

Ghana's Vanishing Past: Development, Antiquities, and the Destruction of the Archaeological Record

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Ghana's past is being destroyed at a rapid rate. Although the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board has in some instances successfully intervened to stop the illicit trading of antiquities, the destruction of archaeological sites as a consequence of development over the past two decades has been staggering and the pace is accelerating. The potential of the legislation that established the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board and empowered it to manage and preserve the country's archaeological past has not been realized. The lack of political action, limited relevant public education, insufficient funding, and the poverty of the majority of the Ghanaian populace have allowed for the widespread destruction of both sites and historic buildings. Conspicuously, both the absence of integrated development planning by the Ghanaian government and the inability of development partners (both foreign and domestic) to recognize the potential value of cultural resources have contributed significantly to the continued loss of the archaeological record. While the antiquities trade is a continuing threat to Ghana's cultural resources, it is, in fact, tourism and economic development that pose the major menace to the country's archaeological past. This article reviews the history of cultural resource management in Ghana, including both traditional attitudes toward preservation and current legislation. Case studies are used to illustrate the problems faced.

Actuellement le passé matériel du Ghana disparaît très rapidement. Le Conseil des musées et des monuments du Ghana a réussi à intervenir dans certains cas pour arrêter la traite illicite en antiquités. Toutefois, la croissance rapide du développement urbain au fil des derniers vingt ans a entraîné une énorme destruction de sites archéologiques qui ne fait qu'accroître. Les lois établissant le Conseil des musées et des monuments du Ghana lui ont en même

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temps accordé les pleins pouvoirs en mesure de la gestion et la préservation du passé archéologique du pays, malheureusement les possibilités de cette législation n'ont jamais été réalisées. Plusieurs éléments contribuent à la destruction très répandue de sites et de bâtiments historiques, dont le manque de prises de mesures politiques, d'éducation publique pertinente, de fonds, et la misère dans laquelle vivent la plus grande partie de la population ghanéenne. Il est évident que l'absence d'une planification intégrée pour le développement de la part du gouvernement ghanéen et l'incapacité des partenaires en développement (nationaux ainsi qu'internationaux) de reconnaître la valeur potentielle de ressources culturelles sont deux éléments supplémentaires clés qui contribuent de façon importante en la perte continue de vestiges archéologiques. La traite en objets antiques présente toujours une menace pour les ressources culturelles du Ghana. En fait le tourisme et le développement économique représentent une menace encore plus importante à la préservation du passé archéologique du pays. Cet article revoit l'histoire de la gestion des ressources culturelles au Ghana, comprenant à la fois les positions traditionnelles envers la préservation ainsi que la législation actuelle. Des études de cas éclairent les problèmes actuels.

KEY WORDS: Ghana; cultural resource management; development; antiquities trade; forts and castles; Koma terracottas; USAID.

INTRODUCTION

The plight of Africa's past has been highlighted in a number of recent conferences and publications (e.g., Ardouin, 1997; Schmidt and McIntosh, 1996; Serageldin and Taboroff, 1994; Udvardy *et al.*, 2003). In particular, attention has focused on the looting of archaeological sites for objects of artistic worth, the antiquities trade, and issues of cultural patrimony. These are major concerns and governments worldwide have far to go to safeguard the myriad of objects that "embody the spirit and creativity of the African past" (Schmidt and McIntosh, 1996, p. xi). However, the threat to the past does not solely lie in the search for antiquities. Development, economic recovery, and nation building, terms that pervade the lexicons of virtually all governments and international aid agencies, also have consequences (e.g., Koroma, 1996; Kusimba, 1996; Mabulla, 1996; Wilson and Omar, 1996). As will be seen, while intervention to arrest the antiquities trade has met with some success, the impact of the efforts to curtail the destruction of Ghanaian archaeological resources threatened by development has been extremely limited. The situation in Ghana is particularly tragic as the country has long had relevant legislation which, if enforced and funded, could protect cultural resources and provide for effective management.

Historic preservation and archaeological resource management is a major concern of governments throughout the world. Increasing emphasis on managing cultural resources is reflected in both national and global agendas. For example,