

Preservation of Historic and Cultural Heritage in Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The focus of this study is to examine the four important areas of preservation of historic and cultural heritage in Delta State. It revealed the current status and highlighted the reasons why the historic and cultural heritage should be preserved. Primary sources of data include, site visits and interview, and secondary data such as Archive and internet search engine were utilized. Using purposive sampling technique, four study sites were selected and 20 community elders were interviewed. The study identified the Araya Bible Site, Ekumeku Monument, Ojife Statue and Mungo Park House as the four important areas of preservation. It also shows the current status. The Araya Bible Site is in good shape but the original bible was long taken away by the British, a structure has been erected on the spot where the bible was found and has been a famous pilgrim site for Christians. The status of Princess Ojife and Ekumeku Monument are currently in good shape while the Mungo Park House is in a dilapidated state. The study discovered that these statues and building are of great historic and socio-cultural significance to the people and the country, and recommends proper preservation of the historic and cultural heritage.

Key Words: *Preservation, historic, cultural heritage, current status, important areas.*

1. Introduction

Preservation could be defined as the act of keeping something the same or of preventing it from being damaged (English Dictionary). Preservation is done to protect objects with distinct character from adverse effects exerted by both man and the environment. The main reason is to prolong its life span thus sustaining it for the future generation. Preservation is very similar to conservation however preservation is concerned mainly with inanimate objects. Such objects include materials of historic, architectural and cultural significance. Examples include monuments, building and structures of special status. For the purpose of this study four important areas of historic and cultural preservation were discussed showing their current status and highlighting the reasons why they should be preserved.

The increasing realization of the major roles culture and environment play in tourism has, therefore, encouraged several developing countries to redirect policies on preservation of their cultural heritage, and preservation of their environmental resources. Indeed, researchers have pointed to the fact that in Ghana as elsewhere in Africa most of these heritage assets, which include sacred groves, shrines of local gods, river deities, many unique natural and cultural endowments as well as the environmental ethics that underlie their governance, have come under tremendous pressure, and their sustainability is threatened (Sarfo-Mensah et al., 2010; Feldman, 2000; Beier, 1980).

Nigeria as a nation is endowed with abundant rich historic and cultural heritage. It is of great significant to preserve materials of historic, architectural and cultural significance which include monuments, building, and structures of special status to serve as a road map to the future generation giving them an idea of the journey so far in human history and culture. Besides the socio-cultural implication of conservation and preservation, they also have physical urban development and economic implications. This study therefore examines the condition of some monuments and sites of cultural and historic heritage in Delta State and suggest ways for their preservation.

2.0 Study Area

Delta State belongs to the south-south geopolitical zone, a zone often referred to as “The Niger Delta”. Its initial contact with the colonial masters, cultural diversity and numerous inter-tribal wars embodies great history whose stories are told in monuments, buildings and structures of distinct character. The monuments and structures are located in various communities. The state has an agency charged with the function of preservation and maintenance of historic and cultural heritage. Through the agency a number of monuments and structures symbolizing the historic and cultural heritage are erected in various cities and communities in the state.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted the survey design. The study was conducted in Delta state. Asaba and Isoko land were chosen respectively. Using purposive sampling techniques, four areas of historic and cultural heritage sites were identified and studied. A total of 20 elders of 70 years old and above including titled men of various communities were interviewed. Five persons were interviewed in the communities within the location of each monument. This was to derive the opinion of these aged people who are well informed on the history of these important areas and items of preservation.

4.0 Data Presentation and Discussion

The Four important Areas of preservation are the Araya Bible Site, Ekumeku Monument, Ojife Statue and Mungo Park House; and they are discussed as follows:

4.1 Araya Bible Site

History has it that in August 1914, a bible descended from the heavens to the sandy shores of Aya River lying on soaked tubers of yam leaving the bible and the letter inside completely dry. Araya is located in Isoko North Local Government Area in Delta state. During that time Araya was a pagan society dominated by various spirits: Okolobe hillock and Ihewerhe-the visible water spirits that tormented the people at night, Onorie-the marital juju, and the famous Aya cult. The dedication of the people to pagan worship made penetration by Christian missionaries difficult. But with persistence, the Christian Mission Society (CMS) led by Rev J.D Atkins set up his headquarters in Oleh, a town not too far from Araya and visited Araya from time to time. A vision concerning the appearance of the bible was revealed to Ewobohoh and few Christian converts within the town. The message was centered on expectation of the gift, however details of the gift was not revealed. The people of Araya were mainly farmers- yam being their major farm produce. The farmers usually moved their harvest through the creek linking Aya to Ekregbesi creek which eventually emptied into Ase River and River Niger (Vanguard Online News, 2011).

On one occasion of harvest transport, Mrs. Esievo and other women discovered the bible lying on soaked tubers of yam but the bible and the letter contained inside were both wet. The Bible was taken away by the British missionaries and has not yet been returned to the community till date. However, a symbolic bible on top of yam tubers has been erected on the spot the bible was found. Plate 1 shows the symbolic bible on the yam tubers.



Plate 1: The bible on the yam tubers

Source: Vanguard online News, 2011.

Despite the absence of the bible at the Araya bible site, the site is one of the famous Christian pilgrimage destinations. Araya bible signifies the acceptance of Christianity into Araya society, it embodies great history and is of historical significance to the people and so should be preserved to ensure the generations to come know about the gift of a bible to the community from heaven.

4.2 Ekumeku Monument

Ekumeku monument is located in Asaba the capital city of Delta state. The monument represents the war that was fought between Anioma people “the Igbo speaking part of Delta state and the British people” between the years 1883-1914. The war began as a result of the resistance put forth by Anioma people in a bid to prevent British intrusion and subjugation. It was the strongest opposition the British had by local forces. The British forces were bent on infiltrating the zone, even if it meant by the use of force. This zeal was bent on the strong economic interest they had in the zone. The British people already had a negative impression about the Anioma people because of the way the Landers brothers were treated on arrival into the same region.

The Ekumeku war was indigenously known as Aya Ekumeku. “Aya” meaning war and “Ekumeku” which connotes – do not talk about it (Okelum, 2012). This was associated with the level of secrecy attributed to the operation. The war lasted for sixteen (16) years with a heavy casualties from both sides. After great tussle, the Anioma people were defeated. The fall of Anioma led to its divisions, the distinct parts were later integrated into neighboring communities which were under British rule. Asaba division was integrated to Benin division, Aboh division into Urhobo. Ijaw and Itsekiri which formed the Delta division. Onitsha-Ado (now Onitsha), Oguta and its environs were integrated into the Eastern division. Some Anioma territories such as Onitsha and Oguta have been permanently lost to the East culturally and territorially. Plate2 shows the Ekumeku statue located at Zenith roundabout in Asaba, Delta state.



Plate 2: Ekumeku Statue

Source: Naira Land Forum

The Ekumeku statue which is of great historical significance to the Anioma people was located at Inter-BUARoundabout in Asaba. This monument which represents the historic struggle of the Anioma people is an integral part of the people's history. It shows the unity of the Anioma people. The Anioma people were united despite their differences to protect their land from British forces.

4.3 The Ojife Statue

Ojife statue is a monument of Princess Ojife, the only daughter of Nnebisi, the founder of Asaba. The monument was put up in honour of her ultimate sacrifice for her people. History has it that at a particular period the Asaba people were deeply rooted into slavery. Their children were often kidnapped once they leave the house to attend to their various businesses. This was a plague that disturbed the people for a long time. To help the people, the god of the people instructed them to move to the hinterland, the hinterland however had no source of water. To provide water in the hinterland, the god demanded for a human sacrifice. Ojife sacrificed her only daughter to the god. This led to the creation of the Ayuta stream which served as an alternative source of water. This served as a permanent check to the slavery of the children across River Niger.

The monument is erected at the Federal Medical Centre (FMC) roundabout in the West-end Area of Asaba. It is in good shape. The monument forms an integral part of Asaba history as it shows the patriotism and love the princess had for her people. Plate 3 shows Princess Ojife Statue at FMC Roundabout in Asaba.



Plate 3: Princess Ojife Statue at FMC, Roundabout in Asaba

Source: Researcher's Field survey

4.4 Mungo Park House, Asaba

Mungo Park House was built in 1886 by the Royal Niger Company and the Lander brothers in honour of a Briton-Mungo Park who according to history discovered the source of River Niger. Mungo Park died in 1806 when his boat somersaulted in Bussa, Niger State. The building was known to be the first seat of power and the first government house in Nigeria. Mungo Park House is located in the present central business area of Asaba and inside the premises of the former Royal Niger Company. Plate 4 shows the Mungo Park House.



Plate 4: Mungo Park House

Source: Researcher's field survey.

4.5 The Current Condition of the Monuments

In the Araya bible site, a structure has been erected on the spot the bible was found and has since been a famous pilgrim site for Christians. The structure was unveiled in 1988 and has since been maintained by the Christian

society in the community. Plate 5 shows the structure erected on the spot where the bible was found. There is no conscious effort by the government to assist or take over the maintenance of the site.



Plate 5: The structure erected on the spot the bible was found

Source: Nigeria Galleria

The Ekumeku statue was previously located at Inter-BUARoundabout. In 2010, this statue was pulled down and replaced by a Christmas tree and later a Zenith Bank advert board. It was finally removed and replaced by a flyover. Prior to its removal, the monument was falling apart as a result of neglect and lack of maintenance. According to some elders interviewed, the removal of the Ekumeku monument was a distortion of the history of Anioma people. Being of paramount importance to the history of the citizens, they agitated for the re-installment of the statue. It was then after, reinstalled by the Delta State Government and presently it is in a good condition.

The Ojife statue still stands at the Federal Medical Centre (FMC) Roundabout in the West-end Area of Asaba. It is still in good shape and forms part of the urban beautification of the city. In an interview with some elders in Asaba, the Ojife monument represents not only the past of the people but a symbol of patriotism needed to be passed into the future generation. They believe that with the rapid transformation of Asaba into a cosmopolitan society such monument is necessary for the preservation of the city's cultural heritage. They suggested that efforts should be made to administer various preservation techniques when necessary to ensure its continuous presence.

The nonchalant attitude of the Federal government towards the maintenance of the structure has led to the dilapidation of the structure. Building members are falling away particularly the woods that are decaying and wearing away. A plate 6 shows the current condition of the Mongo Park House. Despite its dilapidated condition, it is still an attraction to numerous tourists.



Plate 6: The current condition of the Mungo Park House

Source: Researcher's field survey.

5.0 Conclusion

This research has revealed the rich historic and cultural heritage of the people of some communities in Delta State. The current condition of some of the monuments indicate that they are not adequately preserved and maintained. Preservation should be an integral part of the nation's cultural development because it is the only way to protect the culture and the history of the people. Besides the socio-cultural implications of preservation, the preservation of the cultural heritage, monuments, buildings and materials would serve as a road map to the future generation giving them an idea of the journey so far. Specifically the dilapidated Mungo Park House should be redeveloped. If properly maintained, its sustainability would be ensured and would also serve as a constant source of income to the government. The building is of great historical significance to the people of Delta state and the country at large therefore efforts should be made towards its preservation.

A request should be made by the Nigerian government to the British Government concerning recovery and eventual return of the bible to the Araya Bible Site in Isoko North Local Government Area back to the community. Efforts should be made to administer various preservation techniques when necessary to ensure continuous presence of the monuments in good conditions and make them resilient to climatic conditions and possible accidental damages. A special fund should be set aside by the government for the preservation of monuments and maintenance of sites of historic and cultural heritage. The traditional councils in the local communities should be part of the preservation of the sites and monuments.

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