Chapter 2

Cultural Heritage Preservation in a Modernizing Africa:
A Comparative Study of Nigeria and Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage preservation is a sine qua non for the effective technological, scientific, and economic development of nations across the world. This follows the theory stating that culture is life and that there is a cultural factor in technological development. In view of this truism, most African states and social institutions have these last years embarked on multifaceted tactics aimed at heritage conservation in their respective national territories. These preservation efforts have yielded only patchy fruits as they are confronted to the forces of modernism and globalization. Thus, modernism and globalization have continued to represent big threats to heritage preservation in many African countries. This chapter illustrates this thesis through a comparative study of cultural heritage management in Cameroon and Nigeria. The chapter begins by examining the extent to which heritage preservation is feasible in an era governed by modernism and globalization before exploring similarities and differences in the ways modernism and globalization affect heritage preservation in Nigeria and Cameroon.

INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage preservation and conservation have, from multiple indications, become an imperative for the socio-economic development of most – if not all – countries in the world. This imperative is particularly recognized and made palpable in developing countries, (more particularly Black African states), where both tangible and intangible cultural heritage are popularly known to be in danger. According to international conservancies such as Global Heritage Fund (2010), the world most impaired historic sites are located in Third World countries (particularly in Black African countries) which generally have less capacity to safeguard the existence of these physical records of human civilization. In its study titled DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7555-9.ch002
Saving Our Vanishing Heritage, Global Heritage Fund (2010) observed that out of 500 global heritage sites found in 100 of the lowest-income countries, 200 are in irreversible loss and damaged. Such trend of loss has been intensified over the years, due to a myriad of man-made factors including internal and cross-border conflicts, looting, inappropriate government policies, unsustainable tourism, development pressure and insufficient management among others. Intangible cultural heritage has likewise been under serious threat in these low-income countries. This has been at a higher magnitude, compared to their counterparts in developed countries. The growing magnitude of heritage loss or impairment in these countries has partially been due to issues such as the adoption by these Third world countries of western models of modernism, cultural globalization and/or western cultural imperialism among others.

Both tangible and intangible cultural heritage have therefore been threatened by a wide range of colossal challenges. One of the most phenomenal of all these challenges is modernization. In effect, in many African nations, modernism is technically equated with subtle westernization and radical abandonment of various indigenous cultural patterns. In the name of modernism, many Africans have tended to systemically relegate anything African (traditionalism) to anti-progress and primitivism; this, to the advantage of a western pattern of life (Eloundou & King, 2009; Endong, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017). In tandem with this, issues like traditional African music, animism, traditional arts and medicine among others are dominantly viewed by (westernized) members of African communities as vestiges of backwardness, obscurantism and dangerous paganism. Thus civilization is popularly equated with adherence to western modes of life and ethical designs. In spite of the existence of various programs conceived by western nations, Afro-centric cultural activists and major international conservancies (such as the UNESCO) to assist Black African nations in the realm of cultural heritage preservation, western models of modernism continue to constitute a serious cause of cultural erosion in many Black African countries. The phenomenon remains a real threat to cultural heritage preservation in the continent. In view of this scenario, Black African nations have adopted various approaches to cultural heritage preservation.

The effectiveness of these approaches has varied from one country to the other and has been subject to serious and thorny debates. Using empirical understandings and a comparative methodology, this chapter seeks to explore the challenges and prospects of cultural heritage preservation in Nigeria and Cameroon in an era governed by the two quasi-indomitable forces of modernism and cultural globalization. The chapter is divided into four principal sections. The first section provides a conceptual framework comprising of cultural heritage preservation, modernism, traditionalism and cultural globalization. The second section explores the issue of cultural preservation in Africa in an era of cultural globalization and modernization. The third section examines the extent to which modernism and globalization affect cultural heritage preservation in Nigeria and Cameroon, using a comparative approach. This section presents the prospects and the challenges of heritage preservation in the two countries.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

This section gives attention to four key concepts used in the present discourse. These concepts include cultural heritage preservation, modernism, traditionalism and cultural globalization.