

WHEN THE CASTLES WERE WHITE, II ADC HYLAND*, Zimbabwe and GEORGE W K INTSIFUL*, Ghana

*"When the Castles were white
Trade was good, flags flew
From the tallest towers, big guns
Fired salutes from the seaward bastions,
Ships dropped anchor in the bay frequently,
Merchants were rowed ashore by crew-men singing
Lustily; and the sounds of the waves
Breaking on the shore, drowned
The muffled moans of the slowly dying."¹*

The European Castles and Forts along the Coast of Ghana, built between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries to promote and defend the commercial interests of half a dozen European nations, were among the first groups of buildings to be designated World Heritage Properties. So designated in 1979, the citation describes them as "groups of separate or connected buildings which, because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding architectural value from the point of view of history, art or science ... that meets... the following criteria and test of authenticity... (Criterion vi)... directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance...."²

Some cultural properties, however, carry conflicting messages for different groups of people. The forts and castles along the coast of Ghana... are undoubtedly of some architectural merit, and are significant examples of early European tropical military architecture and carry positive messages, to Europeans, of early pre-colonial European-African encounters. To Africans of the diaspora, however, they carry degrading messages of slavery and humiliation.³ The poem, whose first stanza has been quoted above, explores the dichotomy created by these conflicting messages.

At the time of their designation, with the economy of Ghana in severe decline, their physical condition was generally poor, and although all (apart from the Castle, Osu, the seat of government of Ghana and official residence of the Head of State), were at the national level under the Custodianship of the Ghana Museums & Monuments Board (GMMB), resources available to GMMB were so inadequate for the task of regular maintenance and repair of the 27 fortified properties and sites listed in the World Heritage designation, that their designation brought no immediate benefit to them. And so the situation remained for a further ten years: as the national economy of Ghana limped forward with successive governments scraping the bottom of the barrel of national resources, so the Forts and Castles fell into increasing dilapidation and decay.

In 1988, the Government of Ghana successfully negotiated a major regional integrated development programme, with substantial financial aid contributions from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Central Region Integrated Development Programme (CERIDEP) was launched in 1989, with the preservation and revitalization of three major national monuments - Cape Coast Castle, St George's Castle, Elmina, and Fort Saint' Jago, Elmina - constituting the historic preservation component of the programme for which Prof. Hyland was engaged as architectural conservation consultant. Initially funded mainly by UNDP, in 1991, the USAID funding came on stream, and the overall objectives and administration of the programme were slightly modified, with US/ICOMOS being assigned overall responsibility for administering the historic preservation component of the programme, while retaining Hyland as consultant, and with the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, being assigned overall responsibility for the museological and interpretive services component of the programme, under the direction of Dr. Vera Hyatt of the Office of International Relations of the Smithsonian Institution. This programme, completed in 1997 and extended for a further two years, has been widely reported internationally⁴ and need not be summarized here.

In architectural terms, the programme can be judged to have achieved its objectives, and the future of these monuments, maintained and managed by their custodians, the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, appears to be reasonably secure.

The subject of this paper is the changing perception of the overall objectives of the historic preservation and interpretative services components of the programme as its implementation proceeded, and the increasingly diverse and conflicting views that were expressed as to what those objectives should be. As news of the programme became more widely reported internationally in its later years, and images of the physical transformation of the formerly dilapidated structures more widely circulated, more and more individuals and organizations engaged in the dialogue, and the debate about the overall objectives of the project became increasingly acrimonious, to such an extent that the custodians of the buildings, GMMB, were obliged to order modifications to the project.

The preliminary planning and preparation for the historic preservation and interpretative service components of the programme cannot, we believe, be faulted. Thorough archival, archaeological and physical surveys of the buildings were carried out by consultants chosen for their expertise in these fields, and committees of Ghanaian scholars were established to prescribe and authenticate the interpretation of the buildings, and of their role in the historical and cultural development of Ghana, before contracts were awarded for the execution of the physical works and installations.

During this preparatory period, it was clearly understood by all participants in the project that the significance and value of these monuments lay not in their architectural qualities and roles as examples of European military architecture in the tropics, but as major focal points for the continuing encounter between Africans and Europeans, and for all the developments, for good and ill, that stemmed from that encounter. And not only for the encounter between Africans and Europeans, but as gateways, no less powerfully evocative than the Statue of Liberty in New York, but evoking despair, rather than hope, for the millions of Africans who crossed the Atlantic as slaves. There was nothing new about this perception, of course; the male and female slave dungeons in Cape Coast Castle and in St Georges Castle Elmina, and the "Gates of No Return" in the seaward-facing walls of the castles had been major points of call on the itineraries of guided parties of visitors through the castles for many years, and many visitors had been moved to tears by the oppressive, dank and fetid atmosphere of the dungeons.⁵

But the Government Minister responsible for the project at its inception, Dr. Mohammed Ben-Abdullah, Commissioner for Culture in the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) administration, himself a playwright and theatre producer of international reputation, had his own clear vision of the unique role of the Castles in the continuing encounters between Africans and Europeans, and between indigenous West Africans and Africans of the diaspora, and communicated that vision to the project teams. The realization of that vision was to be effected, in part, by the establishment of an annual Pan-African International Drama Festival to be known as PANAFEST, the principal venue for which was to be Cape Coast Castle⁷. The Castle, in the centre of Cape Coast, with its spectacular Great Court, open to the sea, had already established itself as a popular venue for concerts, plays and cultural displays, especially by visiting choirs, drama companies and cultural groups, and this was demonstrated to the project teams in 1993 by the striking production of 'Hamlet' by the visiting English Shakespeare Company. Dr Ben-Abdullah's prescription of a flexible, multi-purpose production and performance space at the heart of Cape Coast Castle was a welcome modification to the architect's brief for the refurbishment of the castle, and provision was made in the cavernous range of warehouses on the ground floor of the eastern wing of the castle, for changing rooms, toilets and backstage accommodation.

The facilities were put to good use during the third PANAFEST, in December 1994, by which time Dr. Ben-Abdullah's tireless advocacy of the castles as unique cultural resources had captured Ethiopian film director Haile Gerim's interest and secured his commitment to use the Castle as the location for his next film. The powerful presence of the castle and of the harrowing atmosphere of the slave dungeons determined in large part the scenario of his film "Sankofa" which hit the cinema screens of North America and Europe in 1994.

Panafest III probably marked the high point of the Ben-Abdullah 'place of Cultural Encounter' perception of the role of Ghana's World Heritage monuments, even though by December 1994, General Quainoo had taken over from Dr. Ben-Abdullah as Commissioner for Culture. The opening night of Panafest III on Saturday December 10 1994 was a profoundly memorable occasion. All day, the greensward on the townward side of the Castle had teemed with tourists and townspeople visiting the booths of craftspeople and curio sellers who had set up shop there for the period of the festival. As the evening progressed, a torch-light procession wound its way down through the town to the gates of the Castle, drawing in its wake an eager audience for the opening performance. And what a performance that was! In the first half, there was a dazzling performance by the Jamaican Modern Dance Company. The second half, a captivating performance of a new play about Zora Neale Thurston, by two actors from the National Black Actors Touring Collective of New York, whose unamplified voices, reverberating from the enclosing walls of the Great Court against the constant surge and spray of the ocean waves breaking on the rocks below the seaward curtain walls, held the audience spell-bound. Never was Ben-Abdullah's vision of the future of the Castle more profoundly vindicated.

Yet, disputing voices were already making themselves heard at a management directorate 'inclusivist' role. At Panafest II, in 1993, the members of a different Jamaican dance ensemble had refused to perform in the Great Court, on the grounds that to do so would desecrate the memories of their ancestors who had suffered in the dungeons below. The authors were participants at a management conference at Cape Coast Castle in 1994 and experienced a very interesting development. During a break in one of the plenary sessions, an announcement was made that lunch was to be served at a restaurant in one of the spaces adjacent to the courtyard. There was a hue and cry from some of the conference participants. They contended that the place was so sacred and hallowed that no meals should be eaten there! Led by the famous drummer Guy Warren (now known as Kofi Ghanaba) and several African-Americans, the group staged a boycott and walked out through the castle gate. Under the circumstances, the other participants could not take lunch at the restaurant either. The 'exclusivist' view saw the 'slave castles' as sombre reminders of the evils of the slave trade, and held that to stabilize the walls and lime-wash them each year - authentic conservation maintenance practice - was to prettify something that ought to be left to mould and crumble away, and that Auschwitz was a more appropriate management model than, say, a mediaeval fortification, like Stirling Castle.

The project team was adamant that the future role of the Castles as places of Cultural Encounter was more appropriate, and that the Castles should continue to serve the local communities as well as attract visitors, and that their contribution to the re-generation of local economy was an essential part of their role, as it always had been. The newly-designed museum in Cape Coast Castle, opened to the public during PANAFEST II in December 1994, opened with a thoroughly researched exhibition on the historical role of the forts and castles, 'Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade', which propagated the 'inclusivist' view of the castles' roles, and set out to interpret to visitors the architectural history of the forts and castles, and the history of the communities that had grown up around their walls⁸. The Government of Ghana, and the directorate of GMMB, continued to affirm their support for the objectives of the project, as defined in the initial terms of reference, and so did the local Ghanaian public, principal beneficiaries of the project, but the project teams were fully aware of the growing strength of the opposition to their 'inclusivist' view of those objectives. In the North American media, opposition to the project as it was being implemented intensified: "Heritage Battle Rages in Slavery's Sacred Sites" press headlines are but one of the more memorable.

The co-authors of this paper have had a long and chequered association with Cape Coast Castle. Under the supervision of Prof. Hyland in 1978, Intsiful proposed the conversion of the Castle, which then housed a prison and was in disrepair, into the West African Historical Museum and Research Centre, for his post-graduate diploma thesis in architecture at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. Many of the spaces in the subsequently repaired and refurbished castle had been suggested in this thesis.

Despite vigorous opposition from the more extreme exponents of the 'exclusivist' view of the Forts and Castles, Cape Coast Castle continues to host PANAFEST, a role it has continued to play since its inception in 1992. This festival is attended by people from different parts of Ghana, many African countries, Europe, the Caribbean Islands and the USA. In 1998, the then Head of State, President J.J. Rawlings, added the celebration of Emancipation Day to the festival after a visit to the Caribbean.

Every year, participants are urged to foster African cultural identity and integration to break cultural and economic barriers. On July 28 2003, the festival was opened by the Minister of Tourism and Modernization of the Capital City, Mr. Jake Obetsebi-Lampitey.⁷ He stressed that the festival must move away from putting too much emphasis on music and clothes to issues which will move the continent forward, adding that there is a lot to gain from a united African family. He continued that the diaspora probably have more to give by way of skills and the African continent certainly has urgent need for such skills. Moving on, the Minister hoped that the festival would achieve its goal of reversing the harm done to the physical and psychological wellbeing of the people of African descent and pull the African race together to develop Africa.

At the same opening ceremony, the Chairman of the PANAFEST Board, Mr. Kojo Yankah, said the festival was recognized internationally and must therefore move from surviving to thriving.⁸

On his part, the Chairman of Ghana's National Commission on Culture, Prof. George Hagan, expressed optimism that the festival would be used to build bridges between all peoples of African descent to help fight poverty, ignorance and disease. Last but not least, the Chairman for the opening ceremony, the Omanhene of the Oguaa Traditional Area, Osabarima Kwesi Atta II, also added that though the slave trade can be forgiven, it cannot be totally forgotten⁹. Four different personalities, four diverging opinions.

The editorial of the Daily Graphic of July 29 2003, commenting on the joint celebration of PANAFEST and Emancipation Day, expressed concern that "often ordinary Ghanaians distance themselves from events such as the retracing of the slave route because they are not related directly to any indigenous culture and see such events as being for foreigners and public officials".¹⁰ The editorial entreated Ghanaians to consider the celebrations as important major national and international events with the potential to sell Ghana and promote the country's tourism industry.

On Friday, July 25 2003, ceremonial activities in remembrance of the ancestral slaves at Asin Praso Heritage Village in the Central Region of Ghana were held as part of PANAFEST and Emancipation Day celebration.¹¹ The event included the demonstration of crossing the River Pra with the slaves, and visits to historical sites of the slave routes, mass graves of slaves and the River Pra Bosomptra shrine, and was attended by 42 African-Americans, chiefs, government officials and diplomats as well as thousands of Ghanaians from all walks of life and tourists.

Again, both the editorial and the remembrance ceremonies present yet two more divergent opinions. So we revisit the questions posed above. Who are the real stakeholders? How could they have been consulted? Could the stakeholders change over time? Obviously these are all very difficult questions to answer. The repair, refurbishment and adaptive re-use of the buildings as community assets and as revenue generators did not happen overnight. As described above, it was a complex, painstaking process involving several different groups of people over at least a ten-year period. Under the circumstances, the end results must be accepted in good faith, especially if it is noted that interviews conducted by an eminent American during the opening of PANAFEST III 1994 revealed similar divergent views.¹² As long as the castles remain open to visitors from around the globe, these divergent views will remain.

*The castle walls are white again
What do they say to us?
Visitors from over the horizon
Who see them shimmering in the distance
Across the bay? Do we feel a lifting?
Of the spirits, a catch of the breath,
As we cross the greenward towards the drawbridge,
A heightened anticipation as we enter the gate?
Or do we experience a growing apprehension,
As though we know what we shall find
As the end of the tunnel?
Or do we feel and have we learnt nothing? ¹*

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ABSTRACT

Three of the historically most significant forts and castles of Ghana, which were designated as a group of World Heritage properties in 1979 - Cape Coast Castle, St George's Castle Elmina, and Fort St Jago Elmina - were the subject of a major conservation programme executed in the 1990's under the aegis of the Ghana Government, UNDP and USAID. In architectural terms, the programme can be judged to have achieved its objectives, and the future of these monuments, maintained and managed by their custodians, the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, appears to be reasonably secure.

What had not been anticipated, however, when the initial brief for consultants was drawn up and during the period of project development, was the growing divergence of opinion among stakeholders as to the authenticity of the repair, refurbishment and adaptive re-use of the buildings as community assets and as revenue generators. How are these World Heritage Properties perceived? How should they be presented to the public? As national icons embodying the history of the country's development, or as memorials to those who suffered the cruelties of the slave trade - or merely as holiday venues?

At bottom, there is an irreconcilable conflict about what these buildings mean. The conflicting layers of meaning are examined and analysed, and proposals made for their reconciliation.

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