Article

Preservation of Benin’s Heritage. Is there a Happy Ending?
Préservation du patrimoine béninois. Y a-t-il une fin heureuse ?

Inga Merkyte¹,* and Søren Albek¹

Abstract

Fifteen years of research in Benin provides a retrospective to challenge the mainstream recommendations on the management of cultural heritage. Benin is a politically stable country with traditional structures still in place, thus an ideal place to see how postmodern paradigms, also discussed widely at the PANAF 2018, may play out. Three cases are presented. Each demonstrates the potential of heritage preservation initiatives as well as local appreciation of such initiatives. At the same time, they expose severe flaws in instrumentation. Firstly, the preservation of heritage sites, is carried out in response to tourism demands; their value is still appreciated only in such context. Secondly, the establishment of such attraction sites is seen as a finite action, ignoring the need for upkeep and maintenance. Thirdly, misread recommendations regarding the implementation of such projects result in irreversible losses, especially due to the allotment of decisive influence to local communities.

Keywords: Agongointo archaeological park, Dahomey, Huawé palace, Dogbo Tota mines.

Résumé

Quinze années de recherche au Bénin permettent une rétrospective pour contester les recommandations principales sur la gestion du patrimoine culturel. Le Bénin est un pays politiquement stable avec des structures traditionnelles toujours en place, donc un endroit idéal pour voir comment les paradigmes postmodernes, également discutés lors du PANAF 2018, peuvent se dérouler. Trois cas sont présentés. Chacun montre le potentiel des initiatives de préservation du patrimoine ainsi que l’appréciation locale de ces initiatives. En même temps, ils révèlent de graves défauts d’instrumentation. D’abord, la préservation des sites du patrimoine est réalisée en réponse à un besoin d’attractivité touristique, puis, la création de tels sites d’attraction est considérée comme une action finie, ignorant le besoin d’entretien et de maintenance. Ensuite, les recommandations mal interprétées, concernant la mise en œuvre de tels projets entraînent des pertes irréversibles, dues en particulier à l’attribution d’une influence déterminante aux communautés locales.

Mots-clés : parc archéologique d’Agongointo, Dahomey, palais de Huawé, mines de Dogbo Tota.

¹ The University of Copenhagen, The Saxo Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark.
* Corresponding author’s e-mail address: toinga@yahoo.com

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Fig. 1: geographical maps with locations of the mentioned sites in South Benin (© wikipedia.org).

Fig. 2: aerial photo of Agongointo Archaeological Park and Museum, now the only green island in Bohicon. The initially defined but locally ignored buffer zone is outlined (©BDArch, August 2017).
**Introduction**

In 1998, something unprecedented happened in Benin. A Danish company constructing a road near Abomey in Southern Benin was taken by surprise when their bulldozer vanished under the ground. The attempts to dig it out revealed the existence of subterranean cavities that impressed the road builders with their regularity and depth. As is custom and law in Denmark, the road builders contacted the archaeologists and asked them to investigate the place. In the meantime, they relocated the road, thus avoiding the mysterious caves. It was the first time ever that a large building project took such consideration towards Benin’s cultural heritage. Ten years later the first open-air museum in Benin was inaugurated at the place, known as the Agongointo Archaeological Park and Museum (AAP). Today it is the third-most popular tourist attraction in the country, drawing both local and foreign visitors. This development has inspired the government of Benin to formulate an ambitious programme for tourism promotion, finally acknowledging that cultural heritage is a source of revenue.

**Presentation of the Agongointo site**

The site of Agongointo is located in the municipality of Bohicon, which is directly responsible for the maintenance of the Agongointo Museum, staffing and security (Fig. 1). The AAP was inaugurated in August 2008, as a result of collaboration between Danida (Danish International Development Agency), BDArch (Benin Danemark Archéologie, a research programme driven by Danish archaeologists and Beninois colleagues), Department of Cultural Management (Direction du Patrimoine Culturel) under the Ministry of Culture and the municipality of Bohicon.

The AAP consists of two sectors, rectangular in shape, A and B, separated by an intermediary zone or more like a passage between the two sectors (Fig 2). The northern sector A is 2.43 ha and contains 26 subterranean caves. It is in this sector that a bulldozer dropped underground revealing for the first time the existence of subterranean caves for the academic community. This place (Cave 1) and a nearby cave are made accessible to visitors (Fig. 3).

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The southern sector B is 3.31 ha and covers 30 caves. It is in this sector that the most authentic visitor experience is given. The visitors can descend into an intact cave with three chambers and a niche, sensing the humid, mysterious and slightly claustrophobic atmosphere, i.e., re-living the situations when people had to hide in such caves in the past (with oil lamps rather than modern electric lightening). The total area covered by the AAP is 6.18 ha.

The souterrains

The caves in Benin are human-made subterranean structures intended for utilitarian purposes such as the collection and storage of water or a hiding place for people or goods. The last purpose was particularly important on the Plateau of Abomey. The earliest bunkers date to the 10th century AD. However, it was during the times of the Dahomean Kingdom (c. 1650-1894) that hundreds of subterranean structures were dug. Currently, there are more than 2,000 caves recorded around Abomey, and these represent only a fraction of the total amount.

At the surface, each cave looks like a well with an opening not exceeding 1 m (Fig. 4). A narrow shaft leads to a central chamber that could be up to 6 m in diameter, either circular

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or kidney-shaped. From the central chamber, there could be several side-chambers, up to five (Fig. 5). Some caves are double with interconnected chambers. The elaborate architecture of the caves varies, and this has provided the basis for establishing a time-sensitive typology⁴.

Subterranean structures can be encountered everywhere in West Africa. They include simple pear-shaped pits for water storage and also graves and mines. The latter are widely known and were the result of the extraction of ores or clays. The subterranean structures, the so-called souterrains, intended for short-time dwelling have so far only been encountered in Southern Benin and can, therefore, be seen as a new type of archaeological monument in the region.

The Agongointo caves, that were created in the 18ᵗʰ century, are predominantly with three side-chambers, but there are many with just two or one side-chamber.

The attraction of the AAP, apart from the 56 caves, owes also to the ancient cultural landscape with centuries-old trees, medical plants, four ritual sites (with upheld private family ownership status that makes them difficult to maintain by the museum staff), ancestral burial site (recently expanded with a symbolic burial of Prof. Klavs Randsborg, the driving force behind the creation of the AAP), a museum with an exhibition on burial traditions on the Plateau of Abomey and workshops/shops of traditional artisans. The AAP has become the only green oasis in the rapidly expanding Bohicon and an abode for smaller animals such as snakes, rabbits, turtles, and the like.

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However, ten years after the inauguration following the construction and development of infrastructure lavishly paid by DANIDA, the AAP is suffering from the lack of maintenance, environmental degradation, polluting neighbours and people scavenging for wood, and not least superstitions driven by new religious movements that stimulate destruction of cultural heritage.

With an entrance fee from nearly 2,000 visitors a month, the municipality of Bohicon, that proudly overtook the responsibility of museum keeping in the wake of the decentralisation programme is still not able to provide the means for much-needed restorations.

What is also often forgotten, is the deteriorating psychology of the AAP staff, neglected by the local government and the state, not being able to generate resources for day-to-day maintenance tasks and normal functioning of the AAP.

The wider impact

Despite the economic neglect, Agongointo has become a flagship for tourism development in Bohicon. Abomey and Bohicon are located just 7 km apart. And while Abomey transpires the traditions and reminiscences of the Dahomean grandeur, Bohicon is focused on commerce and economic expansion. In modern times, Abomey has been attracting visitors with its Dahomean Palace Museum, established in 1943 and now a UNESCO world heritage site. However, Agongointo managed to become another point of attraction in its own right. And this has been noticed.

To many Beninese, Agongointo is more relatable, being a relic of common people’s activities rather than court culture, a testimony of an ancient village. Many visitors write in the museum guestbook that history told through Agongointo make them proud demonstrating the genius of their ancestors.

Today one can witness the impact of Agongointo as a reality. The government of Benin have formulated a program for the promotion of tourism, Revealing Benin[^5]. It aims to establish several new museums and improve natural resorts. In connection with this initiative, the Danish team was asked to provide counsel on how the AAP could be improved, also with regards to making it more tourist friendly. One clear conclusion reached was that presentation and preservation should be based on “cultural sustainability”, meaning that visitors’ impact should not destroy or alter the cultural heritage significantly. Cultural sustainability implies that the cultural heritage is fragile, and has an intrinsic value that can be lost, e.g., due to negligence. Cultural sustainability is also a cultural idea by itself - with many supporters, especially in Europe. In Agongointo it is also linked with the idea of environmental sustainability and should be implemented as an important appeal to foreign tourists.

The creation of the AAP has transformed the mentality on all social levels. It brought the awareness that museums and historical sites can generate revenue. Below are two examples discussed that are directly inspired by the AAP.

[^5]: [http://revealingbenin.com](http://revealingbenin.com)
The iron production sites near Dogbo Tota

Already during the initial mapping of the distribution of caves, the BDArch team came across a vast mining system 45 km S-SW of Abomey. From the surface, the openings resemble the entrances of the caves. But below ground, there is a dense net of passages and corridors emanating from each entrance in various directions. Only an area of 32 x 25 m below the surface was mapped since the movement was restricted due to the fluctuating height of the passages being between 1.30-0.30 m. Three major sites of iron production surrounded the area of subterranean mines. These can today be seen as impressive mounds of slag, the largest being 11.5 m in height and measuring 100 x 45 m. These dimensions correspond to nearly 2 million kg of raw iron. In many ways this complex 15th-early 16th century AD site is unique. Despite modern population pressure, the natural environment that the iron production has been based on is well-preserved, offering an unspoiled experience of all facets and remains of the ancient industry. Therefore, not surprisingly, inspired by the AAP and embracing the opportunities of decentralisation, the mayor of Dogbo Tota, Mr Vincent Codjo Acakpo decided to create a museum. The approach was to mimic Agongointo: to build facilities for exhibition and shops, to create trails, to roof the openings to the mines, and to make the labyrinths of subterranean mining corridors accessible to tourists. The staff of Agongointo assisted in the realisation of the project. The main challenge was to preserve the integrity of the site. There was an understanding - for reasons of “authenticity” - that only traditional materials – clay, wood and chaff should be used for constructions. As in Agoingointo, this proved to be attractive in terms of visitor experience but a disadvantage in terms of maintenance. Since the opening in 2015, there are already many signs of disintegration.

The biggest dilemma relates to the accessibility of the mines. To accommodate the visitors, the mining passages are now dug two, in some places three times deeper than their original height (Fig. 6). The intent was to allow the visitors an unrestricted stroll below ground. No archaeological research or soil sampling was undertaken during the deepening of the passages. Fortunately, two clusters of mines exist within an area of 1 km². The system of passages that was deepened...
ned recently was the best-preserved part of the mining system but makes up only a fraction of the total mining area. The visitors can explore several hundred meters of subterranean corridors occupying an area of ca. 70 x 50 m.

This bold initiative of the Dogbo Tota municipality exposes the need for coordinated actions of tourism promotion on state level. The local infrastructure is in place, including an updated hotel, dedicated guides and a newly established open-air museum of Goundoudjji, as it is known locally. A large lake in the area, fed by natural springs, also offers a possibility to experience wildlife from dugout canoes. Needless to mention, many opportunities exist for ecotourism in traditional villages around Dogbo Tota. Yet the tourist flow is in effect non-existent. The President of Benin has recently established an Agency for Promotion of Tourism (ANTP). But as a state-regulated body with its own agenda, it seems to ignore any new initiatives not generated by the Agency.

The scholarly community also demonstrates dissatisfaction with the way the project was carried out, in particular, due to the missed opportunity to explore the sediments accumulated in the subterranean passages before these were removed. To this day the mines are only dated through excavations of nearby slag heaps. Also, there are many indications that the mines contained special areas for dwelling (in prep.). Furthermore, safety is an urgent issue, particularly the risk of collapse during rainy seasons.

These circumstances seem to create a negative disposition towards the newly created touristic site. Rather than addressing the flaws and embracing the enhancement of the touristic map of Benin, it appears to be easier for responsible state agencies to ignore the result of an independent and locally generated and effectuated project.

The Huawé Palace

Agongointo as a source of inspiration is also seen behind a government-funded initiative to revitalise the presumably oldest Dahomean royal palace near Abomey. This royal compound can be found 7 km SE from Abomey. The oral tradition maintains that the palace was established by the first Dahomean King Dako Donou (1625-1645). Some claim, however, that it was built during the reign of King Tegbessou (1740-1774). Until recently, the palace provided the most authentic experience of Dahomean architecture and traditions. Numerous shrines of the complex demonstrated a significant age predating the reign of Tegbessou (this observation is based on the age of ceramic containers). The walls were adorned with motifs that are not encountered elsewhere, for instance, monkeys at the shrine established in the main palace gate. Monkeys appear to be a popular mythical animal in earlier periods with the best representations found in 10th century AD contexts. Their significance expired in Dahomean times. The core of the palace was a baobab tree of a gigantic size without parallels.

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8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3FD0HyvVBU.
10 Randsborg K. and Merkyte I. 2009, fig. 5-3.
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in the country (Fig. 7). Its foot was covered with heaps of offerings indicating the importance of this focal point, witnessed by numerous generations. Overall, a tour at this small crumbling compound gave a feeling of genuine and unsurpassed excitement with all the facets of Dahomean court and rites coming alive.

Fig. 7: the centuries-old baobab tree behind the palace walls at Huawé as photographed in 2003 (© Inga Merkyte and Søren Albek).

Nowadays everything has changed. The “development plans” were designed with a key notion of community involvement. This community – the alleged descendants of King Dako Donou – transformed the ancient palace into a camp of concrete-built barracks (Fig 8). The ancient walls, the shrines and even their contents were removed and discarded. Only a trained eye can see the traces of old foundations. Unfortunately, this is how the community relates to its past, seeing the place rather than materiality as important. The trees are also burned down, including the centuries-old baobab. The damage is irreversible.

**Final remarks**

Benin has much potential to offer unique experiences for local and foreign tourists. Despite recent determination of the government to focus on tourism promotion through heritage exposure, all the real initiatives remain on paper, drowned in elaborate project descriptions and now also in seductive 3D virtual visualisations, produced by foreign companies. However, the awareness that cultural tourism can be a source of revenue pertains on all levels of society. Also, in recent years archaeology transitioned from solely abstract, almost
ephemeral discipline to an increasingly appreciated scientific means to access history of the pre-colonial period. As such, it is understood as valuable in adding to cultural tourism.

The above examples have demonstrated the flaws that are inherent in postmodern political correctness. The creation of the Museum of Goundoudji near Dogbo Tota was possible due to the wave of decentralisation. For the same reason, it is also programmed to fail. The channelling of information and the active promotion, as well as enhancement and training of local guides, not to mention research, lies firmly with the agencies and academics in the economic capital of Cotonou.

The Palace of Dako Donou in Huawé is now lost due to a misread understanding of the role of community involvement. The state money was provided to the community that did not have any prerequisites to ensure the preservation of the ancient structures and environment. The principle of participative partnership that is so often cited by the academics was implemented on the level of financial transactions only. The relish of postmodern discourse in heritage preservation – the demand for engaging individuals and communities ensuring that places and objects remain embedded and active in their domains of contemporary life comes at the cost of protection and conservation.

The heritage of Benin is, more than ever, under pressure. The respect for traditions that have safeguarded the ancient sites is vanishing. the seductive political correctness paves the way to headless initiatives while the responsible bodies are failing to ensure the minimal maintenance for the sake of new, virtual and costly projects. The ancient landmarks such as centuries-old shrines and in particular trees are under siege from foreign religious movements viewing the shrines as abodes for spirits (and therefore “malicious”). The shrinking cultural landscape is dramatically impoverished, while policymakers and academics discuss postmodern abstractions that Europe or the USA can afford but certainly not Africa.

Acknowledgement

The research of the subterranean caves and the establishment of the Agongointo Archaeological Park and Museum was supported by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA).

Bibliography


**ملخص**

تقدم خمس عشرة سنة من البحث في البنين عرضًا استعاديًا من أجل مناقشة التوصيات الرئيسية بشأن إدارة التراث الثقافي. البنين بلد مستقر سياسيًا ولا تزال الهياكل التقليدية قائمة به، لذا فهو مكان مثال لمعرفة كيف يمكن أن تتطور خاذاً ما بعد الحادثة، والتي تمّت مناقشتها في «PANAF 2018». تم تقديم ثلاث حالات، يظهر كل منها إمكانات مبادرات الحفاظ على التراث بالإضافة إلى التقدير المحلي الذي تحظى به. بالموازاة مع ذلك، تتيح هذه الحالات الكشف عن عيوب خطيرة على مستوى الأجهزة. أولاً، يتم الحفاظ على المواقع التراثية استجابة للطلب السياحي. ثانياً، يُنظر إلى إنشاء مواقع الجذب هذه على أنه عمل محدود، فيتم تجاهل الحاجة إلى العناية والصيانة المستمرة. ثالثًا، يؤدي سوء فهم التوصيات المتعلقة بتنفيذ مثل هذه المشاريع إلى خسائر لا يمكن تعويضها. النتائج المفتاحية: المنتزه الأثري Agongointo، داهومي، قصر هواوي، مناجم دوغبو توتا.