Africa 2009: a Story of African Empowerment

by Galia Saouma-Forero

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Africa 2009 is a ten-year capacity-building programme that was launched in Abidjan (Ivory Coast) in 1999 by the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO, together with the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) based in Rome, and the International Centre for Earth Construction, a research centre at the School of Architecture in Grenoble, France (CRATerre-ENSAG). The programme is emblematic of the recent development of an abiding commitment to conservation among African professionals, along with the matching skills. Its unfolding has therefore been a story of empowerment. The involvement of the African experts as active stakeholders was central to the elaboration of the conceptual framework, and to the subsequent programme design and process. This involvement was the result of a deliberate stance on the part of the intergovernmental organizations that support the programme’s ultimate aim, which is ‘to improve conditions for the conservation of immovable heritage in sub-Saharan Africa by better integrating it into a sustainable development process’.
30. Poster for the *Africa 2009* programme.
The Idea emerges

Africa 2009 was developed in the wake of ICCROM’s Programme for Prevention in Museums in Africa 1990–2000 (PREMA), which was devoted to building the skills needed for preventive conservation in African museums. In 1995, UNESCO’s World Heritage Centre determined that a similar initiative was needed with regard to the preservation of monuments and sites. Ten years seemed the appropriate time-span to ensure that a first batch of trainees would in turn become trainers and that the responsibility of running the programme could be shouldered by African experts well before its termination. The two institutions created by PREMA: in French-speaking Africa, the École du Patrimoine Africain (EPA, School of African Heritage) in Porto Novo (Benin), and in English-speaking Africa, the Programme for Museum Development in Africa (PMDA), renamed the Centre for Heritage Development in Africa (CHDA), in Mombassa (Kenya), were clearly identified at the outset as partners with excellent credentials, able ultimately not only to be responsible for the programme but also to ensure its continuity beyond 2009. Their reputation for quality and stamina on the African conservation scene also made it possible to avoid investing in the creation of two entirely
new pan-African institutions (for English- and French-speaking countries respectively) for training in the field of conservation. Their active and early involvement in the programme were thus a top priority.

The challenge of designing such a programme for immovable heritage began to emerge together with concerns that began to be expressed in 1994 by the World Heritage Committee as regards the skewed composition of the World Heritage List, dominated by cultural sites representing the monumental heritage mainly in Europe, but also in Latin America, China and India. The Committee adopted a ‘Global Strategy’ objective of achieving a better regional representation of different types of cultural heritage properties on the World Heritage List.

The reasons for the poor representation of sub-Saharan Africa were not difficult to identify. It was obvious that the culture of conservation, which is a necessary prerequisite for the preparation of World Heritage nomination files, was rooted in a European conception that emerged and has developed since the nineteenth century. Although Article 5 of the World Heritage Convention requires its signatories ‘to engage in conservation policies and to take appropriate legal, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures necessary for the identification, protection, conservation,
presentation, and rehabilitation of heritage’, this clause implies long-term policy decisions and resources that simply could not be given priority by newly independent states having to face education, public health or agricultural needs, not to mention the struggle against poverty. On the other hand, as the World Heritage Committee issued stricter guidelines for inscription on the list, entailing sound legal protection measures and not only well-drafted laws seldom enforced, but also management plans and the identification of human and financial resources of site management units under the authority of a site manager, sub-Saharan states parties were clearly at a disadvantage. Neglect, hasty interventions, post conflict situations and natural disasters put their heritage at risk, and emergency interventions could not provide long-term solutions. By 1995 the World Heritage Committee had recognized that the time had come to prepare a long-overdue holistic approach that would enable conservators across the entire continent to understand and address the challenges facing their immovable heritage.

Drawing out appropriate new frameworks

I was fortunate to have joined the Centre in 1994 and to have been entrusted with the responsibility of developing activities in sub-Saharan Africa. I also had to implement the Committee’s decision to organize a series of regional and sub-regional meetings in sub-Saharan Africa for the implementation of the ‘Global Strategy’, at which African experts were to explore ways of understanding, defining and presenting their heritage from their own perspectives rather than from the prevailing Eurocentric view. To remain within this overall framework would have been a recipe for non-achievement, particularly on the part of countries bereft of the conventional ‘culture of conservation’, for they would be inescapably disadvantaged in the preparation of nominations for categories of heritage whose ‘outstanding universal value’ stems from different criteria. Thus, at a series of workshops organized at the sub-regional level, we facilitated a learning and empowerment process in which the invited African experts were empowered to present and define their heritage in their own terms, without necessarily referring to European categories of appreciation. UNESCO’s presentations focused on the text of the Convention and its modus operandi, thus clarifying and explaining its operational guidelines. The participation of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), an advisory body to the World Heritage Convention in charge of the evaluation of the nomination files for cultural properties, also enabled its experts to explain how the independent evaluations entrusted to them were carried out during the inscription process. The reports of these meetings were published and widely disseminated through the network of UNESCO Field Offices and National Commissions. The recommendations adopted repeatedly highlighted the specificity of African heritage. The identification of intrinsic links between nature and culture brought to the fore the importance of sacred sites that should be considered from a cultural perspective, even if they had been inscribed or perceived by non-Africans as natural sites. The relationship between tangible and intangible heritage and the role of local communities and traditional leaders as essential key stakeholders and active agents for the conservation of cultural properties were also emphasized.
The notion of cultural landscape attracted considerable attention, as it encapsulates the relation between nature and culture. It also revealed that local stakeholders were a unique source of information for assessing the significance of these sites and uncovering their values through oral tradition and other intangible elements such as social practices, whose symbolic nature is essential to understand their emotional, spiritual and societal values. Preservation that would be relevant in the African context would thus need to go far beyond built form, and the identification of value would not be left to specialists such as architects, historians, anthropologists and archaeologists alone, but should also take on board the views and representations of the local communities. African specialists led the way in building the conceptual links with the aspirations of those communities and in conceptualizing the wealth of African heritage with the support of outside professionals who played an essentially catalytic and backstopping role.

As the findings of these workshops were widely disseminated across the sub-Saharan region, increased awareness on the specificity of African heritage was built up. The challenge of reconciling the idea of one’s own heritage with the universal values embodied in the Convention opened up new avenues for thought and action. The experts repeatedly demonstrated that African heritage includes cultural landscapes, sacred sites, and traditional architecture, which is not necessarily monumental, and that conservation had to be looked at afresh, by taking into account local knowledge and know-how, and addressing management issues with the stakeholders who had conserved these properties so far. It became evident that the development of integrated and inclusive heritage-management practices designed solely by experts in conservation would not be appropriate. Moreover, the importance of cultural heritage in the construction of identity and belonging proved once again to be the fuel that mobilized energies and triggered the commitment to engage actions consistent with the cultural perceptions of Africans.

The ‘Africa Revisited’ exhibition and further developments

The Global Strategy reports and findings were presented at each session of the World Heritage Committee. However, the new approach was not always easy to illustrate. In order to enable the Committee and the public at large to visualize the diversity and the richness of African heritage, I conceived the idea of an itinerant exhibition, which was also put on the World Heritage Centre’s website, by requesting leading experts working in Africa to provide *pro bono* a choice of their own photographs and short explanatory texts. The exhibition *Africa Revisited* was prepared by a Finnish architect on loan to the Centre, and UNESCO covered only the production cost. Swahili heritage, Lobi habitat, human settlements in Cameroon, mission settlements in South Africa, cultural landscapes and itineraries, nomads’ building know-how, as well as military architecture were some of the topics that highlighted the diversity of African heritage, whose values were finally being recognized. The committee expressed its satisfaction by requesting the publication of a brochure on the exhibition, which again was disseminated through UNESCO’s networks. Dawson Munjeri, then executive
director of Zimbabwe National Museums who had hosted the first Global Strategy meeting in Africa, said in his introduction to the brochure: ‘In both conception and execution, Global Strategy meetings reflect an approach based on the kaleidoscopic nature of all humans as well as the particular experiences of the African’.

Until 1994, African representation on the committee was as limited as it was discreet. Individually elected representatives generally kept a low profile, as if the debate did not concern their constituencies. However, the wind had turned and the situation changed after the adoption of the Global Strategy. Not only did the number of elected African members increase, but they also became more engaged, active and vocal, paying tribute to the work of the network of African experts who had revisited their heritage and appropriated it, supportive of the initiative to draw a holistic framework for the recognition, protection and safeguarding of African heritage. Dawson Munjeri, elected to the committee, was the most active champion of this cause. Nor was it a surprise to see an increasing number of African states gradually ratifying the Convention, and responding to the call of the Centre by presenting through personalized letters its substance and practicalities.

Yet what was still missing was a clear needs assessment to understand the magnitude of the conservation problems facing such a large and diverse group of countries. CRATerre-ENSAG, a French non-governmental organization with well-established credentials and experience in Africa, teamed up with UNESCO in order to establish an accurate diagnosis of the situation as a preliminary step. We were encouraged by the achievements of the PREMA programme, which had paved the way for capacity building for museums and collections and given proof that the expected results of their drive had been successfully met. The methodology adopted was the establishment of a questionnaire in French and English to be sent to forty-four directors of cultural heritage in sub-Saharan countries who either had or had not ratified the 1972 Convention. The purpose was not only to elicit information on the characteristics of identified heritage, the existence of inventories or conservation laboratories, but also on the state of conservation of cultural properties, the structure of the various directorates of cultural heritage, and on financial and human resources. The questionnaire was carefully prepared in order to be primarily a learning tool on the process of conservation and the issues to be addressed. A glossary was prepared by the advisory bodies to clarify the terminology used in the text of the Convention and to identify the entire conservation process – from documentation to conservation, restoration, and management issues. Thanks to the support of the network of UNESCO’s National Commissions, thirty-four out of forty-four countries responded to the questionnaire. CRATerre and the World Heritage Centre jointly analysed the results of the survey. The overall picture underscored the scarcity of conservation professionals, revealed the magnitude of training needs, identified the specific situation of each respondent country and underlined how limited the funding available for the protection of cultural heritage actually was. It also showed that site management issues were seldom addressed, and that a centralized system of management prevailed at the level of directorates of cultural heritage. The administrative system for
the protection of cultural heritage followed an already out-dated European model focusing entirely on specific physical features and their conservation. Collaborative actions with communities were only sporadic. The analysis of the survey was presented, discussed and validated at an ICCROM expert meeting on Training Strategies for Conservation of Cultural Property held in Rome in September 1996.

These facts clearly indicated that remedial measures would need to concentrate on a target audience, which was the middle-level management who needed to acquire the intellectual and practical tools to preserve the sites, and at the decision-making level, to raise awareness on the importance of conservation while also taking into account the specific intangible values of each site. Therefore, the idea of presenting a two-tier programme gradually emerged, to respond to issues identified at both site and regional levels. The proposal identified conservation activities at the site level with a pedagogic approach in close co-operation with local communities who would not merely be informants, but also partners and custodians of the site, and identifiers of the values that it represents. On the other hand, formal training with a tailor-made syllabus needed to be designed. CRATerre engaged in this process on a voluntary basis, and did not charge for the services provided mainly by their expert, Thierry Joffroy, during this first phase.

The African experts who attended these Global Strategy meetings were primarily practitioners of cultural heritage with hands-on responsibilities at the local level; some had risen through the ranks and were already entrusted with national responsibilities. They had been requested to present an overall view of their national heritage by categories, and propose significant sites in terms of value that could later be integrated in national tentative lists of properties eligible for inscription on the World Heritage List. As managers, they had experienced the hardship of responsibilities in the field of conservation and were eager to open up to the outside world, update their knowledge, define appropriate conceptual tools and move on to ‘change’ things. Most of them were under 40 years of age and had successfully exercised leadership in their workplace. UNESCO, by providing them with an international forum, enabled them to address their findings not only to the committee but also to their own decision-makers, and to the African experts at large: it gave them legitimacy. Considered as full intellectual partners, they were truly eager to build up solid working relationships with the World Heritage Centre. They unfailingly demonstrated a high degree of commitment as they became more and more involved as members of a network of experts sharing the same vision and concerns, all determined to obtain the inscription of cultural heritage sites on the World Heritage List, where African heritage so far was overwhelmingly represented by natural sites.

Since states parties to the World Heritage Convention are eligible for international assistance from the World Heritage Fund, the experts attending the Global Strategy meetings were encouraged to submit requests either for the preparation of tentative lists or for improving the state of conservation of sites already inscribed on the list. The answers to the questionnaire proved to
be a valuable source of information for assessing the importance of the project in its national contexts, and evaluating the amount requested in comparison with the often modest existing budgets. When preparing the required recommendations to authorize these requests, I very carefully took into account the experience of each directorate of cultural heritage in managing funds, and ensured that the amounts to be approved were consistent with the current level of funding of their standard activities, as well as their operational budget. The main reason for this was that the funds released were supposed to provide an opportunity to adequately plan in line with their financial capacity and allow some experimentation, including monitoring and maintenance components, to be carried out by the national professionals and local workers and communities trained in situ. CRATerre was given the responsibility of working with cultural heritage directorates and local communities to develop a number of small-scale conservation projects and craft an efficient methodology for in situ training.

The New programme takes shape

Meanwhile, the results of the analysis of the questionnaire were discussed with the well-known conservation-training expert, Gaël de Guichen, who had conceived and conducted the PREMA Programme. He provided invaluable advice on the basis of this experience, and underlined the need to involve decision-makers at the level of directors of cultural heritage in the training programme in order to legitimize the knowledge acquired by the trainees, create optimum conditions for them upon their return home and encourage them to use the intellectual tools and methods of work defined either in situ or in the formal training sessions to be conducted at regional level. ICCROM also advised that curricula should be defined by the African experts themselves and not by the international team, and participated at the meeting held in Abidjan in early 1999 to enrich and validate the findings of the survey and its working hypothesis. The majority of the African experts invited to that meeting had already attended Global Strategy debates or read the reports. They wanted to contribute as much as they could. Potential donors were also present and witnessed the participatory process and bottom-up approaches that had been developed and put into practice. This was very important at this crucial moment, which required not only validation but also appropriation. The Nordic donors, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), sent representatives, as they had been continuously informed on the progress achieved at each step of the elaboration of the programme, and were aware of the Global Strategy debates and incremental steps achieved as they were presented at each World Heritage Committee session.

As the Africa 2009 programme took shape and matured, it became evident in 1997 that its implementation would have to be entrusted to ICCROM, rather than to the World Heritage Centre. ICCROM consequently identified a staff member, Joseph King, an architect with a solid experience in conservation in Africa, who became the manager of the programme. The conditions for the launching of the programme having been met, UNESCO, ICCROM and CRATerre subsequently jointly organized the meeting in
Abidjan, which was also attended by the head of the PREMA programme. The Africa 2009 proposal was presented to a number of African experts who had attended the Global Strategy meetings or recently received assistance from the World Heritage Fund. They represented various African sub-regions and were both French- and English-speaking. They were invited not only to approve the general framework of the programme, its measurable objectives, and its structure, but also to debate in working groups on the various options that some of them had presented. They ultimately designed the outline of the regional training courses and the orientations they adopted clearly underlined the management content throughout the conservation process, with an emphasis on the preparation of management plans. Since then, a three-month course has been organized each year at the regional level with the collaboration of EPA and CHDA in Porto Novo (Benin) and Mombassa (Kenya). At the end of each course, the directors of cultural heritage from the trainees’ countries are also invited. The trainees are thus given the opportunity to present in person the results of the course and their work to their directors. Once every two years the French- and English-speaking directors are also invited at the end of the three-month course, and to renew the composition of the steering committee and network.

At the Abidjan meeting, the African experts were also requested to elect, for two years, four African experts (two English-speaking and two French-speaking) to become members of a steering committee, which would meet once a year to monitor and evaluate the progress of work, to approve annual action plans and develop future phases, decide on course outlines and select participants for the training activities. UNESCO, ICCROM, and CRATerre became ex-officio members of the steering committee, whose chairman had to be an African expert, and its secretariat was entrusted to ICCROM. Dr Georges Abungu, from Kenya, was the first chairperson, and his professional profile as an archaeologist, his career within the National Museums of Kenya, and leadership skills ensured the success of the programme during its first phases. The African members and the African chairperson of the steering committee were chosen by consensus, after extensive deliberations outside the sessions, in line with African tradition.

After the Abidjan meeting, the Nordic donors, SIDA and NORAD, promptly decided to fund the programme in its initial three-year phase, including the steering committee meetings, which were perceived as an essential tool for ensuring its long-term sustainability. Their financial support was unfailing throughout the entire programme. However, a fund-raising strategy was also prepared, including a component from the World Heritage Fund, which was earmarked to support the organization of the yearly regional course, and priority was given to states parties submitting assistance requests for the in situ projects within the framework of Africa 2009. The governments of Finland and Italy have also given financial support to Africa 2009.

Africa 2009 functions at two levels. At the regional level, the organization of courses, seminars, research projects and improvement of networking is based on the notion that the best
way to deal with problems is to work together, share ideas and construct frameworks that can be adapted to local needs, through the gathering and exchange of information. Site-level projects are also carried out to ensure that Africa 2009 remains deeply rooted in the realities of the field while still responding to the specific needs of selected sites in terms of training and implementation of conservation activities. ICCROM has now entrusted the responsibility of its implementations to two distinguished African project managers, Weber Ndoro and Baba Keita, who are English- and French-speaking, respectively.

In 2001, just after the evaluation conducted at the request of the Nordic donors, it was not only manifest that the lengthy and careful preparation of the programme had already borne fruit, but also that its philosophy and participatory approach were concordant and resonant with the views and commitment of the African actors themselves. In addition to the professional satisfaction I have derived from my task of implementing this new programme, Africa and Africans nurtured my personal quest and vision, opening up new avenues of thought and emotion as they guided me towards a fuller understanding of the invisible assets of their culture. Their sense of solidarity and sharing has taught me that compassion and leadership go hand in hand.¹

Lessons and achievements

The major lesson to be learned is that development programmes in Africa and elsewhere have to be built in a transparent and collaborative way, and that participatory mechanisms enhancing democratic and principled decisions are the core for ensuring their short-term success, and more importantly, their sustainability. It was always foreseen that from 2009 onwards African institutions would definitively be running their own conservation programmes, and they will.

The achievements of the African conservation community have indeed been quite spectacular. Strengthened national institutions have been able to launch independent activities using members of the network, including professionals from neighbouring countries. The impact on communities where projects have been undertaken was evaluated, and it is a good example of cultural heritage used as a resource for development. By November 2005, 142 professionals from forty-two countries had been trained in the regional training course and thirty-four participants had risen through the ranks and become resource persons and course assistants. Sixty professionals from thirty-six countries had been trained at three specialized technical courses. Six national seminars had been organized on topics such as documentation and inventory, legal frameworks and arguments for conservation, thus contributing to an increased awareness of heritage. The research programme included inter alia issues such as traditional conservation practices, guidelines for improving legal frameworks, and dry-stone conservation. Twenty-six projects had been conducted or were being implemented. More crucially, on the basis of the results of a new needs assessment and the national contribution survey to assess the countries’ capacities for cost sharing, the directors recommended the organization of a logical framework analysis workshop to define the nature, objectives and
content of a follow-up programme; and the preparation of an evaluation of the capacities of EPA and CHDA to implement such a programme by 2008. The Africa 2009 network proved its willingness to pursue the work without the international community and to build on the results of ten years of international assistance.

Africa 2009 has demonstrated that protection of African cultural heritage by Africans consolidates their sense of identity, underlines the richness of its diversity, opens new avenues for development, and disseminates African values to the world. Each step is therefore a landmark for younger generations who will identify with the role models of the older generation of African experts, and pursue the work so successfully engaged.

| NOTE |

1. Galia Samoua-Forero was nominated to the Cultural Heritage Division in 2001 and was replaced at the WHC by Lazare Eloundou who had worked at CRATerre.