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# Repositioning Monuments In Ghana

by Prof. Kodzo Gavua



Aerial View of the Fort of Christiansburg, Accra, Ghana

## This article discusses the character, functions and management of monuments in Ghana, and how these assets may be re-conceptualised and re-positioned to become more relevant both nationally and internationally.

The focus is on monuments officially recognised at international, national and community levels, including those listed by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites (WHS). Reference is also made to other monumental assets deserving of national recognition. The article suggests that, although many of the monuments have been commodified and are important sources of revenue generation, they would become more valuable—and attract a wider, more diverse local and international audience—if they were better managed, and if the official historical narratives assigned to them were revised. Following definitions offered by various scholars and international organisations such as UNESCO and ICOMOS (see Ahmad 2006), a monument in this discussion refers to a cultural property of historical value, including a physical construction and a spatial configuration intended to commemorate persons, events and other important aspects of the past and present. It may be an inherited asset or a new construction that embodies, reflects, expresses and reminds of the waywardness of the past and/or positive historical phenomena, and which may serve as reference for development action.

Official designations and constructions of monuments in Ghana commenced piecemeal when the nation's maiden political leadership sought to deliberately define the nation and to memorialise what they deemed to be of national interest (Gavua 2015). These decisions were made by people in positions of power with little or no consultation of other stakeholders. This process involved the naming of schools, roads, roundabouts, spaces and other public facilities, as well as the erection of statues of the head of state, and it ushered in a tradition of monument building, naming and renaming that has been fraught with subjective definitions of Ghana's heritage (Gavua 2015).

### Categories of Monuments Found in Ghana

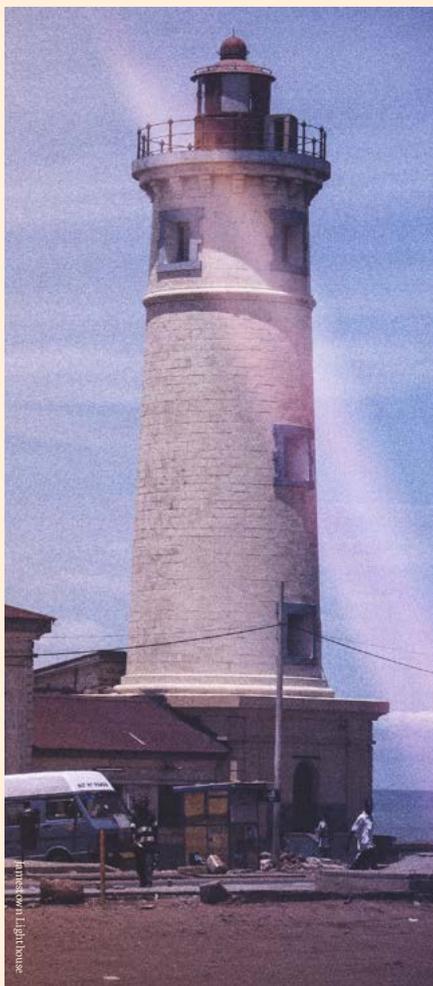
Cultural properties that are designated as monuments in Ghana fall into three different categories: World Heritage Sites; National Monuments; and Community Monuments. These categories each comprise historic buildings, landscapes, spatial configurations, statues and other physical constructions of symbolic, spiritual and practical value.

Ghana's World Heritage Sites include 28 of the several lodges, forts and castles of variable sizes, design and complexity that Europeans constructed with the assistance of the indigenes for trade purposes along the coast of West Africa between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although the total number of these buildings, which once dotted the 500-or-so kilometres of Ghana's coastline, could once have exceeded 60 (van Dantzig 1980), 32 have been listed by A.B. Lawrence (1963) and

33 by Abaka (2012). Apart from the 28 World Heritage Sites, many of these historic buildings have been destroyed as a result of their being abandoned, plundered for building materials or eroded by the strong tidal waves of the Atlantic Ocean (Osei-Tutu & Smith 2018).

The forts and castles, many of which were initially set up as trading posts, served at various times as warehouses, residential facilities, administrative centres and as educational and other training grounds (Lawrence 1963, van Dantzig 1980). Ownership of some of them shifted between the different groups of Europeans that operated along the coast and their local African compatriots through purchase, or force. For example, in 1693, the Akwamu forcefully seized for a brief period the Christiansborg Castle from the Danes while, in 1653 and 1644, the Fetu people of the Cape Coast area took over Fort Carolusberg, which is now known as the Cape Coast Castle. Also, between 1717 and 1724, John Conny, a local merchant with his paramilitary forces, overran and controlled Fort Gross-Friedrichsburg (Anquandah 1990).

In addition to various environmental considerations, the changes in ownership resulted in different forms of alterations to the character and function of the facilities. The global importance of these monuments stems from their association with the history of the Atlantic trade, the trade in enslaved people and the history of Diaspora Africans (Abaka 2012). The buildings also functioned as sites of contact between Africans and people from elsewhere in the world, as well as spaces through which people from the West African sub-region were initiated into international commerce and politics via European



value systems.

Also listed as World Heritage Sites in Ghana are relics of shrines and palaces with peculiar decorative bas-relief walls, which pre-colonial African architects designed for royalty and priests of the Asante Kingdom, mostly between the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Ten of these buildings, which are generally referred to as Asante Traditional Buildings or ATBs, have been found. Regardless of their universal value, these buildings, as well as the forts and castles, archive much of the history of Ghanaians and the interactions between their forebears and their neighbours and Europeans. Reinterpretations of these monuments, informed by scientific research, should increase their commercial and heritage value.

Among the cultural properties

that could be classified as National Monuments are landscapes and spatial configurations laden with the deep and recent history of Ghana. These sites have national appeal, encompassing: hilltop settlements, as found on the Krobo and Akwapim hills in the Eastern Region and on the Avatime hills in the Volta Region; ancient earthworks, including ditches and embankments of the Birim Valley and Likpe; water bodies such as the Volta Lake; the stilt settlements of Nzulezu in the Western Region; Tongo-Tenzug, a settlement in the north of Ghana that is embedded in rocky outcrops in northern Ghana; and more.

Other National Monuments are spatial configurations, such as the Independence Square and the Polo Grounds in Accra; the Rattray Park in Kumasi; parade grounds or communal meeting grounds that the government has constructed and named in many regional capitals across Ghana; the Adome Bridge and highways, streets, overpasses and roundabouts with which the government has commemorated select personalities deemed to be of national importance.

The landscapes and spatial configurations—and the features that characterise them—are laden with much of the nation's history. Beyond their ambiance and utilitarian functions, they are relevant not only to local and regional histories and cultural heritages, but also to the history of Ghana and the West African sub-region at large. Many of them have been closely linked with Atlantic commerce and trade in enslaved people, and with the resilience and heroism of Ghanaians. The packaging and dissemination of the histories and surrounding stories that accompany these monuments

should add to their value, rendering them more attractive to various publics. It is instructive, however, that with the exception of Tongo-Tenzug, which Ghana has unsuccessfully proposed to UNESCO for listing as a WHS, many of these monuments are yet to be defined and designated officially as National Monuments.

Community Monuments that may be found in Ghana include the palaces and residences of prominent citizens, as well as mosques, chapels, shrines and schools of historical significance. In addition to these are statues of historic personalities, such as Okomfo Anokye, the legendary priest of Asante who is acclaimed to have conjured the 'golden stool' around which the Asante rally and unite. Such monuments often appeal to the interests of specific Ghanaian communities, including ethnic, regional and religious groups. The listing and promotion of some of these monuments, coupled with the packaging of researched archaeological, historical and ecological information on them could be useful to the mainstreaming of monuments in Ghana's development agenda at local levels.

## Management of Monuments in Ghana

Management here refers to the administration, conservation and promotion of monuments in Ghana. The Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB) has been mainly responsible for managing Ghana's World Heritage Sites, while various government Ministries, Departments and Agencies (MDAs) manage the National Monuments that function under their jurisdiction. Meanwhile,

Community Monuments are managed by mainly traditional authorities and local organisations.

The GMMB's efforts to actively conserve and promote the World Heritage Sites began in the mid-1990s when it was tasked by the government through the Ministry of Tourism to generate revenue internally. Since then, the Board has collaborated with UNESCO and several other international organisations to commodify the sites, since they were seen as presenting opportunities for employment and overall economic development in their host communities (Bruner 1996). Management of the monuments was thus skewed towards commodification of the facilities for revenue generation.

This commodification involved evaluating the monuments and their associated activities in terms of trade (Cohen 1998), and packaging the facilities, activities and related artefacts for the tourist market. In adopting this strategy, narratives about the role of the forts and castles in the Atlantic trade in enslaved Africans were carefully crafted and presented to attract mainly Diaspora Africans. The strategy has been partially successful, as several Diaspora African returned to the country and organised themselves into groups, such as the African American Association of Ghana, One Africa, Afrikan World Reparations, Repatriation and Truth Commission (AWRRTC) and Fihankra, which have lobbied for Pan-Africanism and the interests of their members (Gavua 2015).

Nonetheless, the commodification of the monuments, and related conservationist interventions the GMMB has made, have incurred the displeasure of some groups of

Diaspora Africans, who regard them as distortions of the monuments' history and spiritual value, and who consider the differing entrance fees payable to be alienating (Gavua 2015, Osei-Tutu 2003; 2007). Members of the settlements in which the monuments are situated have also raised issues about being discriminated against by the GMMB in its bid to commodify the monuments (Gavua 2015). The paramount chief of Edina, for example, threatened in 2017 to close the Elmina Castle because the GMMB had owed his Traditional Council payment of ten remittances (StarrFM Online, January 24, 2017).

UNESCO has also raised concerns about recent attempts made by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture and the GMMB in 2018 to develop the frontage and adjoining areas of the Elmina Castle into an "Elmina Heritage Bay and Tourism Project", suggesting that the project could compromise the monument's integrity and authenticity.

Efficient management of the monuments has also been hindered by the GMMB's lack of sufficient qualified staff and adequate financial support. The monuments are frequently operated by unprofessional personnel, many of whom are unmotivated by their conditions of service. As a result, the GMMB has resorted to running some of the sites in collaboration with local stakeholders and to leasing space to private establishments for commercial purposes. It has, for example, leased Fort Metal Cross at Dixcove, a fort that the British began constructing in 1692 (Biveridge 2018), to a private company to operate as a guest house, thereby diminishing its world heritage value. Also, substantial portions of other forts like Gross-Friedrichsburg in Princes town,

Western Region and Prinzenstein in Keta are in ruins, or overgrown by vegetative cover.

## Reflections On The Future Of Monuments In Ghana

I have shown in this discussion that Ghana has a variety of monuments, among which are World Heritage Sites and other cultural properties that can be recognised as National Monuments and Community Monuments. While these monuments embody much of the nation's recent history—and offer opportunities for Ghanaians and other people of African descent to reconnect to their past, negotiate their lives and (re)define their identities—their commodification is also a viable means of generating revenue and fostering social and economic development at the national and community levels. Yet, management of the monuments is bedevilled by the lack of competent and professional staff, and by inadequate financial resources.

In order to forestall the major challenges that confront management of the monuments, I would like to suggest that the monuments be re-conceptualised as facilities that embody the shared heritage of Africans and Europeans. Although the monuments are Ghana's cultural property and are peculiar to Ghana's heritage, they also relate to other people from diverse geographical, social and cultural backgrounds.

It is therefore important that the various histories and nuances that shape the contexts in which these heritage assets have been produced, constructed and defined are carefully examined. The story

of Ghana's World Heritage Sites, for example, goes beyond the trade in enslaved people and its associated strife. The monuments also archive Ghana's early architectural history; the contribution of local peoples to the construction and function of the facilities; the impact that the monuments (and activities associated with them) have had on the society, culture, economy and cognitive structures of the local people; and the strategies local people used to manage physical (and other forms of) conflict that the architects of the monuments and their ways of life engendered. Documentation and dissemination of expanded storylines of these facilities should be a means of unarchiving subdued local and other histories, and a path towards attracting a cross-section of domestic and international visitors beyond the mainly Diaspora African community.

The GMMB, in its efforts to conserve the monuments, must

engage a broad range of stakeholders (including representatives of various local groups, particularly those in close proximity to the monuments), and interact with them on a daily basis. Such community engagements have the potential to let the local people see themselves and their history in the monuments, and to create a sense of ownership.

Tours of the monuments should also incorporate entry of visitors into the communities in which the facilities are located. These should help to minimise tension and conflict between the monuments' management and the local people, promoting a cordial and relatively safer environment for tours than experienced today.

Above all, there is an urgent need for research, inventorying and profiling of the existing monuments. Attempts at surveying, digitising and creating digital models of the monuments using

archaeological, ethnographic, architectural, civil engineering, digital heritage and visual anthropological methods and techniques, as commenced in 2017 by the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies at the University of Ghana and the University of Rochester, should be encouraged.

The development of digital models and virtual tours of the monuments are means by which many potential visitors to the facilities will be attracted. Thus, by adopting legislation that will permit the GMMB to recruit the professional personnel to manage Ghana's monuments in creative ways—and by redefining the monuments and revising the stories that are used to market them—Ghana's existing monuments (and others yet to be considered as such) have the potential to be major players in the nation's economic and social transformation.





Remains of Chief's Place in Krobo Hills

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