

POLICY BRIEF

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Universal access to **archaeological parks** – a contested principle **in the African context**



Tsodilo Hills in Botswana

Executive summary

Using the Salalah Guidelines for the Management of Public Archaeological Sites as a framework, this policy brief examines the conceptualisation of an archaeological park proposed by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) to question its relevance in the African context. It focuses on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage properties as designated areas which, while presenting particular challenges, are meant to represent examples of best practise in archaeological heritage management, to argue for the need to recognise other values of the sites, besides the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), and consider the issues of access within the local cultural contexts of the rightsholders.

Introduction

In 2015, experts and academic institutions that participated in the first international archaeological conference of ICOMOS on Archaeological Parks and Sites drafted the Salalah Recommendation, which advocated for the inclusion of the term 'archaeological park' in the official general terminology of UNESCO and ICOMOS, and in particular in the World Heritage Operational Guidelines. The document defined archaeological park as

“a definable area, distinguished by the value of heritage resources and land related to such resources, having the potential to become an interpretive, educational and recreational resource for the public, which should be protected and conserved. It is the link between scientific research and the public (ICOMOS, 2015: 2).”

The proposed definition does not outline where such an area could be situated but stipulates that an archaeological park should include archaeological remains below and above ground, a carefully designed landscape that will ensure their protection and adequate interpretation, and access to it should be effectively regulated. In this short statement, the management objectives of such a park have already been suggested, namely, preservation for interpretive, educational and recreational purposes, for the public.

Two years later the Salalah Guidelines for the Management of Public Archaeological Sites were adopted at the 19th ICOMOS General Assembly in India. According to this document, an archaeological park is a designated 'protected area *set aside* for public access, enjoyment, and education' (ICOMOS, 2017: 4; emphasis of the author). The Guidelines have been provided with the understanding that each country and region is different, so the suggested strategies and recommendations can be changed if 'not consistent with the regional and local cultural stewardship of archaeological sites, and especially those open to visitors' (ICOMOS, 2017: 1). ICOMOS recognised different national and regional contexts, legal and policy frameworks, and management approaches that may take into consideration specific cultural practices. Seemingly, the different values that people associate with heritage have been considered in the Guidelines. The document further recommended that 'the experience of visiting an archaeological site should be available to as wide an audience as possible, with the proviso that this does not compromise or destroy *the physical evidence* of what transpired in the past' (ICOMOS, 2017: 1; emphasis of the author). As both the cultural context and the physical evidence have been cited as requiring attention, it can be assumed that when the Guidelines refer to 'sustainable management that requires the clear identification of how the development of public access might harm the sites concerned' (ICOMOS, 2017), they address both the potential damage to the fabric and the values of the sites equally.

In 2022 the International Scientific Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management (ICAHM) of ICOMOS set up a working group to deliberate on the issue of universal access to archaeological sites and parks, based on the premise that everyone should have access to culture, regardless of their social status, cultural background or mobility possibilities. A hybrid conference was organised as part of this work at the LVR-Archäologischen Park und Römer Museum Xanten in Germany. Although the focus of the deliberations was on access to archaeological sites and parks for people with disabilities and senior citizens, the key objective of this gathering was to address the definition of universal access based on theoretical analyses and practical case studies from around the world.

It is with this discussion in mind that this policy brief questions the conceptualisation of an archaeological park in the context of Africa and addresses the limitations to universal access to archaeological sites. While the Salalah Guidelines are intended to apply to all archaeological sites open to the public, this policy brief uses the proposed framework to speak about UNESCO World Heritage properties only, for two reasons. Firstly, because they are supposed to be the examples of best practise, and secondly, because according to the Guidelines, 'archaeological sites in national park systems around the world and those within World Heritage Sites present particular challenges' (ICOMOS, 2017: 1).

Archaeological park – a conceptual problem

According to the Salalah Guidelines,

“every site inscribed on the World Heritage List contains material remains of interest to the field of archaeology. World Heritage Sites include historic cities, all of which contain archaeological remains of the earlier “city below the city.” Other World Heritage Sites, inscribed by virtue of the Outstanding Universal Value attached to natural resources can possess archaeological remains. Relatively recent structures and landscapes that are regarded as works of architectural or engineering genius are of interest to the study of archaeology and related disciplines (ICOMOS, 2017).”

This diversity of properties that contain archaeological material is richly represented among the World Heritage properties on the African continent. From the ruins of ancient cultures (such as the Ancient Thebes in Egypt, or Archaeological Sites of the Island of Meroe in Sudan) through historic towns with layers dating from different historical periods (such as the Old Town of Ghadames in Libya or Old Towns of Djenne in Mali with archaeological sites representative of Islamic architecture) to rock art sites and other archaeological remains within cultural and natural landscapes (such as Tsodilo Hills in Botswana or Ngorongoro Conservation Area with Olduvai Gorge and Laetoli Hominid Footprints in Tanzania).

The properties in North Africa which represent ancient cultures that developed as part of the so-called Cradle of the Civilisations of the Mediterranean basin or formed part of the Greco-Roman world are well known 'archaeological parks'. In the sub-Saharan Africa, archaeological sites are mostly associated with hominid-related sites or rock art heritage. Less understood are archaeological remains within the so-called 'nature parks' which, while created to preserve the natural environment, bear testimony of cultural heritage that is usually not well researched or not adequately documented due to historical developments (Keitumetse, 2021). These cultural heritage resources include archaeological sites of different nature.

In the African context, the problem with archaeological and nature parks starts with the proposed definition of a 'park'. If an archaeological park is a protected area *set aside* for public access, enjoyment, and education, what happens to the values of such a place/site, and what is the process as a result of which a park is created?

The World Heritage property of Ancient Thebes in Egypt can serve as an example of an archaeological park established along the lines suggested in the Salalah Guidelines. The process of creating it included the relocation of communities living near the ancient temples and tombs so that the area can be set aside for an open-air museum to serve scientific goals of archaeologists and enjoyment of tourists, and the demolition of nearby vernacular architecture and the associated intangible heritage (Bialostocka, 2020). Divorcing ancient objects and sites from their current sociocultural contexts, based on an assumption that living communities have no relationship with archaeological sites leads to a situation where the management objectives are primarily focused on archaeological studies and tourism revenue, and the conservation aim is to preserve the material value of heritage. This kind of 'park' constructed through the process of reserving an area for protection 'from people' can be linked to the Western early conception of 'antiquities' which tended to dehistoricise heritage to ship ancient objects from Africa. Within this fabric-based approach to heritage management, the connection between the past and the present is broken.

In the case of 'nature parks' in Africa, the process of erasure of anthropogenic landscapes through displacement and impoverishment of local communities to set them aside as unspoiled nature reserves amounts to 'environmental colonialism' (Nelson, 2003). Before the creation of parks and reserves, African populations actively manipulated the environment for their own benefit. However, within the first decade of the colonial rule on the continent, wildlife was converted from a locally used and customarily managed component of the natural resource base, to a commodity to which mainly Europeans possessed exclusive legal access. The creation of nature parks in eastern and southern Africa typically served to prevent ordinary Africans from reoccupying the land from which they had been expelled by European military forces or diseases. Nowadays, nature and wildlife in the parks continue to take precedence before people, even though the bifurcation between culture and nature is a fallacy from the point of view of the African continent where cultural and natural heritage aspects are not only intertwined but cultural components are embedded within the natural environment and often embody features of this environment (Keitumetse, 2021).

Archaeological sites in the African context

Archaeological parks tend to be perceived as having no continuity with the present, as remnants of the past. Yet, heritage is more than the past. It is not simply a tangible property but knowledge – 'the meanings attached in the present to the past' (Graham 2002: 1003) – and the relationships between the tangible and the intangible, between the people and the land, and other living beings and spirits (Jackson and Smith, 2005: 336). Thus, heritage enclosed within an archaeological park, conceptualised by 'specialists' and fenced off for the purpose of education and entertainment, is devalued as the connections which constitute its meaning are broken.

What the archaeological park means for specialists may be utterly different from what this heritage represents for the local communities. Ideally, both narratives must be told, as they are based on the different meanings attached to the past. The significance the heritage place had for past generations cannot be always sustained. Ancient temples of the Egyptian Pharaonic culture in Ancient Thebes are interpreted today by archaeologists through their contemporary lenses. For the ancients they were sacred and carried mainly spiritual meanings. Their value today is mostly centred on their technological innovativeness, architectural ingenuity or aesthetic ideals. The intangible values associated with these sites by communities living with this heritage continue to be lost, as the management of the properties tends to focus on the fabric or 'universal' values for which they are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

In contrast to the fabric-based and values-based approaches to conservation and heritage management, living heritage approach recognises the relevance of heritage sites to the life of contemporary communities and acknowledges their rights to past vestiges (Wijesuriya, 2015). Considering sites and artefacts as inseparable from the people and practices associated with them, it seeks benefits of heritage preservation for both the tangible relics and the communities living with them, recognising the historical continuity between the past and the present.

Universal accessibility and its limits

The proposed premise of universal access to archaeological sites and parks on the UNESCO World Heritage list is based on the OUV for which these places are recognised. Yet, all of these inscribed properties have also local values that contribute to the meaning of the places, the loss of which may lead to erosion of the OUV itself.

Examples of UNESCO World Heritage properties in Africa with issues related to restrictions on access

Matobo Hills (Zimbabwe, inscribed in 2003)

A cultural landscape that provides rich evidence of the lives of foraging societies in the Stone Age and the agricultural societies which replaced them in the Iron Age. Matobo rocks are seen as the seat of god and of ancestral spirits by present-day local communities. Some areas within the property have restricted passage due to traditional and religious customs, which help safeguard the authenticity of this place (WMW, 2018).

Tombs of Buganda Kings at Kasubi (Uganda, inscribed in 2001)

A property that testifies to the powerful political force of the Baganda people in the region since the 13th century. It is a major spiritual centre for the Baganda and is the most active religious place in the kingdom (UNESCO WHC 1022). The fact that the property continues to be used as a religious site has contributed to its good state of preservation.

Sacred Mijikenda Kaya Forests (Kenya, inscribed in 2008)

A property that contains the remains of numerous fortified villages, known as kayas, of the Mijikenda people. Abandoned in the mid-20th century, the kayas are now regarded as the abodes of ancestors and revered as sacred sites. Certain restrictions have been placed on access and the utilisation of natural forest resources due to customary beliefs, which resulted in biodiversity being sustained.

Cliff of Bandiagara (Land of the Dogons) (Mali, inscribed in 1989)

A cultural landscape, home to the Dogons who since the 15th century were able to protect and preserve their culture and traditions thanks to the difficult access to their shelters entrenched on a plateau and hanging on cliff faces. This heritage has become vulnerable due to globalisation, one of the key impacts of increased development of cultural tourism. The integrity of the property is compromised in some of the areas which no longer contain all the attributes of the OUV (UNESCO WHC 516). Access in this case might have contributed to the loss of integrity.

Measures put in place to protect a temple or a shrine, or rock art painting as tangible heritage of exceptional architectural or aesthetic value may constrain people from carrying out their cultural practices in these spaces.

Under such circumstances, the intangible dimension of heritage, giving life to a site, risks being lost. Restricting local populations from their traditional lands, places to which they are culturally and spiritually attached may lead to the abandonment of these spaces, and the loss of their spiritual value in the long-run; this could contribute to the dilution of the OUV. Therefore, it is important to understand all the values the property holds and protect the sites holistically. This could mean placing restrictions on access.

Access – admission, use and understanding

Restrictions on access to UNESCO World Heritage properties may be introduced due to the function of the sites (e.g. religious areas), associated values (e.g. spiritual values) or cultural taboos (attached for e.g. to ancestral lands, shrines or forests in relation to gender, age or social status in line with customary laws and beliefs). In this light, the premise of entertainment and enjoyment included in the definition of an archaeological park may be questioned – can a place sacred to one community be used for entertainment of another; or a place associated with pain and reflection be deemed a place of enjoyment? Limits to access may also be directly related to the need for protecting attributes which convey the values that sustain the significance of the sites. Access to sites that contain fragile attributes may be restricted to prevent their damage. In such cases, research instead of tourism development may be a management objective.

Access relates also to knowledge or understanding of an archaeological site. Diversity of narratives is key in this instance and potential restrictions may apply due to intellectual property rights or taboos of cultural communities. The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (2008) stipulates principles upon which interpretation and presentation should be based: enabling intellectual access and understanding; using and drawing upon accepted scholarly methods and living traditions; covering a wide context and setting; respecting authenticity; having sustainability as a central goal; including heritage stakeholders in their entirety; and engaging in continuing research, training, and evaluation of site identities. Inclusive presentation and interpretation are particularly important to convey the different relationships between people and the natural world, people and the land, people and the spirits that heritage represents. In many places in Africa, these relationships have been ruptured in the colonial times and continue to be strained due to prevalent heritage management models. Looking at the proposed definition of an 'archaeological park' from this point of view, it may be argued that the term refers to a place that lost its intangible values, for reasons that may include the forceful removal of the people from a place to set it aside for other purposes related to education

and entertainment. Universal open access to the archaeological sites that still host cultural practices and are associated with intangible heritage may threaten the values attached to these places, eventually depriving them of their living nature.

Recommendations

Informed by differing paradigms in which values of a heritage property are often produced, accessed and presented, this policy brief recommends that African State Parties to the Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage (UNESCO 1972), international heritage organisations and Intergovernmental Advisory Bodies to UNESCO:

- Rethink the concept of an archaeological park which at present seems to alienate archaeological past from the present and from the contemporary communities;
- Recognise the role played by other values, besides the OUV, in heritage management and integrate other voices in the interpretation of archaeological vestiges to be inclusive of many narratives;
- Consider access to the archaeological sites within the local cultural contexts in which they are located, and respect limits on admission, use and knowledge guided by cultural codes and norms as well as socio-cultural taboos of the communities that are rightsholders on the basis of widely defined continuity, instead of focusing solely on 'universal' significance for which the properties are inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list.

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