

FOCUS
IL RECUPERO DEL PATRIMONIO URBANO DI MOGADISCIO

La tutela del patrimonio in Africa subsahariana fra realtà informali e culture locali

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Il patrimonio storico in Africa subsahariana è messo a repentaglio da pressione urbana, grandi trasformazioni territoriali, cambiamenti climatici e conflitti. Al fianco di queste criticità si riscontrano tuttavia approcci peculiari al tema della tutela che scaturiscono dal rapporto con la storia di alcune culture tradizionali e orali, come il ruolo che vestono azioni e rituali collettivi o l'apporto di alcune comunità informali.

Patrimonio sotto assedio

Il patrimonio storico culturale nel contesto geografico dell'Africa subsahariana è quanto mai fragile, tanto che con una metafora venutamente militaresca potrebbe essere definito sotto assedio. Gli attori in prima linea nell'avanzare questi attacchi sono molteplici, ed abbiamante guerre e crisi politico-militari protratte a lungo un ruolo importante ne la perdita costante di luoghi di valore artistico, storico o identitario, allo stesso tempo però si collocano al loro fianco fenomeni meno eclatanti ma con una portata altrettanto ampi ancora più distruttive quali l'urbanizzazione incontrollata, la debolezza istituzionale nel tutelare il patrimonio storico e ambientale e le imponenti trasformazioni territoriali promosse da grandi investimenti nei settori estrattivi, infrastrutturali o immobiliari.

È noto come il patrimonio storico culturale e in particolare i monumenti con un forte valore identitario siano da sempre un obiettivo sensibile durante i conflitti. Anche in seguito alla Convenzione dell'Aja del 1954 gli episodi di distruzione deliberata di edifici di grande valore si sono ripetuti puntualmente in decine di aree di crisi.

L'Africa subsahariana, che dall'epoca delle indipendenze risulta il subcontinente con maggiore incidenza di crisi e scontri armati, non è immune ca questi avvenimenti. Alcuni di questi con devastazioni alla scala urbana, come la distruzione del centro storico di Massaua da parte dell'artiglieria etiopica durante la sanguinosa guerra di indipendenza (Fig. 1), la sistematica devastazione di Mogadiscio a partire dal conflitto civile degli anni '90 e l'incendio dell'antica Stone Town nelle rivolte degli anni '60 contro il sultanato di Zanzibar. Uno degli esempi più eclatanti, in epoca recente, è incontestabilmente quello di Timbuctù. La celebre e antichissima città ai margini meridionali del Sahara, miraggio di generazioni di esploratori e narratori, fu conquistata nel 2012 da milizie jihadiste del gruppo Ansar Dine che, oltre ai documentati scempi sulla popolazione, rasero al suolo gli antichissimi mausolei di imam e notabili religiosi dichiarati patrimonio dell'UNESCO. Obiettivi mirati e distruzioni deliberate che risalgono anche all'alba dell'epoca coloniale quando le potenze europee non esitarono a distruggere e restituire dei principali reperti al fine di cancellare fisicamente la memoria collettiva delle popolazioni assoggettate.

Al fianco delle devastazioni belliche quelle delle città e dei palazzi reali di Benin City, Abomey e Kumasi (Hall 1976) va ricordata anche la sistematica spoliazione di saccheggio e trasferimento in Europa dei manufatti artistici quali i bronzi del Benin. Solo di recente in restituzione ha messo allarga lo sguardo al territorio nel suo complesso gli impatti dei conflitti sono ancora più evidenti, specialmente nelle zone rurali. La strutture di villaggio, che pur con sostanziali differenze insediative e con le naturali trasformazioni dovute alla diffusione di infrastrutture e tecnologie, caratterizzano ancora una vasta parte del territorio a sud del Sahara subisce trasformazioni radicali nelle aree di conflitto.

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Heritage Conservation in Sub-Saharan Africa: Between Informal Realities and Local Cultures

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Abstract

Historical heritage in Sub-Saharan Africa is threatened by urban pressure, massive territorial transformations, climate change, and conflicts. Alongside these critical issues, however, there are distinct approaches to conservation arising from the relationship that certain traditional and oral cultures have with history—such as the role played by collective actions and rituals or the contribution of informal communities.

Heritage Under Siege

Cultural and historical heritage in the geographical context of Sub-Saharan Africa is extremely fragile, so much so that—using a deliberately military metaphor—it could be described as "under siege." The forces leading these attacks are manifold. Undoubtedly, wars and prolonged political-military crises play a major role in the constant loss of places of artistic, historical, or identity value. At the same time, however, less sensational but potentially even more destructive phenomena exist alongside them, such as uncontrolled urbanization, institutional weakness in protecting historical and environmental heritage, and massive territorial transformations driven by large investments in the extractive, infrastructure, and real estate sectors.

It is well known that historical-cultural heritage, and in particular monuments with strong identity value, have always been sensitive targets during conflicts. Even after the 1954 Hague Convention, deliberate acts of destruction targeting high-value buildings have routinely recurred across dozens of crisis areas.

Sub-Saharan Africa—which since the era of independence has been the subcontinent with the highest incidence of crises and armed conflicts—is not immune to these events. Some have caused urban-scale devastation, such as the destruction of Massawa's historic center by Ethiopian artillery during the bloody war of independence (Fig. 1), the systematic devastation of Mogadishu starting from the civil conflict in the 1990s, or the burning of ancient Stone Town during the 1960s riots against the Sultanate of Zanzibar. One of the most striking recent examples is undoubtedly Timbuktu. The famous and ancient city on the southern edge

of the Sahara—a mirage for generations of explorers and storytellers—was captured in 2012 by jihadist militants of the Ansar Dine group. In addition to documented abuses against the population, they razed the ancient mausoleums of imams and religious figures (designated UNESCO World Heritage sites) to the ground. Targeted objectives and deliberate destruction date back to the dawn of the colonial era, when European powers did not hesitate to destroy the vestiges of major kingdoms to physically erase the collective memory of conquered populations. Alongside famous devastations—such as those of the royal cities and palaces of Benin City, Abomey, and Kumasi (Hull 1976)—one must also recall the systematic looting and transfer to Europe of artistic artifacts, such as the Benin Bronzes, which have only recently begun to be repatriated.

Looking at the territory as a whole, the impacts of conflict are even more evident, especially in rural areas. The village structure—which, despite substantial settlement differences and natural transformations due to the spread of infrastructure and technology, still characterizes a large part of the territories south of the Sahara—undergoes radical transformations in conflict zones.

On the one hand, the emergence of new forms of "hybrid" warfare or armed insurgencies by small groups (as seen in the Sahel or northern Mozambique) treats isolated rural villages as primary targets for indiscriminate attacks on civilian populations. On the other hand, the further fragmentation of already marginal territories into spheres of influence subject to rapid front-line shifts increases the insecurity and vulnerability of rural populations. This fragility compounds that caused by climate change, which many authors identify as a decisive factor in escalating crises and conflicts (Mastrojeni and Pasini 2017).

The outcome of these compounding causes is almost always the abandonment of villages and secondary rural centers, leading to the progressive destruction and loss not only of existing residential areas and traditional private and public architecture, but more broadly of the spatial and agricultural layout of these territories.

Areas where traditional irrigation and farming systems had shaped landscapes closely integrated with their natural context for centuries are progressively abandoned. Meanwhile, the organic settlement patterns of traditional communities give way to the rigid gridiron layouts of refugee camps on the fringes of major cities. Unlike other factors that are inherently slower and more localized, conflicts represent sudden—and sometimes irreversible—disruptions in the natural transformation of landscapes, understood as palimpsests where interactions between humanity and nature stratify over time (Corboz 1998).

The uniqueness of contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa—characterized by demographic and urban growth rates so rapid they are considered unprecedented in human history—partially shatters this paradigm. The loss of historical heritage due to urban transformation and major infrastructure projects exhibits an extent and speed comparable in some cases to those caused by crises and conflicts.

Over the last thirty years, Sub-Saharan Africa has consistently maintained urban growth rates above 3%, leading to the formation of numerous megacities characterized by inadequate planning, a chronic lack of basic services, and social and economic vulnerability, alongside overall institutional weakness. Alongside phenomena like informality and sprawl, factors such as the growth of the middle class, rising demand for services, and the attractiveness of central and coastal zones have created conditions favoring large-scale developments that inevitably impact historical heritage from the colonial or pre-colonial eras.

Among the most glaring examples is Addis Ababa, which in recent decades has seen the destruction of numerous public buildings in Modernist, Constructivist, or Brutalist styles to make way for questionable commercial or residential developments. This culminated in the complete destruction of the historic Piassa neighborhood—the ancient commercial heart of the Ethiopian capital—which was razed over a couple of days in the spring of 2024 to make room for self-styled urban regeneration projects.

In other geographical contexts, even if less blatantly, the destruction of historical heritage appears so systematic that it can once again be compared to that of armed conflicts. This is the case, among others, of Freetown and its traditional Krio houses—buildings dating back as far as the late 18th century, constructed by freed slaves who founded the city using a unique style reminiscent of Caribbean chattel houses or Mississippi Delta architecture. These hundreds of wooden cottages, the true core of the city's identity, were already decimated by the civil war (1995–2001) and are now progressively disappearing due to real estate speculation.

History, Heritage, Conservation: Universal Criteria or Context-Specific?

Accounts by European explorers venturing south of the Sahara were, since antiquity, nearly unanimous in reporting a scarcity or complete absence of grand monuments and historical architecture. In the colonial

period, this characteristic was erroneously attributed to an absence of organized societies or technical/construction skills capable of withstanding harsh climatic conditions, thereby reinforcing the myth of an Africa in need of "civilizing."

This perspective was disproved by historiography but served the expansive political goals of the time. Archaeologists and scholars did not hesitate to invent foreign origins for artifacts that contradicted this narrative. The rock-hewn churches of Lalibela were attributed to Indian craftsmen, the Ife bronzes (as well as Egyptian civilization) to unspecified Mediterranean communities, and the monumental ruins of Great Zimbabwe were actively concealed for decades.

This approach led to ignoring the importance of alternative concepts of the built environment—concepts not based on monumentality or permanence, but on aspects such as community role or a balanced relationship with the surrounding environment.

It is well known that many pre-colonial civilizations relied on oral traditions—traditions commonly perceived even today as "inferior" compared to approaches built on scientific rigor, verifiable sources, and the preservation of physical historical evidence. Anthropology has shown, on the contrary, that these are simply different ways of viewing the world, positioning oneself in history, and constructing a collective imagination (Vansina 1961).

This mindset is fundamentally distinct from the European and "Western" perspective. Beyond history, imagination, and traditions, it inherently encompasses architecture and the broader art of constructing buildings and cities.

In Book III of his *Odes*, Horace wrote: *"I have built a monument more lasting than bronze."* This phrase speaks volumes about our culture's emphasis on the durability of monuments, often designed to testify to future generations the greatness of an era, or buildings constructed to be handed down through centuries. Yet the same quote reminds us how words—written or spoken—can also endure over time, albeit in a more fluid manner.

The fundamental difference in outlook lies here: in writing-based cultures, a historic building is solid, concrete evidence to be preserved scientifically, keeping original materials, functions, and subsequent alterations legible. It is no coincidence that we speak today of philological restoration, treating buildings much like ancient manuscripts.

In many cultures founded on oral traditions, a building (or territorial plan) holds an equally strategic importance in terms of identity and historical memory. However, it is not perceived as a fetish to be kept intact; instead, it can transform or even be entirely rebuilt, provided it retains the core essence that generated it or accompanied its history.

The famous mud mosques of the Sahel are perhaps the most emblematic example of this distinct approach. The dating of these structures is highly debated: some were mentioned in the mid-14th century diaries of the explorer Ibn Battuta, while others were razed and rebuilt in the early 20th century. Several of these remarkable structures are restored and partially reconstructed during large collective ceremonies held every year. The annual ceremony at the Great Mosque of Djenné—the most famous and monumental among them—engages the city's entire population for about two weeks on the eve of the rainy season, with elders supervising the work. While neighborhood teams mix mud from the Niger River with rice husks, women prepare meals, children knead the mortar with their feet, and young community members—guided by master masons—climb the timber scaffolding projecting from the walls to reapply the exterior plaster.

Just as history in oral cultures is passed down through repetition—renewed each time it is retold—architecture can shift or be remade. What is ancient or authentic in the Mosque of Djenné? What is recent? It is not the physical, original object that carries weight, but the essence of the building itself and its ability to transmit a collective history in which everyone participates (Fig. 2).

This practice is far removed from the Western concept of restoration. Instead, it serves as a renewal ritual in which the building preserves its form through the continuous remaking of its outer skin while reinforcing its public function.

Equally unique is the approach to history among nomadic communities traditionally inhabiting the Sahara, the Sahelian zones, or the savannas of Southern Africa. By nature, they are unbound by fixed territories, borders, or permanent structures. In several of these cultures, the concept of history is circular rather than linear, composed of repeating cycles—both seasonal and over longer spans. The concept of heritage can be tied to these cycles, as seen in the infrastructural networks of wells and tracks crossing the desert (whose

strategic and symbolic value makes them comparable to monuments) or temporary structures like the *Khaima*—the tents of the Hassaniya nomads in Mauritania.
These simple traditional tensile structures—moved to follow rare rainfalls or pitched near oases during date harvest season—are supported by a single tall central wooden pole. This pole is an extremely precious object (wood being almost impossible to find in the desert) that is handed down across generations. The line between nomadism and sedentarism in contemporary Mauritania, as well as in Tuareg or Somali communities, is fluid. A significant portion of residents in the capital, Nouakchott, maintain *Khaimas* within their residential compounds and spend extended periods in the desert when work permits. The form of the "settled" city merges and intertwines with nomadic living spaces (Choplin 2017).
Here again, a rigid dichotomy between tangible and intangible heritage proves ineffective for describing the nuanced cultural practices involving distinct lifestyles and approaches to history.

Colonial Heritage: Rejection, Conservation, or Reappropriation?
Colonial heritage presents a distinct case, often forming a defining feature of major cities and capitals established during European rule. These buildings and monuments span nearly five centuries across different countries: from Dutch and Portuguese slave forts along the West African coast to the white Rationalist buildings of the 1960s and 1970s in former Portuguese colonies—the last to gain liberation following the Carnation Revolution.
Unlike much of the built heritage traditionally valued by local communities, these structures hold little positive significance for local identity. On the contrary, they remain tangible symbols of oppressive foreign rule, which often excluded indigenous populations from urban life and access to basic services.
Colonial urban planning can universally be defined as an urbanism of segregation. Concepts like garden cities or security-focused territorial control were implemented to enforce sharp separations between white and Black residents or to build easily controllable "native quarters" (King 1976). In this context, local populations found spatial agency primarily through non-tangible and spiritual dimensions. The town of Tibiri illustrates this well: in 1947, French authorities decided to rebuild the Nigerien town following a major flood. Traditional spatial layouts were arbitrarily replaced with a modern rationalist grid featuring fan-shaped boulevards converging on a central square.
As geographer Guy Nicolas discovered years later, the town's residents had invisibly reconstructed their symbolic space by planting trees or burying sacred objects at points corresponding to the gates and central landmark of the ancient city. Behind the Western urban grid based on efficiency and functionality, an invisible yet vital indigenous sacred space endured (Bargna 2003).
Unsurprisingly, following independence across African nations, a debate emerged among intellectuals—partially echoing debates in post-WWII Italy. On one side were proponents of a complete removal of colonial heritage; on the other were those advocating for its adaptive reuse and reappropriation. Amílcar Cabral, a leading figure in the independence of Portuguese colonies in West Africa, even envisioned abandoning European-founded cities altogether, proposing a decentralized rural settlement model where ministries and centers of power were distributed across the countryside.
Ultimately, the prevailing response to colonial architecture and urban planning was not outright destruction, but rather partial or total neglect. Today, more than sixty years after the first wave of independence, this legacy leaves room for preserving what remains. The case of Asmara is emblematic: following Eritrean independence in 1993 and extensive internal debate, the country established the Cultural Assets Rehabilitation Project (CARP) in 1997. This initiative banned unauthorized interventions within the historic center, preserving its late 19th-century, Rationalist, and Modernist heritage, which eventually led to its UNESCO World Heritage designation in 2017.
Building on this experience, widespread initiatives by a new generation of African architects, urban planners, and technicians are gaining traction. They are increasingly focused on rediscovering local traditions through a contemporary lens while safeguarding endangered historical landmarks, including colonial ones.
In Sub-Saharan Africa, a pragmatic approach toward the traumatic legacies of the colonial past is not new. A clear example is the issue of national borders, which were arbitrarily drawn by European powers from the Berlin Conference onward without regard for local realities. Following independence, the newly formed Organisation of African Unity addressed this issue. In a historic resolution, while recognizing the injustice and

absurdity of borders drawn by foreign powers, it declared these frontiers inviolable to minimize the risk of interstate conflicts.

This reflects the concept that African intellectuals and historians, such as Joseph Ki-Zerbo, have described as "reappropriation": reclaiming the continent's historical agency as an active participant rather than a passive victim, while writing its own historiography to recover fragments from different eras that survived periods of disruption. In this framework, territories, urban spaces, architecture, and monuments play a fundamental role. Reappropriation is not merely an intellectual exercise; it starts in physical spaces that are occupied, repurposed, and transformed (Ki-Zerbo 1972).

Within these dynamics, another distinct feature of Sub-Saharan urbanism emerges compared to European and Western contexts: the central role of informality.

Informality is often viewed negatively as a lack of rules, chaotic disorder, and a source of urban problems contrasting with orderly, rational growth. However, as scholars like J.F. Turner have highlighted, informality is primarily a bottom-up response to structural challenges—most notably the absence of state-led solutions for housing and service provision (Balbo 1999).

In particular, informality serves as a primary mechanism accommodating the rapid urban growth rates across the continent over the last three decades. Though complex, it remains an effective driver shaping 21st-century African urbanism (Monica 2023).

While the economic, social, spatial, and service-oriented roles of informal networks have been extensively documented (Simone 2004), their contribution to heritage conservation is less widely recognized. Though often unsystematic and unintentional, informal occupation has in several instances enabled the survival and preservation of historical buildings abandoned by owners and authorities—even as these spaces remain vulnerable.

In the Ghanaian town of Sekondi (Fig. 3), for example, remnants of a small British colonial district persist: several Victorian-style villas and a cluster of public buildings positioned around a promontory anchored by a 17th-century Dutch fort. Its coastal proximity led to the area being gradually enveloped by the expansion of an informal fishing village originally situated along the shore.

Open spaces between historical structures now host small homes, market stalls, and net storage areas, while deteriorating historic buildings have been inhabited by low-income families. While this occupation has altered some original layouts, it has simultaneously prevented demolition driven by real estate speculation. Minor structural repairs and informal additions—though architecturally incongruous—have extended the physical lifespan of these buildings.

This example illustrates how challenging urban conditions can create unexpected opportunities for heritage preservation. It underscores the role local (and informal) communities can play where formal institutions face chronic resource constraints exacerbated by rapid urbanization.

Frameworks for Heritage Conservation in Sub-Saharan Africa

This overview of diverse geographical, social, and cultural contexts highlights the complex realities, methods, and perspectives surrounding heritage conservation in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Relationships with history, the role of oral traditions, and the dynamics of rural, nomadic, or semi-nomadic communities intersect with challenges posed by rapid urban growth, climate change, and localized crises.

It would be a mistake, however, to view this issue through a rigid dichotomy contrasting ancient tradition with unguided modernization. Territories and cities south of the Sahara are complex, rapidly evolving ecosystems where distinct yet complementary elements converge—with the increasing adoption of technology serving as a major transformative driver.

Numerous countries have begun establishing legal frameworks and tools for heritage protection, often supported by international cooperation initiatives in which academic institutions play an important role. In this context, Italy can contribute valuable expertise drawn from its long tradition in research, design, and practical restoration.

However, effective collaboration requires a pragmatic approach that respects local contexts and moves beyond rigid regulatory frameworks based solely on restrictions. This involves exploring flexible conservation models adapted to informal contexts and rapidly changing urban environments.

Ultimately, international cooperation relies on mutual exchange rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge. In this light, the distinctive practices found in Sub-Saharan Africa—most notably the active, participatory role of local communities—offer valuable insights for broader global discussions on heritage conservation.

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