
Bimbia in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade: Exploring the Ruined Trade Structures and Artefacts as Visual Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

*It is undoubtable that the territory now called Cameroon was one of the most significant African territories implicated in the historic Trans-Atlantic slave trade with **the coastal town of Bimbia** being one of the most remarkable sites of remembrance. Bimbia was a hot-spot of the capture, enslavement, imprisonment and transportation/exportation of human-beings of different ethnic backgrounds into the Americas and the Caribbean as well as other locations in the world. Memory of this site, its structures and role in the especially the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade has today transformed Bimbia into a historic and an international tourist destination. The Bimbia Slave trade site is survived by an endangered trail of ruined slave trade structures which vividly reflect the brutal nature of the in-humane trade. In addition to its touristic value, the ruins and memory of the role that this town played has made it an important research destination for historians, archaeologists, and ethnologists. Using a mixed research approach, the paper seeks to explore the deeper symbolic meanings and representation of the ruined structures at the site and how they could contribute to the writing of the history of slavery and slave trade in Cameroon from an eco-history perspective.*

Keywords: *Cameroon, Bimbia, Slave Trade, Trans-Atlantic, heritage*

Introduction

Bimbia is one of the chief historical, memorial and cultural sites situated in the Limbe III Sub-Division off the Coast of

Limbe in Fako Division of the South West Region of Cameroon. It would be misleading to contend that Cameroon was not an important player in the history of slavery and slave trade. The colony which became known as Cameroon in 1884 following the historic scramble for and colonization of Cameroon in July 1884 was a hot-spot of the enslavement, capture, imprisonment and transportation/exportation of human-beings of different ethnic backgrounds into Europe, the Americas and the Caribbeans as well as other locations in the world.ⁱ

The Trans-Atlantic Slave trade on the Cameroon Coast which transformed Bimbia into a historic and an now international cultural site spanned from the mid-17th century to the 19th century leaving behind a trail of ruined trade structures and artifacts which illustrate the brutal nature of the in-humane slave trade. Today, much of this evidence helps historians, archaeologists and ethnographers to reconstruct the histories of Africans and how they were transported to various locations in the world without empathy to conscience and self-esteem. The nature of the ruined site clearly illustrates the violence and barbarism that was associated with the slave trade and the importance slave masters or dealers attached to the slave site of Bimbia which was a renowned market and an exit route for the slaves.

The huge relics of the cultural and material remains at the site of the Slave Trade at Bimbia have contributed to make the town of Bimbia an archaeological, cultural and historical space.ⁱⁱ A bird's eye-view of the ruined structures at the site is reminiscent of the past histories and activities of the slave trade and its characteristics where the captured slaves were chained. The ruined structures, though, highly fragile can be considered as useful evidence on site with which to reconstruct a story of the imaginary trauma and torture that the enslavers subjected their countrymen into during the age of slavery and enslavement in Cameroon.

The paper attempts a brief survey of the Bimbia slave trade site by highlighting the evidence of the trade with the use of photographs of the ruined site and what they symbolize. Photos of the ruined site, rekindle memories of

the rise and resilience of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the growth of the town and should inspire a critical discourse in slavery and slave in Africa and the world. The importance of photographic images of the ruined structures herein do not only re-engage memory but also serve as interpretive tool or parameter in the presentation and interpretation of heritage sites in Africa which often have no living records to support the history behind the site. From an eco-history and archaeological standpoints, it seems obvious that human and natural forces of nature impact negatively on the ruined structures which suggest that certain preventive and conservation steps or measures has to be urgently engaged by the government and the local authorities in limbe to ensure the resilience of the site

Besides, very little attention has been paid by the government in the last few years to valorize the site and to protect it from irrational human activities. For students and other researchers across the globe, photographed images of the sites would also serve as illustrative elements in slavery and slave trade studies in Africa and perhaps offer new theoretical and pedagogic paradigms to researchers interested in slave studies. It is also because of the relevance of the site that Bimbia has been classified as a national cultural patrimony and shortlisted in UNESCO's World Heritage Sites list since 2013.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Geo-Strategic Location of Bimbia in the Gulf of Guinea

Bimbia is a village or community that had played an immeasurable role in the history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade., first as a slave market, second, as a slave camp/prison and third as an exit route through the Atlantic Ocean to Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbeans since the 1540s.^{iv} Bimbia is situated at the south-east coast of Limbe Sub-Division in the South-West Region of Cameroon and West of the Wouri estuary in the Gulf of Guinea.^v This peripheral location of Bimbia did not only favour its role in the slave trade but also made Bimbia the nerve center for other commercial activities in the Gulf of Guinea because the area is very rich in oil and gas resources as well as fisheries which attract commercial activities and people of diverse ethnic backgrounds

especially foreigners like the Ijaws, Ibibios, Ghanaians, as well as Chinese.^{vi}

Map I: Location of Bimbia in the South-West Region of Cameroon



Source: Dibussi Tande, "Unravelling Conflicting Narratives about the Origins of the Isubu of Bimbia", available online at www.bakweri.org/http://www.dibussi.com

The village of Bimbia has evolved before, during and after the slave trade era to include villages like: Dikolo, Bona Ngombe, Bonabile, Kange Fishing Port and Mboko I and II. Today, because of its historical importance to the country and its peripheral location, Bimbia is the administrative capital of the Limbe III sub-Division, situated along the coastal south-eastern flanks of the former Victoria (today known as the city of Limbe).^{vii} However, the whole of this area was initially called Bimbia for obvious historical reasons that are linked to histories of the founding fathers of the village called *Mbimbi*. It is believed that the followers of Mbimbi properly named the village in his honor and called it Bimbia.^{viii}

As regards the ethnic composition, about a hundred and fifty years ago, Bimbia was occupied by the Isuwu or Isubu settlers who probably migrated from along the banks of River Wouri in the Littoral Region of Cameroon. Until recently, the area has become cosmopolitan in nature due to the influx of many ethnic groups into the land. Most of the immigrants, mostly Nigerians, creoles and some ex-slaves are employed in the fishing, hunting and farming

sectors of the local economy. The scenery is naturally attractive with a long coastline connecting the Atlantic Ocean that was and is still instrumental in commercial activities along the coastline of Africa and the Gulf of Guinea.

Taking the above into account, one can underscore the importance of Bimbia and the Nicholl's island in the history of the Slave trade. The figures may not be very accurate but highlight the facts and figures related to the inhumane trade whose relic on site still reminds us of the brutal nature of the slave trade., the site not only serves as an indelible bridge into the past, but also provides strong evidence for the writing of histories of slavery and slave trade, histories of actors involved, towns and spaces that served as corridors of the trade.

This is because the site, like elsewhere in Calabar, have retained evidences of the slave trade which future researchers, and heritage managers may exploit for scientific purposes as well as develop new narratives on such spaces.^{ix}

From the perspective of heritage and heritage management or conservation studies, there are many opportunities that need to be exploited by researchers, students, and other scientists for benefit of knowledge production and sharing. What then is heritage? How can Bimbia be regarded as a heritage site? To answer these short thought-provoking questions, one needs to cast a bird's eye-view on the conceptualization of 'heritage' and situate its broad meaning This kind of interpretation would give meaning to the study by re-assessing the historical significance of Bimbia and thus seek to valorise its potentials for tourism development and heritage studies/conservation globally.

Conceptualizing Heritage and Heritage Sites: New Perspectives on the Bimbia Site

Heritage is a broad concept and it includes cultural and natural elements. According to Rodney H (2020), 'Heritage' may be defined as objects, spaces, and practices, cultures, etc, that can be formally protected, conserved and preserved for future generations.^x The heritage of any

community or place maybe derived or inherited from past histories, cultures or civilizations to satisfy particular objectives of life. Bimbia was originally founded on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean and evidence suggest, it had long served as a trading port for arts and craft before the introduction of the slave trade market and exit route by Europeans. Earlier, the indigenous people were involved in subsistence fishing activities that animated trade along the Bight of Biafra to the Calabar River in the Gulf of Guinea.^{xi}

The coming of the European traders and enslavers between the 18th and 19th centuries later transformed Bimbia into a slave port by constructing structures that enhanced slave trade. European contacts were extended into the interior of Cameroon by the 18th century and this invariably marked the transformative stage in making Bimbia a permanent slave trade hot-spot in the Gulf of Guinea. As soon as they arrived the interior of Cameroon, they began erecting structures that were capable of temporarily imprisoning the enslaved men and women of African descent in preparation for the journey of no return.

The ruined structures of the Bimbia slave trade site encompass compactly built concrete walls, pillars, prison circumference and other camps that served the purpose of the enslavers. Much of the actual shapes of the slave structures are ruined and only critical insights could help post-colonial writers to make sense of existing ruins of the site as the attached images of the site depicts. However, it is possible that some of the structures may have evolved with time to accommodate the ever-increasing volumes of enslaved men in the slave camp. Consequently, the available ruined structures may not only serve the purpose of national heritage of the country, but are also useful evidence from which the story of the slave trade in Africa can be retold by Africans using oral and cultural material sources.

Current evidence adduced from the site suggest that human culture through material human remains could be traced to the site using the Carbon 14 dating method as well as DNA samples obtainable from the rock walls and chains at the site. This evidence makes it easier for us to

situate Bimbia both as a cultural heritage as well as natural landscape site. In studies dealing with cultural heritage, it is appropriate to divide heritage into both tangible and intangible cultural and natural heritage materials with specific or unique characteristics which makes such heritages historically, culturally, aesthetically, and scientifically relevant to current and future generations.

According to national and international classifications, the Bimbia Slave Trade site cannot be underrated scientifically, because of its role in the slave trade in Cameroon. Bimbia is the heritage of the past to which the government and international organizations like UNESCO have added value to save it from completely disappearing from the surface of the earth. In view of this, national and local authorities seem to be engaging renewed efforts intended to protect and conserve the endangered site and its ruined structures for future generations and also for scientific and touristic purposes.

The listing of the Bimbia Slave trade site on UNESCO's World Heritage List, has obviously made the government of Cameroon to realize the importance of Bimbia as a cultural, historical, archaeological and ethnographic space in Africa that must be conserved and protected.^{xii} The Bimbia heritage site could best be considered when one reads Article 1 of the 1972 UNESCO Conventions on the protection of cultural and natural heritages of the world. Apart from attempting a broad and concise definition of heritage, it has distinguished between cultural and natural heritages in its articles 1 and 2. According to Article 1, '*Cultural Heritage*' may include:

Monuments: architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structure of an archaeological nature, inscription, caves dwellings and combination of features, which are of outstanding universal value from the point of view of history, arts or science; groups of buildings; groups of separate or connected buildings which because of their architecture, their homogeneity or their place in the landscape, are of outstanding universal value from the standpoint of history, arts or science; sites; works of man or combined works of nature and man, and areas including archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view.^{xiii}

Also, *cultural heritage* refers to “all tangible and intangible cultural properties that have heritage or patrimonial values. By heritage value, we mean its outstanding cultural significance, which put together, is a combination of historical, emblematic, spiritual, artistic and communal values.”^{xiv} By historical value it is meant to have the historical character and content that certainly provide undiluted connection with the past and a sense of continuity; on the other hand, the symbolic implies the power of certain spaces and objects adds to people’s cultural identity and finally, the spiritual value demonstrates the intimate value which people naturally or culturally attaches to a cultural, religious or scared place or object which may promote insights in the meaning of religious, sacred and transcendental practices and experiences. Although Bimbia is not a spiritual site from the perspective of culture, it is more often considered as a historical and memorial site because of the activities of the slave trade as evident by the ruined monuments or structures at the site.

Apart from cultural heritage which is conspicuously present in every community in Cameroon, natural heritage too is replete in many parts of the country. In Cameroon for example, these include natural vegetations, forest reserves, ecological hot-spots like the Waza Park, the Limbe Botanic Garden, Mount Fako (Cameroon), the Korup Forest, Mount Kupe, various lakes in the country as well as endemic birds, reptiles, mammals and landscapes^{xv} fall under the unique category of natural heritage. In fact, *Article 2* of the 1972 UNESCO Convention defines the following as ‘natural heritage’:

natural features consisting of, physical and biological formations or groups of such formations, which are of outstanding *universal value* from an aesthetic or scientific point of view; *geological and physiography* formations and precisely delineated areas which constitute the habitat of threatened species of animals and plants of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation; natural sites or precisely delineated areas of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science, conservation or natural beauty.^{xvi}

There are things that we regard as important to preserve for future generations. They may be significant due to their

present or possible economic value, but also because they create a certain emotion within us, or because they make us feel as though we belong to something a community, a tradition, a way of life. They might be objects that can be held and buildings that can be explored, or songs that can be sung and stories that can be told. Whatever shape they take, these things form part of a heritage, and this heritage requires active effort on our part in order to safe guard it.^{xvii}

Although, the Bimbia site is generally considered by the government as a cultural site because of its historical past, more recently, the interest of ministries of Nature Protection, Tourism and Leisure as well as Arts and Culture tend to show that the site is also being viewed as a natural heritage site especially as it is a significant corridor of the Atlantic Ocean in the Gulf of Guinea.^{xviii} Besides, it is found in an ecological habitat where marine species breed or reproduces. It is a continuous chain of wetland from the Tiko estuary to Bimbia. It is in this mangrove region that fishes reproduce. Therefore, this gives Bimbia a dual heritage status which has to be conserved and preserved for both its cultural and natural heritage importance. By protecting and conserving Bimbia it would help save it from human destruction and thus enhance its protection.^{xix}

Significance of the Ruined Slave Trade Structures at Bimbia - Cameroon

The Bimbia Slave Trade Site is a serious endangered historical and archaeological site of no mean importance to scholars and scientists across the world. Until recently, very little information was known about the site. It was only in 2003 that the site began to gain widespread recognition and importance at national and international levels.

The importance of the site as tourist attraction and national heritage site has continually gained prominence especially after the seminal research and publications of Dr. Aubrey Liza, an African-American fellow and her students who researched on the site and brought out groundbreaking results from their leading project, 'connecting with the

roots' also dubbed the 'back to Africa' movement which saw many African-Americans visiting Cameroon and conducted DNA to ascertain their roots and ethnic connections to Cameroon.^{xx} The results of their findings triggered interest in Cameroonian scholars, the government and the local inhabitants on the importance of Bimbia as an extinct slave trade port in Africa.

Since then, many African-Americans have visited Bimbia for obvious social reasons of tracing their roots and visualizing the stage where their forefathers underwent torture and agony in chains. Therefore, the ruined and dilapidated structures on the site are impalpable evidence to showcase the sojourn that many enslaved persons passed through before finally embarking to the 'journey of no return'. This brings to mind a sorrowful mental picture of the slavery and trade experience to the current generation who would otherwise not have had the opportunity of seeing such ruined sites in their life-time. One therefore, situates the importance of Bimbia in very many different perspectives in time and space.

In terms of cultural heritage tourism, the ruined slave trade structures at Bimbia are powerful fragile material cultural remains and image – identity reminders for the contemporary and future generations. The images of the ruined structures are immortal imprint in the minds of Cameroonians and visitors alike as they take viewers down memory lane to re-imagine the era of the slave trade and its barbaric nature. The ruins have created an identity, image and heritage legacy in the natural and cultural landscape of Bimbia which is today an enviable spot that needs to fully developed for tourism purposes. Many countries that are blessed to have cultural or natural heritage sites have transformed them into great tourist destinations. The advantage is that it plays a key role in employment, foreign trade and cultural tourism development. However, critical and threatened cultural and natural landscapes such as Bimbia that harbor valuable cultural material remains needs to be properly conserved by putting in place effective legal mechanisms and policies that seeks to protect and conserve such delicate ruined structures for posterity and scientific inquiries.

Some Challenges

Cultural and natural heritage sites face multiple human and natural threats because of their fragile nature. In many African Countries experience is obviously the same with the conservation of heritage (tangible and intangible) heritages. The greatest challenge, however, remains to save the traces of the tangible heritage which is highly threatened by natural and andromorphic activities. The material human remains or ruined structures at the site are rapidly losing their cultural or scientific value because once the value disappears, it cannot be repaired or replaced by mankind. Threats to the endangered site come from multiple factors.

Today, urbanization and agricultural/ industrial activities in most developing countries constitutes the greatest human threats to cultural historic, archaeological, and memorial sites like Bimbia. Increased urbanization, commercial agriculture and industrial activities poses a clear threat to the site as these activities directly encroached on the site thereby accelerating the deterioration of the sites. Bimbia is a sea-site village that serves as an enviable trade route connecting many countries in the Gulf of Guinea. It has continued to play the intermediary role in trade and other economic activities thereby attracting huge presence of human population there. This population is involved in fishing, agricultural, shipping as well as military activities that unfortunately poses a significant threat that undermines the cultural and scientific importance of the site thereby threatening its existence.

The lack of effective follow-up of the existing national laws as well as ineffective community engagements through local initiatives have combined to expose the Bimbia site to multiple human and natural threats. Until the research of Dr. Liza and her team of scientists, and also the issuance of successive ministerial texts and directives like *Arrete* No. 0002/MINAC/SG, of 28 February 2019. Until then, very little or nothing was done either by the local inhabitants or

the government of Cameroon to effectively sensitize the farming and fishing populations around the site to avoid undertaking activities that would destroy the fragile ruined structures at the site.

Available survey studies show that a significant part of the site has already been occupied by the expanding farming populations and the expansion of the village itself. Taking into account the above threats, there is obviously an urgent need to halt the scourge, without which the future generations may not be fortunate to see the relics at the site which are fast getting completely ruined by various natural and human factors.

To mitigate the growing threats, it is imperative for countries to introduce reliable and formidable institutions that can assure the security and conservation of cultural and natural heritage sites in each country. This is the philosophy of UNESCO when dealing with the subject of heritage. Thus, heritage must be seen as everyone's concern such that even in the context of violent conflicts such as wars, sites known to have material cultural and natural heritage values must be spared. This paper therefore raises the importance of effective and inclusive conservation, protection and monitoring of all identified and recognized heritage sites in Cameroon.

The only visible efforts alongside some paper policies or legislations have so far been made are the handy-work of Professor Liza Aubrey who spearheaded international collaborative research that has since rekindled in stakeholders such unprecedented awareness that has vocalized the development interest of the site in recent years. Her research interest and attendant publications on the Bimbia Slave Trade Site and activities created the necessary scholarly awareness to the international especially dynamic diaspora world and researchers that have helped to put Bimbia on the international development agenda in the last few years.

Together with poor management of the site and lack of resources, the on-going socio-political armed conflict in the Anglophone regions of Cameroon has further compounded any efforts envisaged at the conservation of

the site. For instance, recent government and UNESCO sponsored projects have been halted since 2016 because of the conflict that has pervasively affected the region. Consequently, this has discouraged international visitors to the site in recent years, thus reducing the chances of further highlighting the international significance of Bimbia as heritage niche in Cameroon.

Again, because of lack of trained man-power, restoration efforts at the site have not been vocal. Very little has been done to restore the fast-disappearing ruined artefacts or relics of the slave sites. It is therefore important to showcase the photos of the ruined infrastructures in order to recapture the attention of scholars, slave experts and perhaps funding agencies for different purposes. Renewed publicity and research could rekindle interest amongst researchers across the globe for future research and reconstruction of the site.

Conclusion

Recent studies on slavery and slave trade in Cameroon have taken deep interest on Bimbia as one of the leading Slave Trade Ports in West and Central Africa. These studies include volumes of edited articles by different researchers like E.D.S. Fomin, and Audrey Liza among others who have continued to research on various aspects on Bimbia as a slave trade hotspot. However, most of the previous studies have not sufficiently uncover the meanings of the ruined structures which serve as important cultural elements with which to rethink, re-examine and reconstruct Bimbia as slave trade harbinger. By re-examining the much ignored and ruined structures from an historical perspective may spur researchers to discover additional meaning associated to the ruined structures for future studies and evidence to collaborate on the hurtful and inhumane nature of the slave trade based on site evidences. It is my wish that further studies on the site would stimulate interest among scholars specialized in heritage studies and public history of Africa, especially studies focusing slave trade sites and their ruined infrastructures.

Appendices

Notes on Appendices

The material or tangible cultural heritage assets offer diverse meanings to researchers and tourists. The meanings, attributes, and symbolism of the cultural elements, usually convey varied interpretations among scholars. The reason for such divergence in conceptual and theoretical interpretation and representations is largely due to the fading memories and lack of documentation about certain heritage sites.

Therefore, there is need for knowledge sharing, awareness creation and representations of the cultural heritage sites to large audiences to enable such heritage property receive fresh interpretations and analysis. This was among the several recommendations of conference participants during an online session organized by the African world heritage workshop from 19 to 23 October in hybrid. These photos of the Bimbia slave trade site, tells its own story and thus viewers should be allowed to reconstruct from the images their own interpretations and presentations of what they see and can appreciate from the relics.



Source: Author's field photograph, 2020, View of the Bimbia Slave Trade Site.



Cross-Section of the Bimbia Slave Trade Market





Bimbia: Vestige believed to be feeding trough for enslaved persons



Source: Liza A (2015), 21.

Vestiges of the Bimbia Slave Trade Site



Source: Lisa A (2015),5.

View of the Atlantic Ocean: “The Door of No-Return”
where various Ships anchored.



Source: Author's Field Photograph, 2020.

Endnotes

ⁱ G. Ugo N and David Eltis, “Characteristics of Captives Leaving the Cameroons for Americas, 1822-1837” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 43, No.2 (2002): 191-210.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ The government of Cameroon has rectified the 1972 UNESCO convention and in line with Ministerial *Arrete* No. 0002/MINAC/SG of 28 of February 2019, the following cultural and natural heritage sites have identified and classified into: archaeological sites, traditional architectures (palaces), colonial architecture, place of memory (like Bimbia), natural sites (Waza etc), paysage culturel, religious architecture, ritual sites as well as historic monuments, etc are found in various parts of the country. For details see the above Ministerial *Arrete*.

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v George Grenfell, “The Cameroons District, West Africa” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and monthly record of geography, new monthly series, vol. 4. No. 10 (1882): 585.*

^{vi} Rosalinde G. Wilcox, “Commercial Transactions and Cultural Interactions from the Delta to Douala and Beyond”, *African Arts* Vol. 35, No. 1, (2002), 43-55.

^{vii} I. Keller, “Knowledge and Theories of Astronomy on the Part of the Isubu Natives of the Western Slopes of the Cameroon Mountains in German West Africa (*Kameron*)”, in *Journal of the African Society*, 59.

^{viii} Lisa Aubrey, Richard Omgba and E.S.D. Fomin, “Bimbia: Route to Re-Memory and Reconnection” in *D’Afrique Magazine*, Special Edition, June (2015): 5-10.

^{ix} UNESCO, *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (Paris November 16, 1972), 2-3.

^x Rodney H, “What is Heritage”? in *The Journal of the Archives and Record Association*, Vol. 41, 330-332.

^{xi} Aubrey, Omgba and Fomin, “Bimbia”, 5-10.

^{xii} UNESCO, 1972.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} Kome Elvis Ngome, “Assessing the Participation of Stakeholders in Natural Resource Management: The Case of the Fako Mountain Forest-Cameroon” (Unpublished Msc. Thesis in Natural Resource Management, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway, 2012)

^{xvi} UNESCO, (1972), 2.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} Ministry of Arts and Culture, *Arrete No.0002/MINAC/SG du 28 February 2019*, Classifying cultural and Natural Heritage of Cameroon.

^{xix} *Ibid.*

^{xx} Aubrey, Omgba and Fomin, “Bimbia”, 5-10.

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