

# What to do with our Memory Sites: A Reflection on the Contribution of Archaeology and Architecture in the Tourist Development of the Bimbia SITE

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**Abstract :-** The article deals with historical memory and the importance of memorial sites, focusing on Bimbia, a site associated with the slave trade in Central Africa. It examines the historical context of Bimbia, highlighting its role as a transit point for slaves, while also addressing present challenges, such as armed conflict in the region. Theoretical debates on the conservation and restoration of monuments, illustrated by interventionist and anti-interventionist positions, are presented to stand up for a balanced approach to the enhancement of Bimbia. The article proposes a synthesis of preservation methods, with a view to guaranteeing the historical integrity of the site while developing its tourism potential. Finally, the article argues for tourism development that respects and integrates local cultural and social realities, thereby promoting sustainable and inclusive development.

**Keywords :-** Memorial Site, Slave Trade, Tourism Development.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In history, memory refers to the links established by individuals or groups living between the past and the present. These links are constantly evolving and memory is 'open to the dialectic of remembrance and amnesia' (Pierre Nora). In exploring the concept of 'places of memory', history has used space as a primarily material framework or support. However, the term 'place' must be understood in a very broad sense, including symbolic dimensions. Memory is therefore the evolving relationship between past and present, influenced by recollection and amnesia, and incorporating both material and spatial dimensions. Sites of memory, with their often painful but significant histories, play a crucial role in preserving our collective heritage. Among them, Bimbia, a site in Central Africa, distinguishes itself for its association with the slave trade. The study of Bimbia offers a valuable opportunity to reflect on how these places can be enhanced while striking a balance between tourism and civic-mindedness.

## II. CONTEXT

The Bimbia site in Cameroon is located in the South-West region, Fako department, 60 km from the capital economic Douala. The coordinates of its central point are 3°57'16" N, 9°14'42" E (Bimbia and associated sites, 2020). Bimbia, a coastal area, became a transit, storage and

boarding zone for slaves, including Nicholls Island towards the open sea, where slave ships could dock. This landing site for captured slaves was traditionally inhabited by the isubu ethnic group, a coastal community that played a central role in the transatlantic trade from the 16th century until the 19th century. The archaeological remains, including the ruins of port structures and artefacts found on site, offer valuable insights into the economic and social dynamics of this period. With German and English colonisation, the local economy shifted towards the production of cash crops. Today, the South West region, where Bimbia is located, is marked by armed conflict between English-speaking separatists and the Cameroonian army, resulting in human tragedy and a humanitarian crisis. Developing this site requires an approach that respects the historical depth and security context of the area. The enhancement of the Bimbia site requires us to immerse ourselves upstream in the theoretical debates on conservation/restoration, even though they focus on architectural cultural property and provide information on the importance or value of an intervention. This approach will enable us to situate and argue our position in relation to the preservation and enhancement of Bimbia, who wants to emerge from oblivion.

## III. METHODOLOGY

This section presents all the methods and strategies used to propose the elements of tourism development to be taken into account in the development of Bimbia.

### A. Current state of Bimbia

This section provides a detailed analysis of the current state of the site, looking at its infrastructure, tourism facilities and conservation arrangements.

### B. Surveys and Interviews

Consultations are carried out through public meetings, discussion groups and individual interviews via the internet or survey forms. These interactions provide valuable insight into how the community perceives the site and the type of memory it wishes to preserve. The opinions gathered can influence the design of the complex. The target groups were historians and researchers, potential visitors and remembrance associations.

#### ➤ *Collaboration with Historians and Researchers*

Historians and researchers specialising in the history of the Central African slave trade play a key role in the historical accuracy of the memorial complex. Their expertise makes it possible to provide recommendations on how to accurately represent the historical and cultural aspects of the site. They can also contribute to the creation of educational content for visitors, such as exhibitions, audiovisual documents and interactive installations.

#### ➤ *Potential Visitor Survey*

Analysing the needs of potential visitors helps to design a space that meets their expectations in terms of function and experience. A survey of future visitors can reveal expectations in terms of information, accessibility and services. It is essential to understand who will be visiting the complex: tourists, students, researchers, descendants of victims of trafficking, or local community groups of different ages.

- Commitment of Remembrance Associations Collaborating with local and international associations specialising in the slave trade and human rights enables the project to be aligned with best practice in terms of remembrance and education.

#### *C. Analysis of the SWOT matrix (Threat Opportunity Weakness Strength)*

- Strength: These are the positive aspects of setting up the memorial complex at Bimbia.
- Weaknesses: These are the negative aspects of setting up the complex, where there is considerable room for improvement.
- Opportunities: These are the opportunities offered by the area in which the memorial complex is to be located, in the context of the current strengths and weaknesses.
- Threats: These are problems, obstacles or limitations to the implementation of the project.

### **IV. THEORETICAL DEBATE ON CONSERVATION-RESTORATION**

In the 19th century, Europe debated the conservation and restoration of monuments. Two main thoughts emerged: interventionism, defended by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1875), which favoured restoration to a previous state, and anti-interventionism, upheld by John Ruskin and William Morris, which favoured preserving the current state of the monument. Later thinkers such as Boito (1893), Bonelli (1959), Giovoni (1987, 1993) and Brandi (2000) adopted more nuanced positions, seeking a balance between these approaches.

For the interventionist thought represented by Viollet le Duc, 'restoration is the only possibility for the building that has been decided upon to come back to life and regain its value and meaning'. For this author, restoring a building means restoring it to a complete state that may never have existed at a given time. Thus the restorer's intervention on a

monument is marked by the principle of stylistic unity to the detriment of authenticity. This view was put into perspective at the beginning of the 20th century by Luca Beltrami (cited by Laurent, 2005; Kouri Yamina, 2014; Perrichot 2014;). For Luca Beltrami, the monument is a historical document made up of its various construction phases, which must be recognised as a documentary fact. He therefore believes that restoration or reconstruction work should be based on 'objective evidence' derived from the monument.

For the anti-interventionists, intervention on monuments of the past is prohibited. They state that 'whatsoever we have no rights, they don't belong to us. They belong partly to those who built them and partly to all the human generations that will follow us'. For Ruskin, 'restoration is the most total destruction a monument can undergo, and the value of monuments lies in their authenticity, which cannot be separated from the state of decay. The result was often a monument on which the many contributions, though cruel and very visible, became, by contrast, interesting and instructive and could in no way mislead'. He sees decay as a sign of the passage of time, and regards the monument as sacred, an unchanging testimony to the work of past generations, which must not be touched.

Seeing the two previous approaches excessive and difficult to apply to all the works of the past, Boito proposes three types of restoration. The first is archaeological restoration, in which he advocates for monuments of antiquity that are of archaeological importance and have intrinsic qualities, the conservation of the ruins as they are found, with the possibility of reconstructing them when there is certain data. The second is picturesque restoration for buildings from the Middle Ages, which he believes should retain their venerable and picturesque appearance. Thirdly, architectural restoration for buildings from the Renaissance onwards, whose architectural value predominates over other values. They need to be restored to ensure that the image of the new is legible, without seeking to make them truly distinctive.

#### ➤ *Application to Bimbia*

In the light of these debates based on the stylistic, historical and social values of monuments, it is appropriate to adopt a position concerning the memorial site of Bimbia, in particular the buildings, which factors of alteration are natural and manmade. In the field of cultural property, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) strongly encourages the preservation of urban and historical ensembles. For us, the Bimbia site is a source of information whose intrinsic and extrinsic data represent a potential for economic, cultural and civic development. We therefore need to identify the values they represent. A synthesis approach seems to be the most appropriate. This site, marking an important place in the history of remembrance, requires preservation that takes into account both its historical integrity and its potential for tourism. In practice, this approach could take the form firstly of archaeological restoration, which should focus on conserving the original structures and artefacts found at Bimbia. This approach would preserve the most significant

elements of the site for future generations, while offering an authentic glimpse of the past. The second is scenic restoration. Certain areas of the site could be developed to improve the visual experience and accessibility while respecting authenticity. This could include well-maintained pathways and visitor areas that do not detract from the historic environment. The final is architectural restoration where necessary and appropriate, architectural restoration could be considered to rebuild or stabilise parts of the site that are in danger of deteriorating, while maintaining their original appearance.

## V. DEVELOPMENT OF BIMBIA

Memory sites appear as a factor for improving the lives of the population. It is necessary to consider that the development of the Dikolo arrondissement, where Bimbia is located, necessitates defining a project for the preservation, sustainability, and especially the capitalization of memorial heritage so that it can serve as a catalyst for change. Thus, a tourism development plan can be envisioned. This tourism development is the ability to plan and develop the assets, infrastructure, and services for the comfort of visitors. However, it is essential to implement development projects based on the realities of the memory site before resorting to external adaptations.

In a Cameroonian society characterized by cultural diversity and ongoing change, Bimbia plays a crucial role in linking the past and the future, while providing stability and continuity. It serves as an educational and transmission support for future generations. Moreover, this site is a source of pride that could allow a people to gain recognition and to valorize their cultural heritage among other cultures. Therefore, it is vital to develop a heritage policy for Bimbia. This involves first carefully observing the territory, its environment, and its inhabitants to understand its unique characteristics and richness. Understanding Bimbia's heritage also helps grasp the social dynamics that have shaped its development, while allowing us to find, in the ingenuity of our ancestors, answers to contemporary challenges. Since 2010, when Bimbia resurfaced, a commemorative spirit has animated the minds of Afro-descendants, the Ministry of Tourism and Leisure (MINTOUL) and the Ministry of Arts and Culture (MINAC), along with local guides and individuals. This has been reflected in proposed developments such as the creation of monuments that illustrate conflicts, hopes, and visions for the future, which are beginning to mark our urban spaces.

Given its particular interest for UNESCO, due to its site still being intact and considering the proposed developments through archaeology, Bimbia must develop infrastructures beyond the confines of the site. The cultural legacies that have passed through Bimbia should serve as a foundation for shaping its future. Therefore, a memorial complex housing accommodations, educational centers, and restaurants should be constructed. The Cameroonian state has undertaken measures for the development of the site. However, we note that the only issue addressed so far is that of attractiveness. Issues such as cultural mixing, security in

the area, and the integration of the local population with potential visitors, to name a few, have not been considered. The question then arises: should we individually represent each cultural area, or is it possible to represent them all within a single unit? Addressing this question could create a sense of reconciliation and belonging to the same Republic or perpetuate the divisions currently present in the Southwest and Northwest regions of Cameroon. It is important to note that the stakes of tourism development go beyond the construction of hotels, museums, or other edifices. It is primarily mental, social, and then cultural. The responses to the needs for various local facilities should be based on the requests and opinions of the population. This is a kind of call to return to the roots, to rehabilitate suppressed values that can serve both as a lever for expressing authentic memory and as a means of producing economically beneficial goods for all. Memory tourism has the potential to contribute, directly or indirectly, to the overall objectives. It is particularly referenced in the targets of Goals 8, 12, and 14 of the 2030 Agenda, which relate, respectively, to shared and sustainable economic growth, sustainable consumption and production patterns, and the sustainable use of oceans and marine resources.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Enhancing the value of the Bimbia site is crucial to preserving the collective memory and promoting local development. By reconciling respect for history, heritage preservation and tourism opportunities, it is possible to create a space that celebrates the past while supporting the present-day community. A thoughtful approach, incorporating local voices and socio-political challenges, is essential to transforming Bimbia into a living place of memory that not only educates and honours those who suffered, but also stimulates the economy and strengthens the social fabric of the region. Tourism development must therefore be built on the authentic values of the community, promoting a sense of reconciliation and belonging, while ensuring a sustainable future for generations to come.

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