



Forikrom Bio-Cultural Heritage, Brong-Ahafo Region, Ghana

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■ Abstract

Nature and Culture are two components of the ecological world that cannot be separated. The connection between people and their environment drives them to make certain decisions that may either harm or protect it. In our African region, most of our concept of our natural environment goes beyond the aesthetics, taking into consideration the intangible elements of our culture in order to preserve it. Our belief systems, traditions, rituals practices, and indigenous wisdom stem from the natural environment and, as such, shape the manner in which humans live. This paper highlights key issues about the Forikrom community cultural heritage and their bio-cultural resources which cut across both the natural and cultural elements of the community. It emphasizes the sacredness conferred to the place and how that has supported its conservation. Detailed site information is given as well as their significance and the challenges that arise in the bid to manage and conserve them. Finally, a section is dedicated to discussing the interdependency of culture and nature in relation to the Forikrom cultural landscape and what recommendations can be brought forward to strengthen the conservation and promotion of such assets.

KEY WORDS: Belief Systems, Bio-cultural Resources, Cultural landscapes, Interdependency, Sacredness

■ 1. Introduction

1.1 Overview of the heritage site

Forikrom is located in the Techiman (Capital) municipality of the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana. It is located between Latitude 7.6540° N and Longitude 1.9490° W [see Fig 1 (a)(b)]. The small, multi-ethnic, community is found at the Eastern periphery of the Municipal Capital. It is bordered by other towns such as Fiaso, Boankro, Anomatua, and Ampemkrom. The community is about 8 km from the Municipal capital, Techiman, and about a 5 minutes drive to the community. The population of the town is about 8,000 people, with a majority being women, 52%, and male with 48%, comprised of adults, youth, and children. The community is located in a tropical climate region, with high temperatures averaging

23.89oC (75oF) and a double maxima rainfall pattern. The area contains the richest soils within the country and is where the majority of farming takes place and most staple foods are grown. Forikrom is surrounded by a myriad of rocky hills, mountains, small patches of forests, and farmlands. A traditional system of governance, composed of a chief and queen mother (community heads) and their sub-chiefs, govern the community. The leaders have a strong connection to the land, and as such, their history, cosmivision, survival, and spirituality are all linked to the rocks (popularly referred to as Boten) that surround the place.

Over the years, Forikrom has remained a very traditional area with strong traditional ties to their cultural heritage, including their bond with the natural landscapes, such as the rocky hills

and mountains that surround the community. Other cultural elements, such as the Kwamene festivals, traditional practices, and the traditional governance system, form part of their daily life. They celebrate two major festivals, the Apour (a steward accountability and evaluation festival) and the Kwamene (a bumper yam harvest festival).

area at about 50 square meters in size. It is located in the forested area of the rocky zones, about 1,000 km from the main town. The Boten shrine is embodied in the ancestral royal cave and is considered a holy place in the community that is meant for the spiritual protection of the people of Forikrom, Techiman, and its surrounding areas. The royal chiefs of the past were buried there and it was referred to as



Figure 1 (a): Map of Ghana showing location of Techiman Municipality: (b) Map of Brong-Ahafo Region, (source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/Brong_Ahafo_districts.png)

1.2 Brief description of the sacred landscape

Located at the central point of all the rocks are the Holy Mountains (high cavement). The area is surrounded by a number of twin binding rocks and a number of indigenous trees creating several segments of unique havens. These rocks are segmented in sections at various angles and arenas. Over the years, the place has served as a religious camp grounds for Christian worshipers and pilgrims. Mythical legend has it that the place is famous for granting answers to people’s prayers. Christian pilgrims come to pray and worship, asking their God for a miracle and answers to their prayers. Over the years, the leaders of the community have come to respect this belief and the super natural power associated with the place, naming it the Holy mountains [see Fig 2 (a)(b)(c)].

Nananompom (resting place of chiefs). This place is deemed very sacred because it is inhabited by the spirits of the departed chiefs. Due to its sacredness, the Nananom (chiefs) visit the place to offer libation for the community, asking for guidance as well as protection. The place also serves as grounds for performing the Bragoro, the traditional puberty rites of teenage girls and boys. Before entering into the Boten shrine, the traditional leader needs to shout three times, in order to alert the spirits of one’s presence. It is believed that not all places are visible without the assistance and permission of spirits .

Another important feature of this site is the Anpan buom (bat sanctuary). Inside the ancestral cave are hudreds of scores of fruit bats. The bats not only pollinate the crops but they also help fertilize some of the community farms through the collection of guano (bat drooping). These bats have also become objects of scientific research for young university researchers on wildlife. [see Fig 3 (a) (b)]

On the outskirts of the main town, overlooking the major road, is the Ancestral Cave which had served as an ancestral cemetery for burying the royals. It is the second biggest cave in the

The biggest cave in the area, which is referred to as the Magic cave, is located at the periphery of

the Forikrom township, a kilometer walk from the main road into a forest patchment. The Magic cave has a circular rock opening, which legend and myth say that it was regulated to open and close by some secret magic words spoken by the community priest. However, those magic words are not known by anyone alive today. The cave is sacred to the people because of its past protective power. It is believed that during the olden days, when wars were eminent, the place was used as a hidden haven for the women, children, and elderly. Inside the cave is an ever green forest patchment with a variety of indigenous tree species and a running stream which is almost dried up. Legend has it that once the chief priest leads everyone inside the cave, recites the magic words, the cave will shut close. Inside the cave there are large foot stone slabs that one would have to climb and other rocks you must manoeuvre around in order to reach the other sites that have the flat topped rocks [See Fig 4 (a) (b) (c) (d) (e)].

Another significant feature is the river Asuketia (River Ketia), which serves as a water source for the community. This same river is used to cleanse abominations in the community, therefore there are many taboos surrounding it that the people still adhered to.

■ 2. Significance of the heritage place, including natural and cultural values

2.1 Cultural Values

Significantly, the attachment of the Forikrom people to their land and its resources is seen in the value they gain from it. These natural resources are interlinked with the culture of the people, in the sense that, when it comes to the celebration of festivals, the chiefs and priests in the community visit the Boten shrine to perform rituals and to ask for ancestral support before the festival commences. Again, the cultural history of the people is incomplete without these rocks, as there is a belief that their very existence and survival are due to the rocks and caves and so one cannot talk about the history of the people of Forikrom and leave out these visible geological features. Furthermore, many Africans believe in ancestral worship and veneration, hence it is not strange that many of the ancient chiefs and royals have been buried in the caves. The caves have

come to be known as the “Ancestral sleeping ground” (Nananom pom), serving as a consultative place for many cultural and spiritual exercises. It is worth noting that two of the important rituals performed in the community are the rain harvesting ritual and the puberty ritual. Because of the sacred belief attached to these caves, most spiritual activities, such as these two rituals, take place in the caves. Surrounding these caves are small holder farms which add additional emphasis to the fact that the people are not separated from the landscape. Their very existence (occupation as farmers) and practices (rituals and rites) are linked directly to the resources which are utilized to their benefit. The dualism of spirituality has become a very normal practice in the community, in the sense that there is the culture of ‘yenfa nananom die nmanwon ne yenfa Caesar die so nmano’ literally meaning, ‘giving that of the gods to them and that of Caesar to him.’ The Christians worship grounds were thus named by the chiefs. This dualism has created a culture of peace within the community.

2.2 Natural values

Undoubtedly, sacred natural sites are becoming increasingly known for their high levels of biodiversity and their preserved environs, especially in India and Africa (Dudley et al. 2010). The myriad of complex rocks, hills, and forest patches surrounding the community provides rich vegetation cover and also harbours a number of tree species and animals that are significant for biodiversity conservation. About 90% of the tree species are primary vegetation. These include the Kyenkyen (bark tree), which is famously used for weaving an uncommon cloth which is worn during festivals, African mahogany, Abisaa (African Plum), Mankube (African royal pal), Dawadawa (Lucus bean), Onyina (Ceiba), Atweabire (Monkey guava), Akjee (akee apple), and a variety of palm trees.

In the forest areas, local medicinal plants that local healers harvest for home remedies can be found. These plants serve a great purpose as the majority of people still ascribe to local treatments and medicines. Also, around the forest areas, different species of monkeys, such as the campbells mona monkey, stray around but are densely concentrated in a nearby monkey sanctuary (Boabeng Fiema).



Figure 2 (a): Entrance Picture of the Holy Mountain sites; (b) Holy mountain worship yard (Source: CIKOD, 2016/2017).



Figure 2 (c) A section of the holy mountain camp ground; (d) Encroachment of site (Source: CIKOD, 2016/2017).

¹⁰Pictures of this sacred shrine cannot be provided.



Figure 3. Picture of a bat sanctuary.



Figure 4 (a): Picture of the entrance to the magic caves; (b) A view inside the magic caves; (c) A visible rock shaped African Map.

■ 3. Current management arrangements

3.1 Forikrom Management system

Forikrom, since its permanent settlement around the caves, has remained as a community which is governed by a traditional council, made up of the Chief (cultural head) with his sub divisional chiefs and queen mothers (female counterparts). The bio-cultural resources are currently managed by the traditional council of the community. Until recently, with the commodification of the heritage site and opening them up to tourists, the elders of the community have instituted a system for revenue collection. The service fees collected from tourists are deposited into the community local fund account and managed by the traditional council. These fees are not regulated by the district governing body and are used to offset costs such as paying tour guides and repairing the community water pump. Many forms of traditional resource management, often supported by customary law, have been recognized in the cultural and natural landscapes and have been found to be relevant. The local government of Ghana has allowed for the existence of locally-enacted by-laws. The elders of the community have therefore set these by-laws to govern the lives of the

people as well as protect the community resources. By tradition, no one is allowed to cut down trees or hunt for game in the forest patchment reserves. Also, people are prohibited to burn trees from the forest areas for charcoal. Currently, the traditional leaders are a group made up of a 7-member committee, comprising of 3 young people, a female woman leader, a chief, a community elder, and an agriculturist who oversees the local management of the sites and reports to the traditional council. Periodically, the youth were mobilized by the Unit committee (local government representative in the community) to engage in clearing and weeding

thesurrounding bushes of the sites. The preservation and management of these heritage sites are the sole responsibility of the community so far, though, they receive support from external non-governmental organizations. These NGOs have been working on the revitalization and documentation of the site and are also working with local authorities for the establishment of a proper management system. Many young people are attending capacity building activities provided by these organizations, focused on natural resources conservation.

■ 4. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

Ghana has developed many conservation mechanisms over the years. Recently, a Community Resources Management Area (CREMA) mechanism was developed as an innovative natural resource governance and landscape-level planning tool that authorizes communities to manage their natural resources for economic and livelihood benefits. The aim of CREMA is to encourage local people to integrate wildlife management into their farming and land management systems as a legitimate land-use option. However, the system is operational for farmer-management use, though it can be adopted

for natural resource conservation and heritage promotion if other measures, such as consideration for culture, sacredness, and indigenous wisdom and practices, are included and implemented.

Despite the community's effort to maintain the heritage sites, Forikrom's bio-cultural heritage is faced with a myriad of challenges. The indigenous ways that the community tries to use in order to conserve their heritage, which includes enhancing their spirituality through the practice of their rituals at the sacred sites and promoting their socio-cultural and economic well-being, has been met with challenging factors. These include the encroachment and abuse of the site by non-citizens who come to build new structures [see Fig 2 (d)], the unsanitary conditions created as a result of the presence of visitors and pilgrims who leave litter everywhere, and the frequent forest destruction as a result of agricultural pressure on the landscape despite the local laws, coupled with seasonal bushfires that destroy a lot of indigenous trees. Another challenge with the Forikrom site is the fact that the heritage site is not yet under the supervision of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB), the body in charge of supervising heritage sites, this has created a burden for the community to solely manage it. With the era of globalization setting in, the cultural relevance of the place is facing threats. A recent research report by a non-governmental organization, CIKOD (Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development), reports of young people showing more interest in new technologies and the expertise to inculcate the essence of protecting such a heritage through traditional means is gradually diminishing (Cikod, ED publication 2017). The rate of technology growth in Ghana has created such a massive urge among young people to explore rather than to take interest in the tradition of folk music, heritage tales, and conservation issues. At the end of it all there seem to be a large number of young people moving from the community to the city areas in search of white collar jobs which not only creates an ageing population but also the loss of transfer of indigenous wisdom, customs, and traditions of the community.

It is very alarming to see that the landscape area have been encroached upon by people who take portions of the land as a private place to

promote their own ambitions at the expense of the community's conservation plans and violating the laws that guide the heritage sites. Over time, it has become very difficult for the community to monitor and collect levies as the people dodge the small local office and also payment is done to the so called "new leaders" camping at the sites. These encroachers are seen putting up personal places of abodes and altering the nature of the place. The effect of the unsanitary conditions at the sites have affected the scenery and reduced the credibility of the place as a sacred natural site. The Ghana Museums and Monuments Board, which is responsible for the management and supervision of the heritage places, plays no role in supporting the community, although traditional roles in conservation is recognised. However, much reliance is sought from external sources, such as non-governmental organizations. This puts a heavy burden and strain on the community and organizations that are helping. The neglect of the place creates a huge challenge, especially if the desire of the community is to have it recognized nationally as a protected area.

Additionally, the technical expertise to put into place a standardized system for safety measures and disaster management is lacking. This is a very alarming situation as this may cause a problem in the future if such measures are not put into place as contingencies to manage disasters, such as people slipping on the rocks or finding it difficult to get a foot hole while climbing, resulting in a fall. Lastly, in developing countries such as Ghana, cultural tourism is a major contributor to its GDP. However, much of Ghana's land is covered with sacred groves which includes significant tracts of land that are not officially part of the protected area system or the State forests (Ormsby, 2012).

■ 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Sacred natural sites are of critical importance to the conservation of biodiversity and, therefore, much effort needs to be concentrated to develop these sites sustainably since they have such potential to serve diverse purposes for the nation.

The process required to do so must address the controversies, tensions, and contradictions in heritage conservation and socio-economic

development and the involvement of the local community. The CREMA system is a good step to begin with and this can be fused with a community bio-cultural protocol. This protocol identifies the local systems, traditions, culture, and practices that exist in the community and formulates laws (protocols) to safeguard as well as spell out how communities will deal with external bodies in the management and conservation of their resources. The protocol gives rights and responsibilities to the local people, in terms of resource management and benefit-sharing, and respects their tradition, culture, and practices which are lacking in the CREMA system.

As much as it is important to preserve the heritage place, ensuring that it does not lose its authenticity, it is also important that heritage is presented to the public for many reasons, such as financial and most importantly, educational and social reasons (Aplin 2007). There is a need for more work to document the logical and legendary stories that surround our heritage for the benefit of teaching others what they must know about our natural and cultural heritage. It is not enough for the citizens alone to know but also the outsiders who will take interest in the place and may not have an idea about the culture and traditions of the place.

Again, in order to have a well-developed system of heritage management in the Municipality, it is important that the district level government participate in the management of the heritage site. Necessary steps must be put in place to build the capacities of heritage officers, individuals chosen from the local communities to manage such historic places. In this way, a well-structured system can be put in place to monitor the sustainable use and development of the sites. Government should also consider the role of the private sector in the promotion of sustainable cultural heritage tourism. Budget must be allocated to the management of such places if they (Municipal Assembly) desire to receive some percentage of the revenue from tourist fees.

More so, although cultural conservation policies may vary among countries, it will be good to find ways geared towards fostering cultural exchanges as a determining factor to bringing added value to cultural management and social cohesion. Ghana,

for that matter, Forikrom can learn from other areas who have advanced in natural and cultural heritage conservation and have turned it into sustainable tourism, as seen with well-structured management systems at Japanese heritage sites.

Last but not the least, it is very important that policy-makers are educated on the importance of the intrinsic linkages between nature and culture. Therefore, issues in dealing with heritage conservation and promotion must take into account the relationship that nature has with the human environment. Policies to safeguard such places must recognize local perspectives and the values they have and include them.

Finally, it should be noted that it is not enough that Ghana has an established multidimensional framework for the protection, safeguarding, and promotion of heritage sustainability. The degree of commitment and action taken by Ghanaian authorities is mixed and varies according to the component of the framework. While many public efforts have been dedicated to raising-awareness and creating a national registry for tangible heritage, there have been persistent calls for additional actions to improve the framework regarding the updating of the registries to include elements of intangible heritage, mechanisms for community involvement, and stimulating support amongst the private sector. Many of these issues have yet to be addressed and there is need for heritage actors in the country to intensify their advocacy for resolution.

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