Choreographing Heritage, Performing the Site

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Performance at sites

The use of archaeological sites as performance venues is widespread : opera at Verona's Arena, *Ramayana* ballets at Prambanan in Central Java – examples from all over the world abound. In general. there is no opposition to performances at ancient theatres and amphitheatres; they are, on the contrary, strongly encouraged,   for they are seen as ways of attracting visitors and generating income, providing a sense of historical continuity. In Europe, the 1995 'Segesta Declaration', approved in 1997, was put forward to encourage the adoption of a charter on the protection, enhancement and use of these 'ancient places of performance' and, more generally of archaeological sites, for contemporary performance (Council of Europe 1997).

 Having said this, one must immediately clarify   that certain types of performance are more welcome than others, regarded as most unsuitable and actively discouraged. Rock concerts tend to fall into the latter category, even though in terms of generating income they do rather well. Zahid Hawass, director of the Giza pyramid excavation in Egypt, has for example strongly   criticised the practice of allowing rock concerts at Giza:

> " I agree to Antiquities sites being used for cultural performances, such as Aida,
> that are in keeping with the dignity of this sacred site. They are also much easier
> to manage… I still remember in 1977 when I was a young archaeologist and I
> attended a Grateful Dead concert in front of the Sphinx. There was a huge crowd
> of 10,000 young people standing, shouting, screaming, drinking beer, and I even
> saw some foreigners smoking ... The sound of their music was so loud that I
> could feel the stones of the pyramids trembling with the vibration, and the delicate

rock of the Sphinx crumbling. I felt that day that the Sphinx was sad, and I imagined that he was appalled that his descendants would do such a thing. He kept it inside and did not speak, but ten years later, a big chunk from his right shoulder fell off. The world was shocked and media from all over the world descended upon Egypt to comment on it. Many experts argued that it was the water table and the rain that caused this damage, but I was the only one who knew the truth: he could not stand what we have been doing to him." (Hawass 1998).

Could it not be that the opposition to the Grateful Dead but not to Aida was more to do with what each represented – counter versus high culture? It could indeed be argued that productions of Aida are as damaging as a rock concert, only they attract a different, perhaps more desirable, crowd, as Gillam highlights in her contribution.

The relationship between performers and archaeologists is not an easy one and misunderstandings abound.   Hodder, for example, drawing on his own experience at the Turkish site of Çatalhoyuk, suggests that all performances at sites are usually an appropriation motivated by longing for spiritual renewal, and this is evident when the performers are westerners and the sites are located in non-western regions (Hodder 2002). Though one might agree with these remarks in connection with certain types of performance, and with some reservations, the importance of Hodder's comments is that they point to an urgent need to differentiate among performance types in order to understand better the power dynamics involved. Thus in this paper I shall attempt to give an overview of performance activities at archaeological sites, in the hope of stimulating further, and better informed, discussion.

About four types of performances at sites can be identified. What the performances which I am about to describe share is the use of the site as a venue. The site becomes an open air theatre but the boundary between spectators and performers continues to be very clearly demarcated.   The site is often in the background and frames the performance. This list is not to be taken as an attempt to fix categories, it is only meant as an 'orientation map', for there is a degree of fluidity and some overlap. In this

overview I will forefront examples from Asia , where performance is totally enmeshed in the heritage discourse, perhaps more visibly so than in the West.   Sometimes performances and sites are paired together in ways which are exploitative and which have been encouraged by Western consumeristic participation.

The first type of performance is linked with living religious practices, such as the long established ritual artistic performances – as distinct from the performance of ritual only - held at key temples in locations such as Bali .   *Odalan* or temple birthdays are periodically celebrated on the island, involving performances of dance and music on temple grounds, some of which are ancient 'protected sites', as for example the 'Mother Temple' Besakih. There are here intersecting issues of tradition, belief, of ritual and artistic boundaries, ritual and aesthetic engagement and of balancing religion and secularisation, Such living temples are simultaneously archaeological sites to be 'protected' and established places of worship, and it would be inconceivable to prevent worshippers from using the site for such performances. An exploitative element is also present: in Bali, the scale of such performances is influenced by the attraction they may hold for Western tourists. There is virtually no activity in the island that can be said to be totally tourist-free i.e. not involving voyeuristic tourist participation in some degree, for Bali has been constructed as a tourist paradise and a living museum , with the Balinese permanently on display, forever exhibiting their Balineseness (Vickers 1989, Picard 1996).

Then comes the use of archaeological sites for performances made by official bodies and government agencies to increase tourist consumption of such sites. Here the emphasis is on culture and tradition and its re-invention, often achieved through commissioned performances of dance and music to which the site provides no more than an 'exotic' backdrop – examples are plentiful.   Specially commissioned choreographed performances which explore given themes fall in this category, for example the above mentioned *Ramayana* ballet (*sendratari*) of Prambanan, in Central Java (fig 1) or the performance of 'classical' Khmer dancing (also involving the *Ramayana* story) at Angkor in Cambodia, with the alluring carved *apsaras* (celestial dancers) of Angkor Wat

in the background.   As commissioned state art, such forms reflect the   nation's self-image and use the past to suit contemporary political needs. Though principally aimed at tourist consumption of the site, choreography becomes here an important metaphor for how heritage is imagined and a ritual expression of this   imagining. I refer to this as choreographing heritage and to the performances themselves as 'rituals of heritage'.

A third type of performance is a combination of the two which I have already mentioned, in other words, living religious practices and choreographed rituals which take place at temples that are archaeological sites reconstituted as places of worship - an example of this are the Buddhist *candi* Borobudur (fig 2) and Mendut, in Central Java or Angkor itself, in Cambodia. On the day of the Buddha's birthday ritual processions, with an international gathering of monks and Buddhist followers, are performed at Borobodur, with all the relevant paraphernalia. Borobudur was not a living temple for hundreds of years; it is Buddhist Mahayana - some even say it is Vajrayana – (Miksic et al 1996) and the present day monks responsible for reintroducing Buddhism in predominantly Islamic Java are from Thailand and of Theravada denomination. This means for example that the mythology is not really shared : Borobudur is full of stories of Bodhisattvas, both male and female, carved in the reliefs around the temple which stretch for miles; Theravada Buddhists do not recognise Bodhisattvas, but only Arahants.

The same applies to Angkor – Angkor Thom was Mahayana Buddhist, Angkor Wat was Hindu; Angkor was abandoned in 1431 following its destruction by the Thais and now some parts of Angkor have been reclaimed as Buddhist sanctuaries by the Theravada Buddhist population of Cambodia. This reconstitution of sites as modern places of worship is again to be inscribed in the 'rituals of heritage' performed by the nation state – the main point is to make people feel that these sites and the past they represent are part of the nation's heritage, and that there is an unbroken continuity of tradition, reinforcing the notion of a timeless Asian culture, with all that is implied – including the marketing of such an image in the West, again to increase tourism. There is a tendency to present tradition as unbroken, glossing over glaring gaps and breaks in that imagined continuity: so what if Borobodur was Mahayana or even Tantric? It is a Buddhist site and it is

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Buddhist heritage. The Buddha's birthday celebrations at the site are thus yet another instance of this practice of choreographing heritage.

A fourth type of performance is the New Age rituals, often involving dancing and music making, performed at archaeological sites, and other similar attempts at establishing a sense of religiosity, aspiring to cultural authenticity, focusing on the site as the source of unseen mystical powers . Catalhoyuk with its Goddess groups is almost paradigmatic, given the scale of the phenomenon at that particular site, but this occurs elsewhere too, in a more subdued way.   Thus, to focus again on Southeast Asian examples[1], at Borobodur as also at the Sukuh temple in Central Java, there is the ritual movement meditation – Buddhist inspired, but quite separate from mainstream Buddhism –led by the Amerta movement of Suprapto Suryodarmo, a Javanese movement artist with a large European following, and in North Bali there are the Awakening Art programmes at the   villages of Tejakula and Sembiran, an ancient megalithic settlement, led by some of Suprapto Suryodarmo's former associates.   Such New Age practices are often interconnected, through the participation of key practitioners and a network of tours. The issue that needs to be addressed here is that of re-invention and fashioning of new rituals as a vehicle to create the illusion of certainty,   responding to a deeply felt need for safety and security at times of profound socio-political change. Such practices are not in themselves exploitative but they are enmeshed in a discourse that can indeed be highly exploitative of the participants. Java, and to a much greater extent Bali, are again a case in point, through the phenomenon of 'well-being tourism,' a complex set of multiple activities, involving yoga retreats in remote locations and meditation, often providing substantial financial returns to their non-Balinese organisers, who are operating internationally.

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[1] Most of my work, focused on performance, has involved extended stays in South and Southeast Asia thus my examples are drawn from my experience in these regions

Performing the site

There is a fifth type of performance at sites. This is quite different from all the other performance types mentioned so far and needs to be considered separately. It consists of new genres of site specific performance with the artist/performer interacting, at different levels, with the archaeological site and using body intelligence to work with the site and at the site, understanding cultural representation as a process of becoming, embedded in the body. This is partly, but not exclusively, linked with current theories of archaeological practice which present excavation as theatre or performance (Pearson and Shanks 2001) and with phenomenological approaches to archaeology, which emphasise its performativity (Thomas 1996). It is this practice which I call 'performing the site' and which is viewed with some diffidence[2].

   Performing the site can be very unsettling and subversive; therefore there is a strong desire to control this practice. 'Is this not too close to New Ageism?' seems to be the underlying question. Performing the site is the very opposite of exploitative. Pearson and Shanks write: "here the archaeological and the performative might make common cause for the document , the equivocal, multivocal working of ruin and trace could be constituted as real-time event. Performance itself can be a rearticulation of site: language can return as a reading onto and into them, as a re-interpretation" (Pearson and Shanks 1997:43)

Because of the dichotomy of mind and body on which Western philosophical discourse is predicated, there is tremendous unease in understanding the body as capable of

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[2] The term 'performing the site' is not my own . Ian Hodder first used it as the original title of an article he wrote for the website on archaeology and performance which I originally curated at http//:www.e-state.org.uk, moving it to the Stanford server in the early part of 2004. The title of the article was later changed, at Hodder's request, to 'Performances at archaeological sites' and this is the title under which the article was eventually uploaded (Hodder 2002). I am here appropriating the earlier title, with apologies to Hodder, as it befits the subject matter of this paper but I use it in a different sense, as Hodder understands 'performing the site' as inclusive of all types of performances by artists 'of various forms', including New Age rituals and performances by archaeologists who use a phenomenological approach to the site.

generating ideas. When engaging in 'performing the site', particularly through an intercultural encounter, it is possible to confront internalized notions about hierarchised positionalities of East/West, and civilization/primitive; one can learn from the performance experience in this non-logocentric way, carefully steering away from any pseudo-ritual association. Performing the site is thus an active intervention which can change the present through relating with the past, avoiding its projection as an immobile moment. Echoing Albright, I feel compelled to ask: " What would it mean to reinscribe history through one's body? What would it mean to recreate the story of a life and the history of a people? How does one rewrite the history …of a past in order to project the story of our future?" (Albright 2001:439)

Conclusion

Going back to Hodder's comments, rather than Western appropriation, in Hodder's terms, I would be more inclined to talk of exploitation of the (non-Western) site, through certain types of performance activities. It is important to differentiate between such activities and it is important to note that the performers themselves, most unlikely to be Western in most instances, are themselves hardly culpable of exploitation. By and large, Westerners are not directly taking over the site, but they have a role to play as consumers. The power networks involved in choreographing heritage are aware of a Western presence as audience and consumers and are keen to encourage this presence, for it is very obviously income-generating . *Sendratari* for example is performed for tourists, primarily Western, it is not usually performed for the Javanese themselves, who prefer other types of entertainment. And there are very tangible returns: these performances are welcomed by the graduates of Javanese dance and music academies for they provide them with regular employment. Participation in these performances enhances the dancers' career, becoming second only to the much coveted tour abroad. Compared with this kind of site exploitation, the dancing and merry making of Western New Agers at non-Western sites – usually controlled by the relevant authorities - pales into insignificance and can hardly be seen as a threat. Saying 'yes' to *sendratari* (or its equivalent in another context) and 'no' to movement meditations (and their equivalent)

comes close to a replay of the *Aida* versus Grateful Dead situation we encountered earlier, with similar implications.

I am also sceptical with regard to the motivation attributed by Hodder to the practice of performances at sites and of performing the site, namely a sense of nostalgia and longing for an unspecified spiritual renewal. What exactly is this spiritual renewal? How is this spirituality constituted? Does the interaction of private (individual) and public (institutional) management of heritage, as articulated in all the contexts that have been reviewed , not impinge on views of spirituality, its manipulation and its consumption?

We should foreground the politics of spirituality. It seems clear that spirituality and power are intertwined so much as to become public and inseparable. The modernist vision is that of a privatisation of the religious and the spiritual. Far from perceiving spirituality as just a personal stance, I acknowledge that it is embedded in issues of power. Carrette, in his analysis of Foucault's writings on religion, points out that to Foucault "the power of religion sets up the point of resistance in a 'spiritual corporality' and is demarcated in a 'political spirituality'" (Carrette 2000:186) Foucault himself defined in 1978 his political spirituality as " the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false"(Carrette 2000:187).

When considering performances at archaeological sites we are dealing with different ways of manipulating spirituality, depending on the type of performance. For example in choreographing heritage and performing the 'rituals of heritage' a certain kind of spirituality is invoked, one which is deeply entangled with the valorisation of a distant glorious past in support of nation- building ideologies. In the Goddess groups' celebration of the female body as a sacred metaphor, one sees the attempt to address the perceived link between the violation of women in contemporary societies and the violation of nature, through nurturing eco-feminist stances and ecological responsibility for a bright new future. My main problem with Hodder's stance is this: in identifying a decontextualised aspiration to spiritual renewal and a sense of nostalgia for the past as

the goal of performances at sites, spirituality is being viewed as a mind numbing drug manufactured by the performers themselves. It is also worth noting that after discrediting the practice of perfomances at sites, Hodder proceeds to lump heterogeneous performance practices together with approaches to archaeology which could be described as phenomenological and which are thus implicitly dismissed as having little relevance to 'the overall scientific investigation' (Hodder 2002). Going further into this would require a lengthy digression, unnecessary in the context of this paper. But it is important to foreground it because once again it demonstrates the ambiguities of the encounter of archaeology and performance, at all levels.

Despite the affinities and parallelisms highlighted by Pearson and Shanks (2001), the dialogue in which archaeologists and performers have begun to engage is not devoid of misunderstandings and mistrust, and even seems to have reached an impasse. Nevertheless, I am convinced it has potential and am not ready to dismiss the whole endeavour as a failure. Occasional misunderstandings, as exemplified by Hodder's views, are inevitable, but they can stimulate reflexivity and as such they can only be welcome.

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List of illustrations

Fig 1 Prambanan complex, Central Java, Sendratari, photo Braunarts for Getty Prambanan Project

Fig. 2 Borobudur temple, Central Java, photo Braunarts for Getty Prambanan Project