Center for Global Studies

Policy Brief 5

No. 5, April 2010

Cultural Heritage: Opportunities and Conundrums

Helaine Silverman
Department of Anthropology
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Cultural heritage has existed ever since human societies developed systems of belief and attachments to places and objects that they claimed as their own, to the exclusion of others, an inheritance passed down through generations. But it is only since the second half of the twentieth century that a discourse and practice of cultural heritage has emerged, becoming inextricably linked to the global tourism industry, to a range of ethnic and international conflicts, and to a number of organizations created to care for it.

Indeed, so important is cultural heritage in our transnational world that the United Nations (UN) highlighted its preservation of World Heritage Sites in 137 countries in a list of achievements that also included "help 8.4 million Iraqis get to the polls; provide food aid to 2 million tsunami-affected people; maintain peacekeeping operations in 16 countries; vaccinate millions of children around the world; inspect nuclear and related facilities in over 140 countries" (*Foreign Policy*, November-December 2005, p. 7). How did cultural heritage—in the form of major archaeological and historic landmarks—achieve such prominence in a world beleaguered by transcendental problems?

The UN was created in 1945 out of the human devastation wrought by World War II. UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), one of the UN's subsidiary organizations, was constituted several months later to bolster the UN's global peace and security mission through specific attention to the "intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind" (see UNESCO Constitution). Recognizing not just the horrific loss of human life as a result of WWII, the UN also turned its attention to the destruction that Europe's built environment had suffered, the paradigmatic case being Dresden. In 1954, UNESCO promulgated the *Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict*. Adopted in The Hague and known as The Hague Convention, the document clearly enunciated the concept of "cultural heritage of all mankind," what today is called *world heritage*.[1]

UNESCO's 1970 *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* added an overt moral imperative to cultural heritage: "it is essential for every State to become increasingly alive to the moral obligations to respect its own cultural heritage and that of all nations…"

1. Article1.2c of UNESCO's Constitution introduced the idea of world heritage: "assuring the conservation and protection of the world's inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science, and recommending to the nations concerned the necessary international conventions."

About the Author

Helaine Silverman, Professor of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), received her Ph.D. in Anthropology (University of Texas at Austin, 1986), specializing in Central Andean archaeology. She is an expert in precolumbian Nasca culture of south coastal Peru. Professor Silverman also researches the use/misuse of the past by the general public, forms of representation of historical and archaeological knowledge, cultural heritage and the production of national and local identity, and cultural tourism.

Professor Silverman is the director of CHAMP (Collaborative for Cultural Heritage and Museum Practices) at UIUC. She is an International Member of ICOMOS (UNESCO's International Council on Monuments and Sites), Expert Member of ICOMOS's International Committee on Archaeological Heritage Management-ICAHM, and Associate Member of ICOMOS' International Committee on Cultural Tourism.

Her current research focuses on cultural heritage management in Cuzco, Peru (the former capital of the Inca Empire), and Khmer civilization sites located in the border region of Thailand and Cambodia; comparative museum practices and cultural heritage policies worldwide; and cultural heritage organizations and their impact on local communities.

Additional information about Professor Silverman can be found at: www.anthro.illinois.edu/faculty/silverman/HelaineSilvermanWebpage.pdf
CHAMP's homepage is: http://champ.anthro.illinois.edu

World Heritage List

The World Heritage Convention (*Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*), adopted in 1972 by UNESCO, argued that "parts of the cultural or natural heritage are of outstanding interest and therefore need to be preserved as part of the world heritage of mankind as a whole." The principle of *outstanding universal value* (OUV) was foregrounded as a fundamental criterion in UNESCO's creation of the World Heritage List.

States-Parties that have signed the World Heritage Convention are encouraged to nominate sites within their national territory to the World Heritage List. Upon so doing, these nominated sites reside first on a Tentative List and are subject to a field examination by a panel of UNESCO World Heritage Centre and outside experts. With their input a comprehensive dossier is prepared by the State-Party (following UNESCO's *Operational Guidelines*) for review by the World Heritage Centre in Paris and its external consultants. Nominated sites are voted upon by elected representatives of the States-Parties to the World Heritage Convention. It is a lengthy process and not all nominations are successful.

The explicit purpose of the World Heritage List is to foster protection of heritage (cultural and natural) of outstanding universal value. UNESCO's admirable goal of protecting the world's great sites is certainly shared by any particular nation's archaeological community and its international cohort. OUV is a concept that most anyone would subscribe to, at least in the abstract. However, over the past decades it has become clear that the motivation behind most nations' nominations to the World Heritage List transcends site protection. Among those motivations the following can be recognized:

- Generating cultural tourism and economic development by means of a marketable site (*World Heritage Site* as a brand).

- Gaining international prestige in a globalized world in which culture is, quite literally, manipulable capital.

- Using the nomination process as a "national project" around which citizens can coalesce.[2]

- Advancing cultural and/or political claims against another nation.[3]

---

2. Currently, Costa Rica is nominating an archaeological complex of stone spheres as a self-professed "national project," encouraged by its National Museum's concern with their preservation. I participated in a UNESCO field visit to Costa Rica as part of the Tentative List process. A problematical example of private initiative in the cultural heritage domain was the global project, launched in 2001 by a Swiss-Canadian man, Bernard Weber, to create a "New Seven Wonders of the World" list. Countries organized campaigns to get their most iconic site listed. All of the winners (save Brazil's "Christ the Redeemer" overlooking Río de Janeiro) were already on the World Heritage List. Even so, the other countries (Peru, India, Jordan, China, Mexico) pushed their sites, with the exception of Egypt, which took umbrage since its Pyramids are, in fact, the only remaining Wonder of the original set from Antiquity. The competition to be named to the new list was comparable to the zeal with which countries bid for the Olympic Games. In both cases tourism revenue and international prestige are obvious motivating factors; in both cases there is questionable attention to the social and economic impact of successful bids.

3. Jordan's successful nomination of Jerusalem as a World Heritage Site flies in the face of Israel's legitimate possession of its own capital city and the fact that Jerusalem never belonged to Jordan. Approval of China's nomination of the Potala Palace ensemble in Lhasa, Tibet passively recognized China's rights to this disputed territory. Thailand and Cambodia continue to fight a border war over a Khmer civilization site awarded to Cambodia in 1962 by the International Court of Justice; the site is located 700 meters within Cambodia according to the current border delimitation. Although Article 11.3 of the World Heritage Convention states "inclusion of a property in the World Heritage List requires the consent of the State concerned. The inclusion of a property situated in a territory, sovereignty or jurisdiction over which is claimed by more than one State shall

Over the past thirty years heritage scholars have pointed out problems in the World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage charters concerning aspects of language, concepts, implementation, and outcomes. Some of the criticism, though valid, refers to essentially benign matters. Other issues raised, however, are quite significant in terms of negative human impact. Observations running the gamut include:

- Continued expansion of the World Heritage List may trivialize its significance, particularly fulfillment of the OUV concept (currently 890 "properties" are inscribed, of which 689 are categorized as cultural).

- Less developed nations (particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa) are significantly underrepresented on the World Heritage List because of its bias toward monumentality, toward the West, and also the cost (money, resources) of putting together a nomination for the World Heritage Centre.

- There is little money available from UNESCO to assist less developed countries in the protection and management of their World Heritage Sites.

- The OUV concept is flawed in its contention that the heritage of one country or one people has significance for all others. Even within a single country OUV may be contested (think of the Taliban's destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001; think of the bloodshed between Hindus and Muslims at Ayodhya, India in 1992).[4]

- An element of the criterion of OUV is authenticity, but definitions of authenticity vary in accordance with diverse cultural values.[5]

- Attention to World Heritage Sites may take needed resources away from a vast array of scientifically important but less "marketable" sites.

- Protection of a site may require expulsion of a population. (Do inert objects have greater rights than living ones?)

- The tourism generated by World Heritage Site status may result in depopulation of historic centers, expropriation of residences and businesses, elevated cost of living, environmental impact, and over-dependence on tourism as the backbone of the local economy. Indeed, tourism may physically damage the very site.

It is important to indicate that *intangible* cultural heritage is also an important arena of UNESCO concern, notably since 2001 when it issued *The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* followed by the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2003.[6] The Declaration rails against globalization's potential for homogenization and is deeply concerned with human rights. The Convention extends that concern to "a guarantee of

---

in no way prejudice the rights of the parties to the dispute," UNESCO's inscription of sites in contested territories frighteningly demonstrates the organization's blithe or disingenuous obliviousness to potential manifold negative on-the-ground consequences resulting from inscription.

4. Some sites that gain inscription on the World Heritage List subsequently are mismanaged or suffer damage and may be placed on UNESCO's ignominious "List of World Heritage in Danger," with the admonition that the issues be resolved or the site will be removed from the World Heritage List. Not only does this shame the State-Party, it also reveals another weakness of the OUV concept since if a State-Party cannot or will not care for its premier site, how much does it really value it? Obviously, sites damaged by natural disaster and warfare may be beyond the preventive and corrective ability of a State-Party. Rather, neglect or contravention of a Master Plan (or lack thereof) for a World Heritage Site is the issue.

5. This issue is only partially resolved by the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity. See www.international.icomos.org/naradoc_eng.htm

6. These were preceded by the UN's 1948 Declaration on Human Rights.

Recommended Readings

Addison, Alonzo C., *Disappearing World:101 of the Earth's Most Extraordinary and Endangered Places*. Collins, 2008.

Di Giovine, Michael A., *The Heritagescape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism*. Lexington Books, 2009.

Jokilehto, Jukka, *The World Heritage List:What is OUV?* ICOMOS, Paris, 2008.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, "World Heritage and Cultural Economics." In *Museum Frictions*, edited by Ivan Karp et al., pp. 161-202. Duke University Press, 2006.

Silverman, Helaine and D. Fairchild Ruggles, eds., *Cultural Heritage and Human Rights.* Springer, NY, 2007.

Timothy, Dallen J. and Gyan P. Nyaupane, eds., *Cultural Heritage and Tourism in the Developing World.* Routledge, 2009.

UNESCO, *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*. World Heritage Centre, Paris, 2008.

Global Studies Virtual Library

The Global Studies Virtual Library encompasses information and access to materials of all kinds relevant to globalization and global studies, including research resources, key databases, virtual media, international projects, a virtual bookshelf, and online reference services.

http://www.library.illinois.edu/cgs/

Contact Global Studies Librarian, Lynne Rudasill, for information or assistance: rudasill@illinois.edu

sustainable development," thus implicitly envisioning a relationship between embodied cultural heritage and tourism.

Though well intentioned, these documents pose major conundrums for the States-Parties that officially signed on, as well as those that did not, since tolerance of cultural diversity brings different ethical and social systems into conflict. Are the Islamic hajib and burqa cultural traditions to be protected, or an abrogation of women's human rights? Is female genital circumcision cruel mutilation? Should the body-deforming practice of wearing heavy neck rings among the long-necked Karén tribeswomen of Thailand be permitted to continue–or are the Thai and international tourism industries exploiting these "exotic" women? Does the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention potentially perpetuate or facilitate government subordination of ethnic minorities?

Although many scholars are writing about the issues discussed in this compressed *Policy Brief*, systematic, comprehensive, comparative attention is missing. A permanent Working Group on World Heritage Sites and a series of workshops and symposia involving scholars and heritage practitioners (from developed and developing countries, and including representatives from public as well as private heritage organizations[7]) would be extremely beneficial to begin a long-term assessment, discussion, and reformulation of cultural heritage policy globally. A university environment, such as Illinois, is the ideal venue to host such a process.

---

7. Distinguished leading private cultural heritage agencies are the World Monuments Fund and Global Heritage Fund.

Center for Global Studies

303 International Studies Bldg.
910 S. Fifth Street, MC-402
Champaign, IL 61820 USA
http://cgs.illinois.edu