

Understanding the Uses of Cultural Heritage

فهم استخدامات التراث الثقافي

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Abstract

It is quite interesting today in social and anthropological studies to debate topics relating to heritage. One reason for this increased academic interest could plausibly be a reaction to the hastening of globalization. However, in examining the nature of heritage, we are faced with exploring the notion of cultural heritage mainly, because it is a contested subject. Of particular interest for this study would be an analysis of heritage as social and cultural constructions articulated within cultural practice. Within this respect then, heritage is represented as a conceptualization of different meanings linked to space time, performance and commemoration, affect, and tangibility/intangibility. To that end, the study points to some preliminary examples from the Algerian context to explain heritage uses.

Keywords: uses of cultural heritage; performance; locality; identity; tangible/ intangible cultural heritage.

ملخص

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من المثير للإهتمام اليوم في الدراسات الاجتماعية والأنثروبولوجية مناقشة المواضيع المتعلقة بالتراث. قد يكون أحد أسباب هذا الاهتمام الأكاديمي المتزايد رد فعل على العولمة السريعة. ومع ذلك ، عند دراسة طبيعة التراث ، نواجه استكشاف فكرة التراث الثقافي أساساً لأنه موضوع متنازع عليه. من المهم بشكل خاص لهذه الدراسة أن يكون تحليل التراث كمنشآت إجتماعية وثقافية منصوص عليها في الممارسة الثقافية. في هذا الصدد إذن، يتم تمثيل التراث كتصور لمعاني مختلفة مرتبطة بالزمكانية، الأداء، احياء الذكرى، التأثير، الملموسية واللا ملموسية. تحقيقاً لهذه الغاية ، تشير الدراسة إلى بعض الأمثلة الأولية من السياق الجزائري لشرح استخدامات التراث .

الكلمات المفتاحية: استخدامات التراث الثقافي, الأداء, المكان, الهوية, التراث الثقافي الملموس والغير ملموس

Introduction

In recent years, it is noticed that heritage has gained various spectators thanks to the mass media. Chief among all heritage audiences is a tourist without whom probably *heritage is lifeless*. According to Halbertsma, M. et al., (2011), heritage needs actors, decor, locality and a scenario sewed at a particular time and which would certainly be deduced differently by heritage consumers. In this way, heritage is conceived not as a set of objects but rather as a socio-cultural process that involves meaning construction. From this point of view, cultural heritage is- and so is culture- a time-process. It is the creek which flows from the past through the structured path of society, giving it substance and meaning, and its fellows, significance, and purpose.

Scholars have long constructed a hegemonic discourse about heritage, in that while cultural heritage continues to play the central role within different communities in defining national patrimony and identity; it also acts as a performance of commitment to certain spaces, or sites of the past

that still have effects in the present. In this token, cultural heritage has another aspect of use which is memory and which serves as a *passerelle* to link our past to our present.

What is Cultural Heritage?

It is particularly necessary here to draft the holistic definition of cultural heritage produced by UNESCO according to which the term is considered as an accumulation of various facets ranging from the works of artists and architects to “*expressions of the people’s spirituality, and the body of values which give meaning to life*” (UNESCO, 1982, art.6).

When looking at pre-2003 World Heritage documents, the two vantage points and most dominant heritage typologies, tangible and intangible heritage were introduced to the conceptualization of the term. Tangible heritage is the whole complex of organizations, institutions and practices devoted to the preservation of culture and the arts (Hovi T., 2014:15). Although most people, if not all, are well aware of what tangible heritage is, many cannot understand the actual meaning of intangible heritage. As an intangible concept, heritage is talked about, in Literature studies, as being the past in the present, or a model of the past. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that heritage is restricted to the past; it is inseparable from the interpretation of heritage in the present (Handler R. and Linnekin J., 1984:276). Cultural heritage, within this respect, is also a process of commitment, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present. The idea of cultural heritage as an act of communication and meaning making experience is not something; however, that finds much interaction with the expert view of heritage (Bagnall G., 2003).

In short, cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible works through which the creativity of those people finds expression: *“languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, archives and libraries”* (UNESCO, 1982, art. 23). In trying to recombine both concepts, I will also return to Anthropology, a science that considers cultural heritage as *“a social ensemble of many different, complex and interdependent manifestations... it is now reflecting the diversity of cultural manifestations”* (Bouchenaki M., 2003). The typology of intangible heritage within this quotation is far more speculative than the one in the Intangible Heritage Convention, as in the Intangible Heritage Section of the organization, the term covers activities on endangered languages (UNESCO, 2006a:163-164), human knowledge, skills or tradition-bearers. At least the category relating human treasures expands beyond the definition quoted above, and thus provides an additional category labeled as human individuals or heritage-bearers (Rudolff B., 2006).

The Uses of Cultural Heritage

This section aims to shed light on the ‘work’ that heritage does. For the purpose of this work then, we will refer to the definition of cultural heritage which is used in the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (FARO, 2005): *“[Cultural] heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge and traditions”*.

As such, cultural heritage is highly important for everyone. In some countries, it is associated with indigenous people more often than others. However, places, objects and practices of cultural importance enrich the

lives of all people by providing deep connections to places, nation states and/or cultural or ethnic groups. It provides connotations to lived experiences and is, therefore, a key element of individual and group identity.

a)- Heritage as Performance

Understanding what heritage is and does may be defined by the discourses that the concept constructs; heritage is not an 'object' only in that no object really has the value of heritage unless it is being used. In the words of Smith L. (2006:304): *"this use takes on a performative edge because in moments of heritage that use may become exaggerated or marked out in some way to signal the importance of the act"*. Throughout Algeria, for instance, there are many domes (quobbas) whose heritage performance may be marked by adopting whispered tones in your conversation as you stay inside the quobba. In Spain, it may be marked by the use of some acts like Pamplona Bull Run in the context of the yearly festival. Whatever the context, heritage activities become performance as they mark out the objects, or events which are significant in identifying identity.

b)- Heritage and Locality

The idea of heritage as performance is linked to the idea of place. In other words, it invokes an idea about the materiality of heritage. However, it also reveals an interrelationship between place, and the events that take place in them. In this way, place is so important to the meaning of heritage, in the same way performances are important to heritage.

In Algeria, when looking at the monument shrine of the martyr (MakamEshahid), which stands as a reminder, one cannot tremble the

feeling of sadness and appreciation for those who paved the way to freedom. Visitors walk around and beneath this monument to commemorate the Algerian war for independence. It also refers to the martyrs' struggles for freedom. Hence, both the place and the performances that took place there are so important.

What this tells us is that for a place or locality to be heritage it needs to deal with present-day cultural, political and social needs; or to put it differently, it needs to be a cultural tool in the heritage process (Smith L., 2006:305).

c)- Heritage and Identity

According to Rizzo I. and Mignosa A. (2013), one of the strengths of heritage, perhaps especially intangible heritage, is that most heritage objects for instance stones or pyramids, tower houses or castles can be place-bound in the sense that it contributes to the identification of people with specific places, it becomes indistinguishably involved in local place images, identities and economic geographies.

As Crouch and Parker (2003:405) show, heritage can give temporal and substantial authority to the construction of identities, especially if the heritage in question has been recognized as *legitimate* through state-sanctioned heritage management and conservation practices, and/or through the research attentions of experts in the field.

Perhaps, one would not completely conjure knowledge about heritage as the establishment of a relation between the idea of heritage with the real heritage out there, but "*rather as a chain of experiences woven into the tissue of life*" (Latour B., 2007:89). Object and subject are not the suitable points of

departure for any discussion about knowledge, but rather they are produced as a result of that knowledge (Vercellone C., 2008). Thus, the construction of cultural heritage as a social object is accomplished through the analysis of the complex chains of experiences leading many different agents to shift from an awkward to a harmonized movement i.e; the co-operation between brains (Architects, handworkers, entrepreneurs, anthropologists, writers, educators, singers, politicians, tourists ...etc) All those, among many others, contribute in the construction of the relational chain of experiences that enables the construction of heritage (González P., 2015).

To reiterate, heritage is a cultural process, it can be interpreted differently within any culture at any time, thus, heritage is as much about forgetting as remembering the past (Graham B., 2002). In this sense, heritage defines our individual presence in the world and that is our cultural identity. *"This is one aspect how we 'stand-within' heritage, how we dwell in heritage and thereby preserve it and how we can finally know; not only know heritage, but know ourselves in heritage"* (Rudolff B., 2006:5).

d)- Tangible and Intangible Heritage

Critical interest in the idea of heritage has significantly increased within the social sciences and humanities, so much so that some have identified and criticized the interrelationship between tangible and non-tangible heritage. Subsequently, to talk about heritage is to talk about tangible and intangible heritage as interconnected in the sense that the former is a physical maintenance for the latter, while the latter contributes to the preservation and conservation of the former (Lekakis S., 2015).

Perhaps Fairclough G. (2009:36-37) further identifies cultural heritage as a blend of “*asset and resource*”. As for the former, heritage has the connotations of being kept untouched, unchanged, like money in a bank. As for the latter, heritage implies that the thing so described is to be used; even if in the process it might be eroded or even used-up if necessary. Besides, it acknowledges that there exist users who are supposed to benefit from the use, individually or collectively.

However, some authors, inevitably, had already decided to talk of heritage and intangible heritage, as one thing. Chief among them is Smith L. (2006:56) who maintained:

What is actually the subject of management and conservation/ preservation practices, and what visitors and tourists engage with at heritage places, are the values and meanings that are symbolized or represented at and by these heritage sites or cultural practices. Whether we are dealing with traditional definitions of ‘tangible’ or ‘intangible’ representations of heritage, we are actually engaging with a set of values and meanings, including such elements as emotion, memory and cultural knowledge and experiences...and as such all heritage is ‘intangible’ whether these values or meanings are symbolized by a physical site, place, landscape or other physical representation, or are represented within

the performances of languages, dance, oral histories or other forms of 'intangible heritage'.

Understanding all heritage as intangible, one thing stands before our eyes; that is the *affect* of heritage. This concept has been first introduced by Thrift N. (2004:60), who explains it as a set of embodied practices (hatred, shame, jealousy, fear, anger, embarrassment, sorrow, pride, happiness, joy, hope) *"that produce visible conduct as an outer lining"*.

The interrelationship of communities and values in the shaping of specific spaces has frequently been acknowledged. For instance, Patru S. et al (2019) maintain that such an interrelationship is active as both entities always grow. A holistic term to refer to such a link may be resilience which is the capability of a system to experience shocks while holding essentially the same function, construction, reactions and therefore identity.

e)- Heritage as Past and Present

With reference to the interrelationship between the communities and their landscapes or places, one should refer to such a link between the past of a given landscape and the present. The past can never be understood exclusively within itself; the present of communities continually redrafts the meaning of the past. Within this respect, Urry J. (1996:48) claims, *"there is no past out there or back there. There is only the present, in the context of which the past is being continually re-created"*. This act of recreating is achieved through the activities of remembering and recalling within the context of interactions between people and their environments, including heritage sites and museums (Davison P., 2005).

In North Africa generally and in Algeria specifically, the painful image of the colonized's country post-colonially fuelled the desire to recover their inclusive cultural heritage and identity. Public memory remains a product of elite guidance, and symbolic interaction. Leaders continue to use the past to raise nationalism and public duty, and ordinary people continue to accept, reformulate such messages (Bodnar J., 1992). The culturally-historical spaces like M'zab valleys (El-Atteuf), the oldest of all towns in Ghardaïa, having been established in 1011 AD., for instance, bridge the past and the present and provide cues to reminiscence. These spaces embody memories of the past (Nuttall S. & Coetzee C., 1998), yet, paradoxically, at the same time, *"the architecture of these traditional spaces expresses a modern rigor"* (Cataldi G. et al, 1996:64).

Since the 1990 law on associations, thousands of Algerian associations have been created to protect the country's cultural heritage. Association Aboulshak Ibrahim Tefayech pour le Service du Patrimoine, a religiously inspired Association, organized to commemorate the works and manuscripts of the Ibadite Sheikh Tefayech, in order to preserve the heritage of the M'zab region of Algeria, and to improve civic education and knowledge about the past (Northey J., 2017). Following Smith L. (2006:46), the sites and the country as a whole are *"aide-mémoire"*; not only do they play a mnemonic role, but they also afford background, location, gravitas, and a sense of occasion for those both passing on and receiving cultural meaning, knowledge and memories. That is, it is all these that made them heritage, not only the fact of their existence.

Conclusion

Much of what has been said here about heritage stems out from different discourses of heritage. As the study illustrates, heritage has several uses and identifications which greatly puzzle any judgment of its role. The process of defining the concept has shifted from material objects to their meaning and values and most recently to affects aiming at the conservation of identities. In other words, the construction of cultural heritage is considered as a social object that is a complex process involving chains of experiences and values in life. At the same time, cultural heritage is considered an amalgam place understood as an abstract locality of thoughts – constructed by community's actions to preserve identities. In response, Place- in the words of Heidegger, M. and Stambaugh, J. (1989:338) -is brought into being by human beings and it offers us to dwell in it. This enables us to conceive heritage as performance.

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