The construction of heritage values in contemporary Cambodia: the case of Siem Reap

Adèle Esposito

Since the colonial time, heritage construction in Cambodia has been dominated by the celebration of the outstanding value of Angkor. I focus on forms that are in the shadow of the archaeological site: dwellings, commercial buildings, public facilities and urban shapes, which are part of the contemporary landscape of Cambodian towns. In the years following the listing of Angkor as a World Heritage Site (1992), foreign experts working in Cambodia, in the context of bilateral cooperation agreements, have produced representations of these forms of heritage and have designed conservation projects and management tools. Not only were these representations influenced by the cultural inheritance disseminated during the colonial domination, but their way of operating perpetuated the foreign interference in heritage matters that was typical of the French regimes. However, their projects had little impact on spatial transformations.

I challenge this operational inconsistency because it has questioned the position of Cambodian national and local authorities as interlocutors of the foreign experts. How do they receive and react to these imported materials? Does the failure of heritage planning mean that the Cambodian authorities lack power? My analysis focuses on the case of Siem Reap province where the archaeological site of Angkor is located, but I also mention programs and projects designed for other Cambodian cities, such as Battambang, Phnom Penh and Kep.

I argue that the measures aiming at conserving inherited buildings through inventory, listing and urban regulations have never been implemented in Cambodian towns. In contrast, the production of knowledge concerning wooden houses and villages, to which both foreign experts and Cambodian agents contribute, has stronger consequences. This knowledge describes architectural models and spatial organization and reveals the technical and cultural reasons of these shapes. It does not aim to justify the conservation of existing villages, but to serve as a source of inspiration for creating new architecture and neighbourhoods. Heritage is conceived as a permanent model that can be represented and reemployed in new creations. It also nourishes an idea of the cultural identity of the Khmer people based on the purity of its rural origins.

While architectural magazines base the design of new types of houses on these models, national authorities used this knowledge for planning the relocation of a part of the population living in wooden houses on the site of Run Ta Ek. Unlike previously unsuccessful attempts in the field of urban heritage and management, Cambodian authorities were able to implement this relocation project. So, they displayed their power to act, while they had been deaf to the solicitations by the experts who had proposed conservation models.

This evidence challenges the actual power of exogenous concepts and tools as well as the pretended dependence of Cambodian agents on colonial paradigms; the conception of heritage as a model, more than as a collection of material remains, seems to be more familiar to the local council according to which the understanding and replacement of inherited buildings is not a source of guilt. In this way, Cambodian authorities show their capacity to receive and reject external contributions according to their own interests.

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Shu-Li Wang presented three national archaeological parks in China. As the heritage industry has expanded alongside the rise of cultural tourism, the Chinese state nominate twelve archaeological parks. These sites face dilemmas regarding the conservation of heritage and the presentation of the past, such as how to visualize archaeological knowledge. Studies of nationalism in China generally take Chinese nationalism and cultural uniformity as monolithic, and China is often portrayed as a nation with a majority voice. Shu-Li argues against this assumption, and suggests that what constitutes ‘Han’ is in a constant state of flux. By analyzing the staging of three national parks, she demonstrates how pasts are utilized as resources in constant state of flux. By analyzing the staging of three national parks, she demonstrates how pasts are utilized as resources in various settings in response to the state’s project. Based on her fieldwork Shu-Li argues there is need to re-think Han Chinese as a set of diversified, uneven and heterogeneous entities.

Analyzing the social cultural context After the presentations of individual papers, Michael Herzfeld pointed out four recurring themes: the complexities of motives and effects; the tension between desire for display and engagement of critical self-knowledge; social poetics of heritage production; and heritage boundaries and the defining of purities. The idea of representing the entirety of, e.g., the Han Chinese patrimony is variegated and contested and shows a tension among the local, regional, national and international level. But to understand changes in the meaning of heritage over time, or between places, we should pay attention to the social political context. According to Herzfeld, a critical study of heritage always means an analysis of the social cultural context. We should first and foremost focus on the analysis of the context in which the idea of heritage is created, used and defined.

One dimension of this dynamic is the postcolonial condition. As the western colonial powers defined and spread a set of social values around the world and tried to reify these as the ultimate good, much at work use we see today represent attempts by various countries to live up to standards thereby created. Although not all of these standards were created in the West, the fact remains that western values have dominated this discourse, sometimes in the hands of Asian or non-European actors, because they were postcolonial and had learned the arts of self-definition from their colonial masters and perpetuated some of these models. In the case of Siem Reap a conflict takes place, among different levels, which is animated by reified assumptions that were generated by colonial discourses and reinforced by the continuing involve of the erstwhile colonial powers in the management of the postcolonial situation. Even in countries that were not technically colonized we see the same kinds of effect.

With his second point about cultural intimacy Herzfeld argues that heritage discourse as a contested space is always about the tension between that which is presented to the world (self-display), and what is happening on the inside: dirty jokes, and a nasty sense of humor in the case of Enthus Susmono. With the social poetics of heritage production Herzfeld refers to the notion that when producing heritage, one is playing games with existing categories. Etymologically speaking, the word ‘invention’ comes from the Latin root for ‘to discover’. To Herzfeld, invention is a mastery of conventional form such that you are able to get away with breaking out of it, and by getting away with breaking out of it, you start to change the rules of the game, as illustrated by the case of Enthus Susmono. Social poetics is revealed in stretching innovation, but not crossing the lines.

Discussions about convention involve the concept of purity, such as in the case of merging rituals into local contexts. Herzfeld points out that behind the creation of a ‘pure’ tradition, ‘pure’ national heritage etc., lies a battle, a contest, a desire to specify boundaries. By the same token, the definition of heritage also has boundaries – with the recognition and rejection of heritage – that are constantly negotiated. A temporal process arises from Reap when we see versions of the postcolonial regime of truth succeed another, all designed to, as Johannes Fabian put it, keep the production in a ‘state of discontinuity’, to make sure we never become part of the modern world. Heritage, as is tolerance, is a form of keeping people in a manageable situation; people are allowed to have traditions, temples, that can be framed.

Critical heritage studies are essential Herzfeld concludes by instructing the audience to have a critical eye for all claims of benign ideology, to always ask the crucial questions by who these ideas of heritage are performed, under what conditions, and for whom. In this respect, Herzfeld is of the opinion that critical heritage studies are absolutely essential. Governments may become increasingly uneasy, and perhaps obstruct research that argues against monolithic forms of rules.

We should not let governments or any other institutional form tell us what heritage is. We might end up by saying more about what heritage isn’t or what it shouldn’t be or what it is in danger of becoming. We should analyze what has actually happened in discourses over heritage in various degrees of totalitarian control, ranging from a relatively open and democratic system in Indonesia, to various forms of ethnic closure in Sri Lanka and China, and a very strong Khmer Rouge parallel dimension. Herzfeld closed with the appeal to keep complexity in full view and celebrate it. If we talk about how heritage happens, Herzfeld hopes that heritage studies might have the kind of political weight in the world it can and should have.

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Drawing on 13 months of fieldwork in Indonesia, I will describe how Enthus Susmono innovates in the field of his puppet creations, the musical compositions he uses, his performance style, the language he uses, his person or personality, the incorporation of Islamic elements in his work, and spectacular attractions (sketsa). These manifestations of innovation reflect Enthus Susmono’s overall approach of wayang. He told me several times that he is always searching for ways to buck pasar – open up new markets – as he calls it, and to reach new audiences. His newest creation is the genre of Wayang Santri, which became widely popular straight after the first performance in August 2010. Enthus Susmono explained that the stories in his new repertoire are locally situated and deal with Muslim daily life and are not derived from the wayang repertoire. In an obvious Islamic context he alternates Islamic chants with crude jokes and a drunk puppet. Despite my own initial reservations when watching Wayang Santri for the first time, nobody in the audience seemed insulted. On the contrary, the crowd screamed with laughter, took pictures and recorded the actions on their mobile phones. Of course, not everyone approves of this new form of wayang. Some in this camp are actively involved in the preservation of wayang, including policy makers in the field of heritage management. Other people think that Islam should not be incorporated in wayang at all, but as far as the general audience is concerned, wayang and Islam are inextricably linked.

The case of Enthus Susmono demonstrates that performers and viewers inevitably identify the standard – and thus authenticity – differently, resulting in contrasting uses. Cultural policy makers and wayang aficionados in Jakarta identify a standard containing an invisible essence of wayang. Innovation produces ‘discomfort’ for these viewers. They expect something from the performer that appeals to their idea of wayang. The spectator’s expectations must be catered to, leading to an internal conservatism as to how the performers can and should present themselves. Enthus Susmono, with almost unrestricted creativity, is not afraid to stretch his innovation to the limit and sober up for the boundaries. In this respect, he is as creatively adventurous as economically minded. Critics claim he crosses the line, but the instant success of Enthus Susmono’s Wayang Santri demonstrates that the boundaries are interpreted differently by various audiences and that the boundaries of wayang are fluid and constantly negotiated.

The WAYANG PUPPET THEATRE OF INDONESIA was proclaimed as UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity on 7 November 2003. The UNESCO Proclamation confirms implicit standards for the wayang tradition, referred to as the ‘normative expectation’ by Richard Schechner in 2010, by describing it and framing it in the international heritage discourse. Such standards are informed by ideas of authenticity and urge critics to condemn wayang (wayang puppeteers), who do not meet these standards. However, audience appreciation of these wayang shows that these standards are fluid. To examine how standards of wayang are negotiated, I focus on the wayang, Rek (The Honourable) Enthus Susmono (b. 1966), who is widely regarded by both friend and foe as a radical innovator. He is a particularly interesting case as wayang standards have prompted critics to refer to Enthus Susmono as Persoal (Destroyer) of wayang, but cause his fans to fondly refer to him as Crazy Dalang. By ‘othering’ Enthus Susmono’s innovations to an implicit standard of wayang, the standard is actually reinforced and emphasized.

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From multiculturalism to transculturalism: the politics of heritage in Sri Lanka

Eva Ambos

After the official end of the Civil War between the separatist LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) and government security forces in May 2009, a number of heritagized rituals took place in Sri Lanka. I discuss these heritage politics in Sri Lanka by drawing on my fieldwork with performer lineages. Through the analysis of a ritual to mark the 2nd term presidency of Mahinda Rāppakās, I argue that purity is the main value around which heritage politics in Sri Lanka are centred. I further discuss a shift in heritage politics, from a multicultural to a transcultural approach in scrutinizing the independence day celebrations in February 2010.

With my first example, I show that purity as a value is localized through the performance of heritagized culture in a village healing ritual, carried out by low caste ritual practitioners. A ritual from the region around the hill town Kandy – a kohombā kankāriya – was chosen to honour a president who originates from the low country, the coastal area of the South and West with its distinctive ritual traditions, and who never tries of undermining this, because Kandyan culture in general is associated with authentic culture and purity, with the latter serving as an axiomatic value and being part of a code, which conveys a dominant interpretation and masks alternative readings. It embraces in the case of the kohombā kankāriya notions of a revitalized national Buddhism, that excludes Theravada Buddhism. The related emergence of an idealized image of ‘Buddhism proper’, informed by middle class values, requires the purging from ‘non-Buddhist’ elements, which eventually leads also to a rejection of rural practices, often characterized by syncretism.

To step beyond the official, nationalist readings of the kohombā kankāriya under discussion, I turn to the performers who due to their seemingly marginal position ‘at the edge’ of this Sinhalese Buddhist nation owing to their low caste and their rural background, are able to escape – at least partly – this tight corset out of tradition, purity and nationalism. Purity as an axiomatic value linked to the kohombā kankāriya, imbued with elitist notions, appears to push the low caste and rural performers to the margins of society. But they use the code of purity in an alternative way, which subverts its dominant usage. While they embrace purity as a value as well, they essentialize a pure and authentic lineage tradition, instead of national heritage.

Looking at purity as a value in relation to interethnic and interreligious boundaries, I argue that the 2010 independence day celebrations reveal a shift in heritage politics from a multicultural to a transcultural paradigm, whereas both embrace purity as a value. Transculturality here should be thought of in a double sense: Firstly, as transcending culture, whereby an official image of a religious and ethnic neutral nation state is developed; and secondly, as an appropriation of the Other. While the multicultural paradigm consists of ideologies which exclude everything that is interpreted as ‘Other’ as invading and corrupting Sinhalese-Buddhist culture to keep it pure, the transcultural one is to absorb the ‘Other’, to incorporate it into a hegemonic Buddhist-Sinhalese framework and to redefine it in relying on purity as a value.

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