



Max-Planck-Institut für ethnologische Forschung Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology

Call for Papers

Workshop

World Heritage on the Ground: Ethnographic Perspectives

11—12 October 2012

Organisers: David Berliner (Université libre de Bruxelles) and
Christoph Brumann (MPI for Social Anthropology)

Venue: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germany

Ratified by 188 states, the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage is one of the most successful international treaties and the flagship activity of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Entries into the World Heritage List with its currently 936 properties in 153 countries hold an almost magnetic attraction for government agencies, conservationists, tourists, and local stakeholders the world over, and political pressure on the World Heritage Committee for still more inscriptions is mounting by the year. In the global political economy of cultural value, the World Heritage label is functioning as a gold standard. While committed to the preservation of unique sites, the World Heritage organisations are a major motor of globalisation, as the nomination process often spreads discourses and practices to world regions with little heritage institutionalisation. With World Heritage university programmes and training centres mushrooming in recent years, we also witness the emergence of a new academic field whose epistemological foundations call for scrutiny.

Anthropologists have done some limited work on the global World Heritage institutions but more commonly, they have encountered World Heritage on the ground, sometimes in an accidental fashion. Several dozen field studies have now been conducted at World Heritage sites across the globe. They have produced ethnographies of singular places, making for a sizable but so far only virtual community of scholars for which this global system is practically significant. Our goal with this workshop is to convert the virtual community into a real one. We believe that it will be productive to compare insights gained from long-term ethnographic fieldwork at World Heritage sites and that this will uncover a lot of parallel phenomena and processes, leading to a better understanding of both the global apparatus and the specific dynamics of the sites.

Topics we wish to explore include, first of all, the articulation of the sites with the World Heritage institutions. The latter are often rather distant, with almost all interaction channelled through national state agencies, and substantial mystification can arise in the ways in which sites and global centre imagine each other's conditions and objectives. Who are the key brokers and mediating organisations here, and which other global institutions enter the game alongside those empowered by UNESCO? How do the ubiquitous conflicts between the levels – such as when plans for office towers in historic cities or mining in nature reserves do not find favour with the Committee – play out, given that the World Heritage institutions have little coercive power but often substantial leverage over national and international public opinion? How are Committee documents and decisions transmitted to the ground and which effects do they have there? And where are the limits of the "global commons" ideal of the convention when national governments, business interests, or local actors prefer to ignore it?

The global-national-local nexus is complicated by the variety of players and interests on each of these levels, with some of the tensions – such as that between long-term conservation and short-term economic exploitation – replicating themselves on each. Who is gaining from World Heritage inscriptions and who is losing out? Do power and benefits always shift to supra-local forces, or can (some) local actors reaffirm control, playing out the various national and global agents against each other? What is the role of different professional groups, including the heritage experts and nature conservationists who, in the global South, often have been trained by World Heritage institutions? What significance does World Heritage have for local populations not directly engaged with the sites? How are such notions as preservation, temporality or authenticity professionally and popularly imagined? And how do encounters with domestic and international tourists and the respective personnel – tour operators, guides, hotel staff, souvenir traders, guards – come into play?

We believe that the anthropological fieldwork tradition is particularly suited to answer such questions but a further motivation is the fact that World Heritage has been moving into a more 'anthropological' direction itself. Fending off accusations of Eurocentrism (a sin of which we anthropologists are well aware), the central institutions committed themselves to a 'Global Strategy' in the 1990s, reaching beyond elite monuments and opening up the list to testimonies of everyday life, migration and transnational connections, and symbols of human-rights achievements. Often in response to non-Euroamerican input, authenticity standards were reformulated and a new category of 'cultural landscapes' – highlighting physical and spiritual interaction with the environment – was installed. More than 50 countries, most from the global South, had their first sites inscribed in the last two decades, subscribing to the attendant discourses and frameworks and adapting them to their own conditions. We wish to explore the consequences of this conceptual and geographic expansion, focusing on key mediators, the discontinuities arising when concepts travel, and the interplay with other interests present around each site. We do so as a discipline sensitive for public appropriations of 'culture' and 'cultural heritage'. And we do so as flesh-and-blood actors influencing the situations we study, mindful that anthropologists have themselves been involved in nominations and the work of World Heritage institutions.

We believe that there is rich potential here for comparison across the sites, elucidating both general trends and case specifics. Our accumulated research experiences, once brought together, will cast new light on a prominent global institution and provide fresh perspectives for the anthropology of heritage and globalisation. While grounded in long-term fieldwork at the sites, contributions should pursue the transnational nexus described as well, using opportunities such as the online availability of much World Heritage documentation.

Ulf Hannerz, leading theorist of global processes, has agreed to comment on all papers; further commentators will be recruited from among specialists in the anthropology of cultural heritage. We expect participants to precirculate their papers and, following on the workshop, revise them for a conference volume by 15 January 2013. For greater coherence, we wish to concentrate on already listed World Heritage sites, so we cannot accommodate proposals dealing with future nominations or with other UNESCO heritage activities such as the 2003 convention for intangible cultural heritage.

Abstracts of proposals (one page) should be sent to both convenors **by 1 March 2012** (contact: brumann@eth.mpg.de , David.Berliner@ulb.ac.be). The Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology will cover travel and accommodation expenses for accepted speakers.