UNDERSTANDING THE USES OF CULTURAL HERITAGE: SOME EXAMPLES FROM ALGERIA

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, for a thing to be, in some sense, useful for one and all is to claim universally the role that it should play in people's lives. Some argue that heritage has different roles as it is conceived as knowledge molded following different meanings. Having all that in mind, this study aims at exploring the nature of heritage, mainly the notion of cultural heritage as 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.It is found in this study that heritage is not simply about material things like objects in a museum, monuments, pyramids, or manuscripts but it is rather about the cultural actions and social meanings inherited in them. Indeed, it is activities of reminiscence and commemoration that make all physical objects valuable.

Keywords

Cultural Heritage, Performance, Locality, Identity, Algeria

1. 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 (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. According to this point of view, cultural heritage is- and so is culture- a time process. It is the creek that flows from the past through the structured path of society, giving it substance and meaning, and its fellows, significance, and purpose.

Many 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.

In Algeria, for instance, the *Kasbah* in Algiers is an old town that has largely been talked about in the media as well as in films, standing as a cultural heritage building (see figure 1).

Figure 1: *Kasbah in Algiers*

(Source: https://www.worldheritagesite.org/list/Kasbah+of+Algiers)

Visiting *Kasbah*'s buildings that rise more condensed and the road tightens, an Algerian would remember the French colonial period and all events that happened at that time in the same

place. So, today's Kasbah is a tool of cultural heritage that represents performances of visiting, handling, understanding, or safeguarding. All these in turn symbolize performances of reminiscence and nostalgia and at the same time reinforce one's Algerianity in the present.

2. 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 regarded as a gathering of several aspects such as the works of singers, actors, comedians, designers, engineers, and builders. Even values that give meaning to life are considered as facets of cultural heritage (UNESCO, 1982, art.6).

Coming across World Heritage documents, the two most leading heritage types, tangible and intangible 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, 2014). 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 (Dekhir, 2019). Yet, this is not to say that heritage is restricted to the past; it cannot be inseparable from the interpretation of heritage in the present (Handler & Linnekin, 1984). Cultural heritage, within this respect, is also a practice of commitment, the performance of saying, and meaning in and for the present (Bagnall, 2003).

In short, cultural heritage comprises both tangible and intangible issues through which the vision of those people meets sense: «*languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, archives and libraries*» (UNESCO, 1982, art. 23). In attempting to reunify the two concepts, I will refer 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, 2003). The classification of intangible heritage within this quotation is more speculative than that in the Intangible Heritage Convention since, in the organization's Intangible Heritage Section, the term covers activities on endangered languages (UNESCO, 2006a), human knowledge, and talents. The classification relating to human treasures goes beyond the aforementioned definition and therefore offers an additional category labeled as human individuals or heritage-bearers (Rudolff, 2006).

3. The Uses of Cultural Heritage

This section aims to shed light on the 'work' that heritage does. For this work then, I will refer to cultural heritage as defined 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, the term is extremely significant for all people. In some places, it is linked to indigenous people. Still, residences, objects, and performances that are culturally important enrich all people's experiences by offering deep links to spaces, cultural or ethnic groups. It affords connotations to people's lives and is, thus, an important component of identity.

3.1. Heritage as Performance

To understand the concept of heritage and the roles it plays; we should refer to the different discourses the term may frame; heritage is not an 'object' only in that no object has the value of heritage unless it is being used. In the words of Smith (2006): «*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 is manifested by taking on whispered voices in the visitor's talk as he/she stays inside *quobba* (see figure 2).
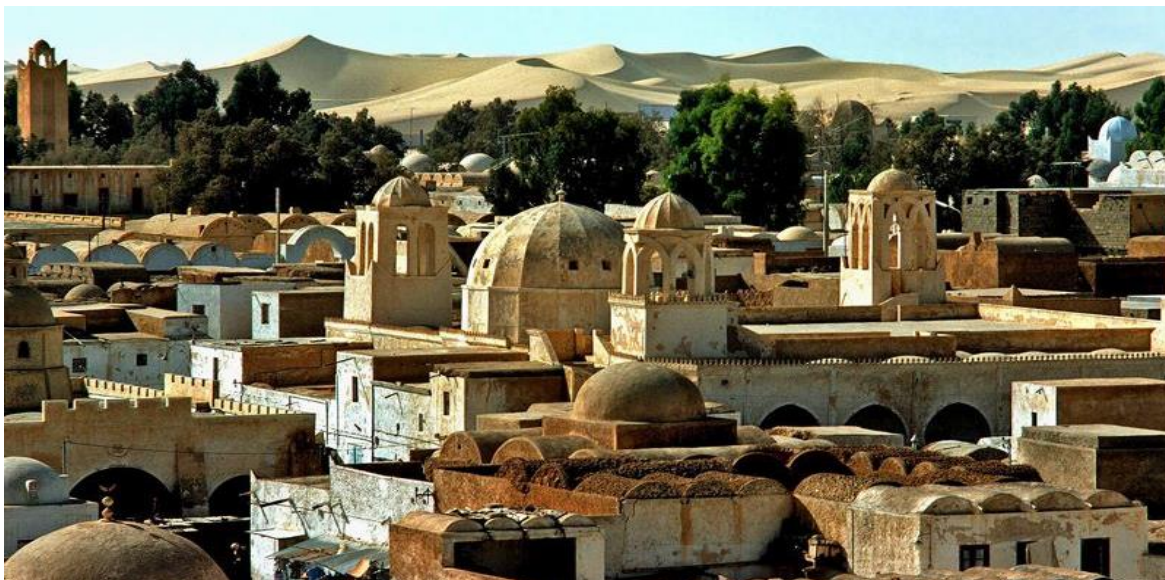
Figure 2: Quobbas in the Region of El-Oued,

(Source:https://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Africa/Algeria/Inland/El_Oued/el_oued/photo107755 5.htm)

In Spain, however, heritage performance may be manifested through the practice of some acts such as Pamplona Bull Run, in the yearly Spanish festival. Whatever the setting, heritage events become enactment as they demonstrate the objects or actions that are significant in identifying identity.

3.2. Heritage as Locality

The idea of heritage as performance is linked to the idea of place. In other words, it invokes an idea about the tangibility of heritage. Yet, it indicates an interrelationship between the setting and events that take place there. In this way, the place is so important to the meaning of heritage, in the same way, performances are important to heritage.

In Algeria for example, when looking at the monument shrine of the martyr (*Makam Eshahid*) (see figure 3), 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, the place and the performances that occurred there are so important.

Figure 3: *The Monument of Makam Eshahid,*
(Source:https://www.elhiwardz.com/event/204952/attachment/%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A7%D9 %85-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%AF-2)

What this tells us is that for a setting or locality to be called heritage it necessitates dealing with socio-cultural and socio-political needs of the present-day or, to put it differently, it needs to be a cultural tool in the heritage process (Smith, 2006, p. 305).

3.3. Heritage and Identity

According to Rizzo & Mignosa (2013), one of the strong points of heritage is that most heritage objects for instance stones, pyramids, tower houses, or castles can be place-bound in the sense that they contribute to the identification of people with specific places, they become indistinguishably involved in local place images, identities, and economic geographies.

Most importantly perhaps is the claim of Crouch & Parker (2003) who emphasize temporal and substantial authority that heritage has in the building of identities, especially if the heritage in question has been recognized as authentic through the investigation considerations of specialists in the field.

Indefinitely, one would not completely conjure knowledge about heritage as the formation of a connection between heritage as an idea and the actual heritage, but «*rather as a chain of experiences woven into the tissue of life*» (Latour, 2007). Object and subject are not the appropriate themes of departure for any debate about knowledge, but they are somewhat produced as the result of that knowledge (Vercellone, 2008). Thus, the creation of cultural heritage as a social entity is done through an analysis of the chains of experiences pushing out many different managers to move from an awkward to a harmonized movement i.e; the co-operation between brains (Architects, hand workers, entrepreneurs, anthropologists, writers, educators, singers, politicians, tourists …etc.) All of the agents mentioned above contribute to the formation of the interactive sequence of capabilities that allows the creation of heritage (González, 2015).

To reiterate, heritage is a cultural process, it can be inferred otherwise according to different cultures at different times; therefore, heritage is about disremembering and remembering the past (Graham, 2002). In this sense, heritage defines our cultural identity.

In Algeria, for instance, ancestral monuments and historical sites like *Jedars* in the south of *Tiaret* city in Algeria (see figure 4), are Berber tombs. These pre-Islamic tombs date from Late Antiquity and are believed to have been used for obtaining divinatory dreams by sleeping in the neighborhood of the tomb. «*This is one aspect of 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, 2006).

Figure 4: The Sites of Jedars,

(Source: https://www.visa-algerie.com/les-pyramides-de-tiaret-un-lieu-meconnu-qui-garde-son-mystere/)

3.4. Tangible and Intangible Heritage

It is worth mentioning that the importance of heritage studies has significantly enlarged in different disciplines to the extent that some scholars have acknowledged and appraised 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 physical maintenance for the latter, while the latter helps in the safeguarding and protection of the former (Lekakis, 2015).

Emphasizing the notion of heritage as a set of meanings is made more intricate by Fairclough (2009, p. 36-37), who further identifies cultural heritage as a blend of *asset and resource*. As for the former, heritage is connoted as being remained unchanged, like money in a bank. As for the latter, heritage implies that the object in question needs to be utilized; although in this manner it might be eroded or even consumed. 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 (2006) who maintained:

« *Whether we are dealing with traditional definitions of 'tangible' or 'intangible' representations of heritage, we are engaging with a set of values and meanings, including such*

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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 the whole of heritage as immaterial, one thing stands before our eyes; that is the *effect* of heritage. This concept has been first introduced by Thrift (2004), 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, Pătru-Stupariu, Pascu, & Bürgi (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.

3.5. Heritage as Past and Present

Concerning the interrelationship between the communities and their landscapes or places, one should refer to such a link between the past and the present of a given landscape. One cannot understand the past exclusively through itself; communities' present constantly redrafts the sense of their past. Within this respect, Urry (1996) 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 re-forming is achieved through the actions of memorizing and recalling within the context of interactions between people and their environments, including heritage sites and museums (Davison, 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, 1992). The culturally-historical spaces like *M'zab* valleys (*El-Atteuf*), the oldest of all towns in *Ghardaïa* (see figure 5), 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 & Carli, 1998), yet, paradoxically, at the same time, «*the architecture of these traditional spaces express a modern rigor*» (Cataldi, Racid, & Selva, 1996).

Figure 5: *M'zab Valleys in Ghardaïa,*

(Source: http://www.destination360.com/africa/algeria/m-zab-valley)

Since the 1990 law on associations, thousands of Algerian associations have been created to protect the country's cultural heritage. Association *Abou Ishak Ibrahim Tefayech pours le Service du Patrimoine*, a religiously inspired Association, organized to commemorate the works and manuscripts of the *Ibadite Sheikh Tefayech*, to preserve the heritage of the *M'zab* region of Algeria, and to improve civic education and knowledge about the past (Northey, 2017). Following Smith (2006, p. 46), the sites and the country as a whole are *aide-mémoires*; in the sense that they play a reminder role in addition to affording contextual, location, and the meaning of juncture for those who visit them and receive socio-cultural meaning and reminiscences. In other words, the presence of all these ingredients together would result in heritage.

4. Conclusion

Much of what has been said here about heritage stems out from different discourses of heritage. As the study illustrates, heritage plays several roles and denotes many identifications which greatly puzzle any judgment of its usage. The process of defining the concept ranges from physical objects to meanings and values peculiar to those objects and lately to *effects* aiming at the conservation of identities. In other words, the creation of cultural heritage is considered a

societal object that is an intricate procedure that involves chains of experiences and values in life. At the same time, cultural heritage is considered an amalgam of place understood as an abstract locality of thoughts – constructed by the community's actions to preserve identities. In response, Place - in the words of Heidegger (1989) - is brought into being by human beings and it offers us to dwell in it. This enables us to conceive heritage as performance.

It is worth stressing that like any piece of research, this study is influenced by some limitations, one of which is that this research analyses a non-quantified issue like the uses of cultural heritage that have been deduced in the literature in diversified environments. Therefore, the current research could not investigate or prove the role of cultural heritage statistically as it was difficult for the researcher to obtain data from a research sample within the pandemic crisis.

It is worth mentioning too that though this study has referred qualitatively to the main uses of cultural heritage with examples from Algeria, there is still a need for further quantitative research that would utilize a questionnaire and/or interview to elicit information about social, political, and economic values of cultural heritage in the country.

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