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Transacting UNESCO World Heritage: gifts and exchanges on a global stage

With the burgeoning research into global heritage, particularly in the work of UNESCO, this paper discusses recent developments and implications of decisions taken by the World Heritage Committee in their implementation of the 1972 Convention. While the World Heritage programme is experiencing a fiscal crisis, significant challenges also stem from sovereign states, non-governmental agencies and other actors. This paper argues that World Heritage decision-making processes have transformed the inscription of sites into exchange values that mobilise ancillary effects in other domains driven by economic and political imperatives. The transactional nature of World Heritage is traced across three scales: the World Heritage process itself, the properties and the participants.

Key words UNESCO World Heritage, gift-giving and exchange, conservation, international organisations, bureaucracy

UNESCO really is, above all, a forum or market-place, an elaborate machine contrived to present, on a succession of concurrent stages, almost all the nations of the world addressing each other, at great length, but by procedures which ensure that genuine dialogue is ruled out. (Hoggart 2011: 99)

Introduction

This paper describes how deliberations over UNESCO's 1972 World Heritage Convention are increasingly reflective of the global marketplace where the inscription of heritage properties is prized more for its capillary transactional potentials than its conservation values. World Heritage Committee debates over specific cultural and natural properties, their inscription on the World Heritage List, their protection or even destruction, are becoming largely irrelevant in substance, yet highly valued in state-to-state negotiations and exchanges of social capital. I suggest that such sites operate as transactional devices whereby cultural recognition both masks and enables a multifarious network of political and economic values. Transaction here refers not only to the process of 'doing business', the exchange of commodities and services in the World Heritage arena, it also encompasses the reciprocal influences and communicative activities between parties. In this international arena today, the gloss of neutrality and disinterest scarcely conceals the sovereign self-interests, calculation and strategic gifting at work (Bourdieu 1980; Mauss 1990). Gift exchange is a euphemism (Bourdieu 1980), a fiction of disinterest that masks strategy and calculation (Osteen 2013) in this setting, using a set of contingent practices using the objects of culture and cultural diplomacy. In view of UNESCO's propensity for protocol and documentation,

transaction is also defined as the published records of meetings and thus describes effectively the setting for this analysis.

Today UNESCO's World Heritage programme faces unprecedented challenges in terms of escalating politicisation, threats to credibility and procedure, as well as its most severe funding crisis to date, but the desire for recognition and inscription has only increased as more and more governments lobby to have their sites listed (Meskell 2013). The notion that World Heritage properties are commodities that mobilise national and international flows is not surprising. The use of the word 'property' in official UNESCO discourse makes that evident from the outset, and it also anchors sites firmly within nation states. UNESCO recognition offers the possibility of direct tourist and other economic revenues for national governments as well as the private sector, though this occurs unevenly if one considers the situation in many developing nations. But beyond such immediate returns World Heritage decision-making itself has transformed heritage places into emblematic and reflective values that mobilise supplementary tangible benefits in other domains. Transactional heritage is thus transformative, leveraging and consolidating relationships, strategic partnerships and worldviews that are determined by economic, ethnic, religious or geographical imperatives. Increasingly, it is the *process* of inscription itself, particularly the political alliances and, by extension, forms of gifting from one party to another, that reveals how the World Heritage process is entangled in an ecology of exchange and reciprocity.

The desire for World Heritage and hence the success of the 1972 Convention could ultimately lead to its undoing, since the economic revenues, the national prestige and international bargaining potential that such recognition bestows has eclipsed the very substance and conservation of sites. There is some irony here given that across heritage studies and archaeology more generally, many practitioners have long argued that 'heritage' is not a thing but rather a process, anchored in people's relationships to place and, as such, cannot be separated out or detached from social and political processes (Smith 2006; Hodder 2010). Perhaps that is exactly what we are witnessing within the World Heritage Committee today, given that properties operate as national 'objects' embedded, as they are, within an international 'process'. One might say that the exchange value of World Heritage is at a premium.

This paper includes three related scales of analysis starting with the World Heritage process, followed by the World Heritage properties and World Heritage players. Along with other anthropologists researching UNESCO, the UN and the complex political negotiations therein (Wright 1998; Eriksen 2009; Hafstein 2009; Bendix 2013; Müller 2013), my research traces how the process of creating patrimony has global impacts, albeit in often unexpected and unpredictable ways that are typically occluded in official agendas. International bureaucracies help nation states to perform their 'transparency' – a word used more and more in World Heritage Committee meetings – that typically hides as much as it reveals (Müller 2013). In the interdisciplinary outpouring of heritage research, a significant proportion now addresses the constitution and corollary effects of UNESCO World Heritage (Brumann 2014). Anthropologists, archaeologists and heritage specialists have studied the globalising strategies of World Heritage (Turtinen 2000; Labadi 2007; Berliner and Bortolotto 2013; Winter 2014a), issues of governance, diplomacy and bureaucracy (Schmitt 2009, 2012; Brumann 2012; Luke and Kersel 2013; Nielsen 2013; Winter 2014b), the political economy of culture and rights (Berliner 2012; Logan 2012a; De Cesari 2014), as well as the cultural economics of World Heritage designation (Frey and Pamini 2009; Bertacchini and Saccone 2012; Frey *et al.* 2013).

My own project began in 2010 with expert meetings at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris followed by more extensive fieldwork since 2011 in conjunction with my official observer status at annual World Heritage Committee sessions. Observers must apply for authorisation to the World Heritage Center and are admitted under Rule 8.3 of the Committee's Rules of Procedure and typically include representatives of international governmental organisations, international non-governmental organisations, non-governmental organisations, permanent observer missions to UNESCO and non profit-making institutions that have activities in fields covered by the 1972 Convention. Since 2011 I have also conducted interviews with members of the UNESCO secretariat, officials from all three Advisory Bodies (ICOMOS, IUCN, ICCROM),¹ ambassadors and members of national delegations, archaeologists and conservators involved in site nominations, as well as evaluators, consultants and academics involved in all levels of World Heritage. This work has also taken me to Peru, India, Turkey, France, Cambodia and Myanmar to follow UNESCO's mission in-country, asking how and why specific nations seek and later utilise inscription. To avoid any conflict of interest, I have not accepted any official role in missions that evaluate World Heritage properties, nor do I have a formal affiliation with UNESCO. Alongside in-depth interviews and long-term participation, I analyse documents archived in Paris as well as extensive UNESCO web-based materials. In collaborative work with cultural economists based at the University of Turin, I incorporate econometric analyses to trace the international political pacting, economic interests and voting blocs that shape today's World Heritage agenda. Being trained as an archaeologist, I am concerned with discerning long-term patterns and evidence of change that can be observed by calibrating between documentary materials, historical accounts, statistical records, interviews with a wide cross-section of players, observation and participation. Previously I have conducted archaeological and/or ethnographic fieldwork at World Heritage sites including Luxor/Thebes (Egypt), Mapungubwe (South Africa) and Çatalhöyük (Turkey), with a sustained interest in the intersection of archaeology, heritage and politics. My position as both archaeologist and ethnographer offers a particular vantage to trace the transactional webs of exchange.

Background

UNESCO is an intergovernmental organisation aimed at fostering peace, humanitarianism and inter-cultural understanding that developed out of the universalist aspirations for global governance originally envisaged by the League of Nations (Valderrama 1995; Stoczkowski 2009; Singh 2011). Established after the end of World War II in the wake of devastation and atrocity, UNESCO's task was to promote peace and 'change the minds of men', primarily through education and promotion of cultural diversity and understanding. It should be noted that UNESCO's mission stemmed from a specifically European organisation called the International Committee on Intellectual Co-operation (ICIC), which operated between 1936 and 1946 (Droit 2005;

1 ICCROM was set up in 1959 as an intergovernmental organisation dedicated to the conservation of cultural heritage and is only involved in State of Conservation reporting in a limited manner. ICOMOS was founded in 1965 and provides evaluations of cultural properties including cultural landscapes proposed for inscription on the World Heritage List. Both ICOMOS and the IUCN are international, non-governmental organisations. The IUCN was established in 1948 and provides technical evaluations of natural heritage properties and mixed properties and, through its worldwide network of specialists, reports on the State of Conservation of listed properties.

Hoggart 2011), rather than a direct offshoot from the United Nations. Founded by prominent figures such as Henri Bergson, Marie Curie, Albert Einstein and Thomas Mann, the ICIC was established to create a ‘state of mind conducive to the peaceful settlement of international problems within the framework of the League of Nations’ (Valderrama 1995). Given this history of recognition and reconciliation, the long-standing ethos of cultural diversity, and protection of minority lifeways, it is not surprising that UNESCO has emerged as the only structural avenue to global governance and promotion of the world’s heritage. Within the UN, UNESCO may not be as powerful as high-profile international peacekeeping or development programmes; instead it is perceived as the cultural arm, the visionary agency and the ‘ideas factory’ for the larger organisation (Pavone 2008).

Recognising the increasing threats to natural and cultural sites coupled with traditional conservation challenges, the 1972 World Heritage Convention was established as a new provision for the international and collective protection of heritage with ‘outstanding universal value’ (Titchen 1996; Jokilehto and Cameron 2008; Labadi 2013). The World Heritage Centre was established in 1992 to act as the Secretariat and coordinator within UNESCO for all matters related to the Convention. The Centre organises the annual sessions of the World Heritage Committee (the Committee) and provides advice to States Parties in the preparation of site nominations. The Centre, along with the Advisory Bodies to the 1972 Convention, also organises international assistance from the World Heritage Fund and coordinates both the reporting on the condition of sites and the emergency action undertaken when a site is threatened. The two major Advisory Bodies to the Convention are the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Their international experts conduct site evaluations and monitoring missions, communicating their findings in reports and presentations at international meetings.

UNESCO, like other UN agencies, has extended its reach beyond the role of an intermediary in the World Heritage arena by adopting the role of ‘strong broker’ or ‘objective broker’ (Müller 2013). Its representatives claim a superior normative and technical authority based on their knowledge and competence. However, as an inter-governmental agency, States Parties that are signatories to the Convention are in fact the most powerful decision-makers in World Heritage (Askew 2010), particularly those nations that have representation on the Committee. The Committee is made up of 21 States Parties, elected at a General Assembly, that serve a four-year term. Today state-appointed ambassadors and politicians, rather than cultural or natural heritage experts, dominate their national delegations. In accordance with Article 8 of the 1972 Convention, the Committee is the actual body responsible for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention. It has the final say on whether a property is inscribed on the World Heritage List. The Committee also examines reports on the State of Conservation (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/>) of already inscribed properties and asks States Parties to take action if it is deemed necessary. It also takes decisions about the inclusion or deletion of properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/danger/>).

The World Heritage process

‘UNESCO, in the minds of millions of people around the world, represents a vision, an idea, often embodied in such symbols as the World Heritage Brand.’ With these words,

Katalin Bogyay, then President of UNESCO's General Conference, addressed the 37th session of the World Heritage Committee on 16 June 2013 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Her statement reflects the reality of the Convention as it stands today: UNESCO is largely synonymous with a vision of global heritage encapsulated by the brand. Indeed, I suggest that the Convention's original mandate to protect and conserve the world's most important cultural and natural heritage places has been largely replaced by an international desire for securing and mobilisation of that brand. Attaining World Heritage status and recognition, and keeping it, is now the primary task of the Committee and has become, literally and figuratively, business as usual. The notion of UNESCO branding has been studied from various disciplinary perspectives (Hall and Piggin 2003; Ryan and Silvano 2009; Poria *et al.* 2011), most often through tourism, site management and international politics (Winter 2007, 2011; Salazar 2010). However, research might also be focused on the process itself as a system of diplomatic exchanges and symbolic gifts between nations and their representatives, between members of UNESCO's Advisory Bodies and their cohort of evaluators, as well as between individuals and consultants who operate within these different networks.

Comparatively speaking, UNESCO would seem to be a low-profile UN agency dealing largely with the cultural sector. However, securing a seat on the 21-member World Heritage Committee is seen by many States Parties as one way to effectively raise their profile across the UN more generally. Members of one influential delegation in the Asia-Pacific region with a long history of Committee participation explained that membership offered an effective mechanism to garner support for their UN Security Council bid. They recounted how offering vocal support for World Heritage nominations by powerful nations like China might further assist in this regard. The World Heritage arena offers a soft option in the realm of international influence underpinned by cultural diplomacy (Luke and Kersel 2013). Moreover, several studies show that a developing country with a seat on the UN Security Council significantly enhances flows of aid from the US as well as credits from the IMF and World Bank: the driving effect being vote buying (Dreher *et al.* 2009; Flues *et al.* 2010). These cross-sectoral alliances and arrangements can be observed across the UN, the World Bank and the IMF.

Perhaps due to these diplomatic exchanges and wider benefits of Committee membership, a scandal emerged in 2013 when no African country was elected to the World Heritage Committee in the new cycle (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/election-reflection2014/>). As one ambassador explained when we met in Paris, the result simply reflected which nations were most effective at winning votes, in this case Asia. One third of the current seats come from this region alone. The exclusion of Africa has caused much consternation among other nations, expressed most notably from the global South and Scandinavia. The stakes for Committee membership are indeed high. Unsurprisingly, there is an acknowledged correlation between the countries represented on the Committee and the location of properties successfully inscribed on the World Heritage List. From 1977 to 2005, in 314 nominations, 42% benefitted those countries with Committee members during their mandate. The proportion decreased to 16.7% in 2006 and increased to 25% in 2008, increased again to 42.9% in 2010 (UNESCO 2011) and dropped to 27% in 2012. This is striking when one considers that the 21 Committee members comprise only about 11% of the total number of signatories to the Convention.

Recently there have been concerted efforts to prohibit nomination of properties by States Parties currently serving on the Committee, but the Committee itself has vetoed

this recommendation. This clear conflict of interest issue is raised each year with nations like Finland, Switzerland and Estonia advocating abstention during membership, whereas Turkey, Russia, India, China and Japan, to name a few, take the opposite position. Jad Tabet, the delegate from Lebanon, addressed his colleagues during the 2014 Committee sessions in Doha: ‘millions of people throughout the world are following what we are doing here, what are they going to say. They are going to say what these people are interested in are their own interests, they want to put sites on the List and that’s all, they’re going to go against the opinion of the General Assembly, go against what the Convention is really about...’. One of the prime incentives for serving on the Committee is the enhanced capacity to vigorously argue for, and thus ensure, a successful site inscription for one’s country. It is generally acknowledged by many national delegates and others that if the recommendation for abstention were adopted, many nations would be less willing to serve on the Committee. During informal introductions during a coffee break in Doha, I observed an earnest Scandinavian delegate explain to another representative that they would not be nominating sites during their term. He, on the other hand, explained that this was precisely the reason that his country had joined the Committee.

UNESCO claims that the impact of the Convention has grown over time, inspiring greater involvement by governments, communities and individuals, universities, foundations and the private sector (Bandarin 2007). From a more realistic perspective, the rush to inscribe sites on the List has become a political tool for nations to bolster their sovereign interests, using global patrimony as a pawn (Meskell 2012). With the dominance of strategic political alliances, the World Heritage Committee has increasingly challenged the technical approaches and decision-making capability of these bodies over the last decade (Claudi 2011; Jokilehto 2011; Meskell 2012; Meskell *et al.* 2015). Using econometric analyses of decision-making trends within the World Heritage Committee from 2003 to 2013, it is clear that there has been an increasing divergence between the recommendations of the Advisory Bodies and the Committee’s final decision. The period from 2008 onward demonstrates the greatest escalation (Meskell *et al.* 2015). In 2014, some 47% of their recommendations were overturned by the Committee, with a record 81% of nominated sites inscribed on the List, taking the total to 1,007 properties.

In view of these developments, UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova made an unprecedented plea to the Committee for more considered adherence to UNESCO’s mission:

The credibility of the inscription process must be absolute at all stages of the proceedings – from the work of the advisory bodies to the final decision by the States Parties, who hold the primary responsibility in this regard. Today, criticism is growing, and I am deeply concerned. I believe we stand at the crossroads, with a clear choice before us. We can continue to gather, year after year, as accountants of the World Heritage label, adding more sites to the list, adhering less and less strictly to its criteria. Or we can choose another path. We can decide to act and think as visionaries, to rejuvenate the *World Heritage Convention* and confront the challenges of the 21st century. World Heritage is not a beauty contest. (Bokova 2012: np)

Advisory Body evaluators have limited categories of recommendations that they can make: Inscription, Referral, Deferral and Non Inscription (WHC.10/34.COM/

INF.8B4). Inscription is straightforward and has rarely been challenged by the Committee in the Convention's history. A Referral entails some minor additional information is needed from a State Party to supplement the original nomination. Deferral requires more significant additional information from, or actions required by the State Party, and a new mission to the property. The decision not to inscribe means that the dossier is, in theory, closed and cannot be presented again to the Committee. Members of the Advisory Bodies describe these designations as helpful tools whereby states are empowered to work in conjunction with the World Heritage Center toward greater preparedness for site nomination and potential inscription. States Parties, however, perceive any decision that is not an inscription as a 'poisoned gift' – a term that delegates have used repeatedly with some disdain throughout recent Committee meetings (Meskell 2012; Hølleland 2013). The delaying of inscription for further revision is regarded as a highly subjective and spurious criticism directed at countries that have already spent thousands of dollars, sometimes millions in the case of China, and years of work preparing dossiers.

The annual World Heritage Committee sessions take place for 10 days each year, days filled with meetings, side-meetings, events and receptions as well as endless diplomacy, lobbying and political negotiation (Hafstein 2009; Brumann 2012; Fresia 2013). During the last few years, and especially after the meetings in Brasilia (*The Economist* 2010), many observers argue that state agendas now eclipse substantive discussions of the merits of site nominations in tandem with issues raised over community benefits, the participation of indigenous stakeholders, or threats from mining, exploitation or infrastructural development (Askew 2010; Meskell 2011; Logan 2012a, 2012b; Willems 2014). Indeed, several prominent ambassadors on the Committee explained in our conversations that the real focus of sessions is solely site inscription and branding, and that only those three days of decision-making out of the ten were paramount. Inscription, I was told by an experienced politician, offers great potential, especially for developing nations. In contexts like that of her country, quibbles over conservation or management from external experts found little resonance with 'the man in the street'. She made it very clear to me that times had changed and World Heritage also needed to adapt. The ancillary effects of listing, indeed the supplements to heritage, according to these diplomats, outweigh the outmoded, Eurocentric notions of universal value, authenticity and integrity (Labadi 2013).

Another notable trend is that collective decision-making and the over-arching responsibility for the conservation of sites, once the remit of national delegates with heritage expertise, has been replaced by excessive backstage lobbying by politicians (Hoggart 2011; Cassel and Pashkevich 2013) and the bargaining power of nations with geo-political alliances based on geography, religion, trade partnerships or anti-Western sentiment. Thus the ideal of collective responsibility, both ethical and fiscal, once so central to the ideals of the Convention, is losing ground. States Parties petition aggressively for support before and during the meetings and international alliances are cemented prior to properties being presented for debate, often through the prohibited practice of circulating signature sheets. As a type of immediate reciprocity, the practice of garnering signed amendments *before* the opening of the debate on site nomination was officially prohibited in the 2010 external audit (WHC-11/35.COM/9A). One national delegation complained bitterly to me that they had to write formally to all 21 States Parties before the meeting to lobby for inscription, without any qualms about engaging in this unsanctioned practice. At those meetings they then enlisted four

nations from their region on the Committee to challenge the ICOMOS recommendation that inscription be postponed and were ultimately successful in their bid for listing.

Since members of the World Heritage Committee are, first and foremost, state representatives, they are free to pursue their own national interests, maximise power, push their economic self-interest and minimise their transaction costs (Pavone 2008). These national imperatives and economic necessities are more binding than any ethical norms. Given the economic interests at stake and the presumed prestige listing bestows, States Parties are increasingly pushing properties for inscription that, in the opinion of the IUCN and ICOMOS, do not appear to warrant global recognition. The Russian nomination of the Bolgar Historical and Archaeological Complex provides a salient example (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/981>). During the 2012 sessions in St Petersburg, ICOMOS recommended that Bolgar *not* be inscribed on the List because of significant changes to the historic structures following massive consolidation and reconstruction efforts. Additionally, there was new construction at Bolgar and further plans to develop the site for religious tourism. During those same World Heritage meetings, Russia offered to fly delegates to the nearby city of Kazan where it hosted UNESCO's Youth Day, attempting to secure multilateral support for Bolgar's nomination (Meskell *et al.* 2015). The following year a French documentary film (Bentura 2014) revealed the excessive political pressure exerted on other Committee members by the Russian ambassador during the meetings in Phnom Penh. With new media access and live webcasting now covering the Committee sessions, such practices have been captured and transmitted worldwide.

Underpinned by capitalist desires, States Parties rely on international alliances and exchange relationships through their heritage negotiations, while remaining intensely territorial and national in their aspirations for site listing and UNESCO branding. The pretence and performance of the global are actually undercut by intensely statist arrangements and agreements by some nations secured well before the World Heritage Committee meetings each year (WHC-11/35.COM/9A). Successful nominations by State Parties are linked not just to the support of one or two neighbours, but also to a wide array of countries spanning the globe. Moreover, these interdependencies are no longer confined to a single group of countries (e.g. the West or industrialised democracies), but to a diverse range of economic regime types, religions and cultures (Hale and Held 2011). One example of this was with Palestine's first site inscription in 2012, the Church of the Nativity (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1433>, see also De Cesari 2014), which was vocally supported primarily by Christian nations including Russia and France, rather than strictly Middle Eastern delegations. Vocal support of Panama was offered in 2013 by Qatar and South Africa; both countries have no obvious regional or religious connections but have economic ties that centre on the Panama Canal, and soon after trade agreements with those nations were announced (see Meskell 2014). Gift exchanges such as these forge a nexus of obligations between States Parties. Some exchanges involve a 'generalized reciprocity' (Osteen 2013) between states with implicit obligations that may extend indefinitely, while others like the economic agreements cited above proffer more immediate returns. Taking the 'gift out of the commodity is never easy' (Tsing 2013: 21).

In the case of Panama, the government extended paid invitations to the 21 delegations of the World Heritage Committee on three different occasions to visit the Historic District of Panama (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/790>), and many accepted. Members of UNESCO's Secretariat were also invited, but declined and instead

offered to meet in Paris. World Heritage sites, by definition, have always operated within a 'global economy of prestige' (Isar 2011), but what we are witnessing now is the almost transparent scaling up of operations. Excessive and expensive lobbying is *de rigueur*, especially if States Parties and their corporate partners are going to convince Committee members that they can both conserve and capitalise culture simultaneously. At the UNESCO meetings in Cambodia in 2013, executives from Norberto Odebrecht, the Brazilian construction company engaged in a billion dollar contract that threatened the historic site, were part of the Panamanian delegation, two of whom were falsely listed as officials of the National Institute of Culture (Arcia 2013).

Sovereign states can be 'easily resentful' too if their aims are thwarted, as Hoggart (2011) astutely observed. During the 2013 meetings the controversial case of Old Jerusalem (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/148>) became more fractious when a majority vote ended with a draft resolution to send a monitoring mission to assess the situation. Infuriated by their perceived lack of Committee support and breaking with norms of diplomatic protocol, members of the Israeli delegation paced around the auditorium, approached several national delegations including Estonia and Germany, and confronted members of the World Heritage Center seated at the podium. Following the adoption of the resolution, the Israeli representative invoked their close ties to the USA and promised those present that there would be 'devastating ramifications on the future of UNESCO' and that such a decision undermined 'the core values and identity of this organization to an extent that will certainly lead to its ultimate destruction'. Back in the USA, one spokesman for Israel imputed that 'heritage has become war by another means' (Ahren 2013). Here again the decisions over individual properties have become embroiled in larger transactions, exchanges and even threats that States Parties can wield in other, perhaps more overtly political and consequential arenas.

A complex exchange of favours, expectations of reciprocal support and alliance building is widespread throughout the World Heritage arena and is now being more publicly performed in World Heritage Committee sessions. In the 2014 meetings in Doha, another style of practice emerged as normative. While various ambassadors and national representatives admit that considerable coordination between States Parties occurs in advance of Committee meetings, and specific texts are prepared and pre-circulated for presentation, this year the scripting of speeches became even more elaborately orchestrated. Listening to the speakers in turn, it appeared as if a single text for each site nomination had been crafted and then divided between delegations to read out in order: the same obscure phrases were repeated and some terms were clearly culturally unknown and un-pronounceable in several cases. Delegates often struggled to make sense and read aloud the typed script before them: very few managed to speak off the cuff, as has been common practice in previous years. The intense scripting of statements of support for each property now involves the complicity of almost the entire Committee, guaranteeing the decision to inscribe well in advance and ruling out all possibility of dialogue on substantive heritage matters. Paraphrasing Foucault, the conduct of conduct is visibly changing. The evolving complexity of World Heritage transactions entreats collective coordination and participation, leading to new norms and obligations, all underpinned by elements of strategy, calculation and self-interest that are common to both gift and commodity exchange (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992).

World Heritage properties

If the World Heritage process has become inherently transactional, so too has the nature of the sites being nominated and, inevitably, inscribed. I have suggested above that there has been an emptying out of the substance of heritage, leading to a lack of informed debate and a transformation whereby the materiality of things is reduced to their sign value and ultimately to their potential exchange value. In Committee meetings sites have become ciphers. This reduction is, in part, influenced by the manner of their delivery, especially by members of the Advisory Bodies, many of whom present tedious, descriptive, highly specialised accounts of nomination dossiers accompanied by lifeless PowerPoints. The formulaic and proper patterning of language, rather than its meaning, is what populates such meetings (Riles 1998; Hull 2012). Many hundreds of delegates, year after year, sit in dark, windowless, overly air-conditioned auditoriums long into the evenings for many days listening to repetitive bureaucratic procedures, shuffling papers and responding to pressures from their governments or others, lobby groups, NGOs, the media and observers. Perhaps it is not surprising then that many politicians and diplomats are not interested in the presentation of properties: site borders, buffer zones and management plans do little to inspire. One Brazilian delegate put it succinctly when he rebuked the technical priorities of the Advisory Bodies back in 2012, saying that the Committee ‘evaluates sites, not management plans’.

Sites, I have argued, as objects embedded in national specific contexts, become nodal in international diplomatic relations. Things ostensibly create social relations and social cohesion between people through the mechanism of exchange, for the thing itself has an inalienable spirit (Mauss 1990). World Heritage properties are thus transparent vehicles that forge alliances and dependencies. Mauss described this as society paying itself in the false coin of its dream. The 2014 inscription of Myanmar’s first World Heritage site, the Pyu Ancient Cities (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1444>) provides an evocative example. However, the ICOMOS recommendation was for deferral, stating that the criteria for authenticity and integrity had not been met, there had been over-restoration and major reconstruction in places, and there was an urgent need for stabilisation and monitoring. Regional support to overturn the decision came immediately from Malaysia, the Philippines, India, Japan and Vietnam. Significantly, most delegates spoke about Pyu being important as Myanmar’s first World Heritage inscription, rather than addressing the merits of the sites themselves. Japan, Croatia, Germany, Algeria and the Philippines all underlined that Pyu should be inscribed due to this ‘firstness’. The Polish delegate was alone in questioning the dossier, later stating that ‘we have to provide our decision on the scientific evaluation which should be based on scientific research’, partly in response to the weight of sentiment in the Committee. Indeed the Committee’s decision to inscribe Pyu had little to do with its ancient or archaeological components and more about Myanmar’s participation in world government, its nascent democracy and development (see also Logan 2008; Philp 2009), and the timing of this international recognition, all underpinned by the gift of good will. Myanmar was being rewarded for transitioning out of isolation and becoming a member of the club.

Ironically, some Advisory Body members involved in the recommendation to defer inscription were visibly moved by the final decision. Despite the ideal of neutrality (Hoggart 2011), some experts appeared highly invested and emotional: everyone spoke about the critical importance of the listing in terms of timing, government perceptions

of the UN and how this first foray might figure in the future of a democratic Myanmar. The specificity of the Pyu Cities themselves seemed peripheral, a series of archaeological footprints that testify to ancient settlement, sidelined by the supplemental force of recognition and entry into a new set of global exchanges. New forms of multilateral cooperation, obligation, reciprocity and dependency were set in motion. Sites like Pyu provide the vehicle through which such gifts can be extended, in the hope of other returns in future. In this rush to inscribe (Meskell 2012), heritage sites have become thing-like: their mattering is not in their physicality but in their possibilities for circulation beyond culture to expanding global networks.

The spirit of the gift was also captured in other rhetorics during World Heritage site nominations in Doha. The Iranian site of Shahr-i Sokhta (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1456>), a prehistoric archaeological settlement known for its ancient trade connections, was described by States Parties and Committee delegates alike as an exemplar of a peaceful past and thus the promise of a future peace in the region. Qhapaq Ñan, the Andean road system created by the Inka civilisation and submitted by five nations (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1459>) was held up by Committee members as a model of peaceful cooperation, while no mention was made of the long-standing indigenous protests in Argentina opposing UNESCO inscription (Korstanje and Azcárate 2007; Angelo 2014). Each year a particular discourse is unofficially adopted by the Committee that gains traction during the meetings as the momentum of State Party interventions builds. In previous years I have witnessed impassioned Committee-adopted themes such as sustainable development or transparency: in 2014 the mantra of world peace and intercultural understanding held sway.

As a new member to the Committee, the State Party of Turkey repeatedly used this gift of peace to overturn the Advisory Bodies' unfavourable recommendations into successful inscriptions, particularly for Turkish and Middle Eastern properties. In the case of Erbil Citadel in Iraq (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1437>), Turkey argued forcefully that UNESCO's 'mandate was to promote peace through culture ... we have approached a critical stage in the case of Iraq' and given the current turbulent state of affairs in the region there was every reason to support inscription. With the site of Historic Jeddah in Saudi Arabia (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1361>) slated for deferral by the Advisory Bodies, Turkey argued that 'it is high time that UNESCO and the United Nations moves from ... the "clash of civilizations" and clash of religions to bridging between civilizations and religions'. With the Turkish nomination of Bursa (<http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1452>), the trope of a 'clash of civilizations' reappeared. The Turkish Ambassador contended that World Heritage should be bridging between cultures, thus bringing greater the understanding, 'the more heritage we endorse, the more understanding we have between nations', he stated. Hence the more sites inscribed, the closer this possibility becomes. This amounted to a 'different message than previous years'. Sites then become gifts, objects and tokens that garner and bestow benefits, developments and ultimately, world peace.

How could such gifts be refused? During the 2014 sessions Committee members frequently invoked Director General Bokova's calls (Bokova 2014a, 2014b, 2014c) for peace during recent conflicts in Mali, Syria and Iraq, as well as citing the original mandate of UNESCO itself rising from of the ashes of World War II to promote peace, tolerance and intercultural understanding. By using the language of peace, the Committee could co-opt UNESCO's originary *raison d'être* for their own strategic ends, for international political connection and solidarity through successful site listing. Sites

too are pawns, emblems or tokens that leverage other things in ever-widening circuits of economic and political power. World Heritage properties and the very process of inscribing them produce a dynamic market place for international trade and exchange. When the 1972 Convention came into force the motivation was to conserve imperilled sites through international assistance, whereas the globalising effects of conservation today generates far-reaching corollary rewards in other seemingly unrelated arenas.

World Heritage players

UNESCO's annual Committee meetings are now open to the world's media and a growing number of observers and have come to resemble Hoggart's description of an international marketplace more and more each year. Moreover, using official UNESCO records we can track the number of delegates sent by their governments to the Committee meetings each year and by each electoral group (Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America and Latin America and the Caribbean). While only 35 delegates took part at that first meeting in 1977, some 794 officials were sent by their governments to attend World Heritage Committee sessions in 2014. This year the Asia and Pacific region sent more people than any other, some 291 representatives mostly coming from East Asian nations.

Several thousand people attend the meetings to do business, whether for their government, international agency, NGO, consultancy firm, university or just themselves. While the Committee sessions themselves feature scripted performances of protocol with raised nameplates, timed interventions, points of order and diplomatic exchanges, quite the reverse is true of the coffee breaks, buffet lunches and receptions. The exchange of business cards, brochures and books, emblems and gifts is constant. Business cards are a must and widely distributed in the hope of future contact and contract. The circulation of glossy brochures, booklets and flyers has also proliferated, from a meagre assemblage in 2011 to hundreds of highly coloured and detailed offerings in 2014 from States Parties, NGOs, companies and consultants, and of course UNESCO. The circulation of gifts, in a variety of forms, is also commonplace. Each year UNESCO provides all registered participants with a conference bag, USB drive, pen and paper all emblazoned with World Heritage emblems. This year one Committee member proudly produced an expensive pen, indicating to me the Montblanc designer brand with obvious delight. The pen was a gift from a delegate from a poor nation and he compared its monetary value with the array of rather tawdry souvenirs he had received from considerably wealthier ones. Everyone brandishes their badges, bags, books and gear emblazoned with logos and good will. Receptions and side events organised by States Parties typically give their invitees clearly branded gift bags filled with lavish promotional materials, as well as plying them with food and alcohol – a not insignificant draw card during the meetings since the catered food is often poor quality, repetitive and in scarce supply.

There are nation-to-nation exchanges, with ambassadors and diplomats as intermediaries or stand-ins for their respective countries and sovereign concerns. Government ministers and princesses can be heard talking about their heritage sites one minute, then quickly moving to other orders of business such as setting up reciprocal commercial ventures. Through receptions, informal meetings and even royal audiences I have observed and participated in, individuals use World Heritage as a non-threatening avenue

for cultural diplomacy to initiate discussions about more substantive political matters. Diplomats and delegates might best be understood as brokers, intermediaries between buyer and seller who help to negotiate economic transactions to the satisfaction of both parties (Müller 2013). Despite national borders appearing more porous in the globalising arena of World Heritage, national elites increase their power through the flow of information and cultural products, often through multilateral agreements with other states (Smith 2010). Intergovernmental agencies like UNESCO have only fuelled the longevity and power of the state, giving it further legitimacy on the international stage. One might even conclude that the workings of transactional heritage in fact open diplomatic channels between States Parties and stimulate multilateral cooperation, marking the success of the 1972 Convention in world building efforts.

National elites also exert considerable pressure on members of the World Heritage Center and Advisory Bodies during the meetings and obviously throughout the entire nomination process, sometimes over many years. Members of the Secretariat have expressed their concern over intimidation, excessive lobbying and other unwelcome advances. Some countries are more aggressive than others and feel they have more to win or lose in the scramble for World Heritage, as outlined by an independent Norwegian report (Report by the Norwegian Delegation 2010). Of course, members of the Center are themselves national elites who must balance their own personal attachments for their nation and region against the work of the international civil service (Bjerregaard and Nielsen 2014). This slippage was evident during the Doha meetings when a senior Secretariat official spoke from the podium, encouraged by a European Committee member, on the virtues of a cultural landscape inscription from his own country and its famous wines. Still more uncomfortable, alcohol is a religious prohibition in Qatar, as reiterated in a comment by the Committee Chair, H.E. Mrs Sheikha Al Mayassa Bint Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani. Indeed the World Heritage Center has been plagued with its own national networks of nepotism, as has been discussed at length by many of my interviewees, especially by European countries like Italy and Spain that have historically provided high-profile executives and other Paris-based personnel and given substantial funds to particular programmes.

There is also a growing dissatisfaction toward the Advisory Bodies and their members' extracurricular activities, including running consultancy companies, acting as consultants for particular States Parties, and generally doing business at World Heritage meetings. Some of these individuals retain high-level positions and are also involved in directing these intergovernmental agencies, evaluating dossiers, conducting field missions and reporting. ICOMOS has received considerable criticism for its 'closed club' operation, which many complain poses a risk to the credibility of their evaluations. Others describe them as 'gatekeepers'. This small circle of experts selects evaluators within another small group of experts, often friends and colleagues familiar with the system, to undertake international missions. And although many evaluators complain that they are not really paid to undertake missions other than a *per diem*, the chance to travel to exotic locations, enjoy unique site access, be hosted superbly and be further enmeshed in the international network offers an appealing exchange. In response to broad criticism of assessment practices, a 2010 audit advised that 'ICOMOS undertake a serious reflection about the composition of its World Heritage Panel' in order to address the 'imbalance in the representation of cultural regions', issues of gender parity, questions over the expertise of its members, and the frequent 'presence on the Panel of members belonging to the same country as one of the

properties examined' (Tabet 2010). In his interviews with various stakeholders, Tabet found strong dissatisfaction with ICOMOS and the organisation's opacity and lack of transparency. 'Conflict of interest' was frequently cited as a major concern during my own interviews with almost all World Heritage constituencies, including representatives from UNESCO or the national delegations, evaluators, academics or other experts. Indeed, the very idea of expert assessment might be seen to 'purify' the processes of gifting and commoditisation that surrounds all levels of World Heritage. External evaluators may, or may not, be aware of the 'gifts that have resulted in the proto-commodities they assess' (Tsing 2013: 23), or the impact on future international exchanges.

As with researching any organisation, the longer the period of observation, the more intricately entangled and preferential many of the personal and professional connections become. Expert observers, Müller notes (2013), are rarely disconnected from the issues. Moving between closeness and distance means that people within the organisation expect a certain degree of allegiance and discretion from those with related interests researching the institution. Studying the World Heritage process and players has also inadvertently drawn me into a series of exchanges. Members of the UNESCO Secretariat hope that critical research into the increasing politicisation of the Committee might help hold states accountable and may be useful in forthcoming reviews of the Operational Guidelines. They also request time and labour from my students through unpaid internships as a result of their vast workload and dwindling resources. The requests for such transactions are multifarious and often unexpected. One permanent delegation in Paris sought advice on what strategies might improve their international image. Interlocutors from national delegations often take the opportunity to seek advice and exchange insights because of my archaeological background and as an official observer over the years. This is particularly the case with archaeologists working abroad who are themselves involved in preparing dossiers. Moreover, presenting an academic lecture about the politicisation of UNESCO can itself be transformed into a commodity, a fragment of expertise that can bolster a country's case or help support an argument for listing. Scholarly critique is thus transformed into valuable data on the logics of lobbying. Several colleagues have requested my assistance on behalf of their respective ministries and governments, and while I have politely declined there is always, to some degree, the impossibility of distance and neutrality (Bendix 2013). One cannot easily jettison attachments, national sentiments or commitments to rights and social justice.

Final thoughts

The 1972 Convention World Heritage Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage is considered a near universal instrument for the preservation of global patrimony. Inscription on the List is increasingly regarded a viable driver for development, peace and intercultural dialogue, despite the fact that World Heritage properties have been embroiled in conflicts including Cambodia, Iraq, Mali and Syria. Although the Convention is facing challenges on a number of fronts from its funding to expert credibility, it remains one of the most powerful mechanisms for countries and communities to showcase their particular historical achievements to the wider world. These threats in conjunction with mounting pressure on the World Heritage Center from some members of the World Heritage Committee and other States

Parties comes at the very time when those same nations are pushing more vigorously for site listing. This escalating desire for recognition and inscription has, over the past decade, shaped the World Heritage agenda and recast UNESCO as an agency for international branding rather than international conservation. I have suggested that the entire World Heritage system creates transferable values that mobilise supplemental rewards in other global domains, driven by economic, military, religious and social imperatives (see also Meskell 2011, 2013, 2014). This can be traced throughout the World Heritage process, but also at the level of particular properties and participants within the system. World Heritage sites, their nomination, inscription, monitoring and conservation further leverages and consolidates international relationships, strategic partnerships and worldviews. In these politicised transactions, cultural recognition both masks and enables a multifarious network of exchange values. World Heritage status, achieving it and keeping it, has become big business.

International organisations are not immune to the processes of gifting and exchange that are common to all human societies. While World Heritage sites might represent the ultimate example of inalienable property, the politico-economic transactions surrounding their inscription, mobilisation and conservation are replete with all the trappings of traditional gift and exchange economies. The full force of these negotiations and the ensuing obligations, reciprocities, dependencies and alliances that are set in motion can only be fully apprehended by employing a variety of research methodologies, particularly long-term observation. Many studies of World Heritage are informed by only a weak sense of UNESCO's institutional organisation and inner workings, relying heavily on published texts without fully comprehending the context in which such documents are constituted and by whom (Brumann 2014). When analysing an organisation like UNESCO, we need to track more closely the meetings and participants who drafted the decisions, in what country or office, at what event hosted by what nation and so on (Heinich 2009). Behind the UNESCO label are an expansive suite of institutional actors that constitute World Heritage, including the Paris-based officials, international conservation agencies, national delegations, NGOs and lobby groups, regional experts and consultants, and heritage professionals and national bureaucracies (Berliner and Bortolotto 2013). The institutional setting of heritage conservation should not occlude the people and practices and the materiality of their interactions. Only through sustained engagement with the people and processes that bring global heritage into being (Bendix 2013: 25) can we see the substantive politico-economic transactions at work in decision-making that are commonly construed as merely technical, and thus 'being there' remains essential.

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