Debat

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Constructing, Deconstructing, and Reconstructing Heritage Values Amidst Conflicts

Construir, desconstruir i reconstruir valors patrimonials enmig de conflictes

This paper explores the weaponisation of heritage in a broader scope, going beyond armed conflict. We investigate how cultural heritage's destruction, preservation, reconstruction, and representation can be manipulated or misused across various political and social arenas, particularly in shaping identities or in the erasure of those belonging to others. By examining multiple cases, our paper aims to challenge the notion that cultural heritage is solely a benign, simple, and romanticised construct, instead presenting it as a complex interplay of social and political dynamics.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Heritage weaponisation, Universal values, Contested heritage, Heritage manipulation

Aquest article explora la militarització del patrimoni des d'una perspectiva més àmplia, que va més enllà dels conflictes armats. S'investiga com la destrucció, la conservació, la reconstrucció i la representació del patrimoni cultural es poden manipular o utilitzar indegudament en diversos àmbits polítics i socials, sobretot en la conformació d'identitats o en la supressió de les que pertanyen a altres. Mitjançant l'examen de múltiples casos, el nostre objectiu és qüestionar la noció que el patrimoni cultural és únicament una construcció benigna, simple i romàntica, presentant-lo en canvi com una interacció complexa de dinàmiques socials i polítiques.

Paraules clau: Patrimoni cultural, Militarització del patrimoni, Valors universals, Patrimoni controvertit, Manipulació del patrimoni

Introduction

We often, and usually rightly, have no doubts about the need to protect cultural heritage, even though we debate over what exactly we mean by cultural heritage. The value of protecting cultural heritage is a basic assumption of our modern time. The modern history of protecting cultural heritage, especially architectural works, has relatively recent roots in the 19th century with the preparation of lists of historical monuments, religious complexes, and ancient castles, and gradually became a widespread and international movement in the second half of the 20th century (Jigyasu and Jokilehto 2023: 95). The protection of intangible heritage has followed, to become an increasing concern in the 21st century. We undertake research to try to identify values in the past, including surviving traditional values, and establish what we want to protect for today to pass on to the future.

Our appreciation of the value of cultural heritage has led to the formation of a 'cultural heritage' sector worldwide, aimed at recognising, researching, protecting, introducing, and interpreting cultural heritage at various levels. This has resulted in the creation of various academic fields related to the protection and recognition of cultural heritage, the establishment of numerous national and international institutions, non-governmental organisations, and funding bodies supporting the preservation of cultural heritage. This international movement for the protection of cultural heritage has, at least until recently, been based on the idea that we can recognise universal values in cultural heritage, which we desire to preserve for humanity, not just for a specific group of people (Meskell 2018). The assumption is that everyone should be able to identify and 'benefit' from these values. Undoubtedly, the concept of the universality of cultural heritage finds its highest expression in the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (or simply the World Heritage). However, this is not the only global document that has formulated the concept of the universality of cultural heritage and turned it into a global brand.

The 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (1954 Hague Convention), the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention, and the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003 Intangible Convention) each represent milestones in this evolution, emphasising the universal value of cultural heritage and its protection as a global responsibility.

The 1954 Hague Convention, which resulted from the widespread heritage destruction that happened in the Second World War, marked the first major international and exclusive effort to protect cultural heritage during armed conflict, emphasising the idea that cultural property, regardless of its location, holds universal significance. In its introduction, the Convention stresses that "damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world" (UNESCO 1954).

Building on the foundations laid by the 1954 Hague Convention, in 1972, the World Heritage Convention expanded the scope of protection to include not just cultural heritage endangered by conflict, but also natural and cultural sites of "outstanding universal value"(OUV) threatened by various factors. It introduced the concept of a World Heritage List, recognising sites that hold exceptional importance for humanity as a whole, thus underscoring the universality of both cultural and natural heritage. The principle of OUV suggests that some heritage sites have an intrinsic value so significant that they are deemed important not just for the location or culture to which they belong, but for humanity. This view is central to UNESCO's World Heritage Convention, aiming to protect sites that possess this exceptional global importance (Labadi 2013: 11).

The 2003 Intangible Convention further broadened the formal definition of cultural heritage by focusing on intangible aspects, such as traditions, practices, and expressions. It recognised that intangible cultural heritage is a major source of the world's cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development, emphasising the importance of community involvement in its identification and safeguarding, thus adding a new dimension to the universality of cultural heritage by including the living practices of communities (UNESCO 2003).

These three conventions essentially frame cultural heritage as a universal good, emphasising its importance for fostering understanding, peace, and cooperation among nations. They highlight the role of cultural heritage in promoting dialogue and mutual respect, contributing to the identity and continuity of communities, and enhancing human creativity and diversity. However, they also implicitly acknowledge the potential for cultural heritage to be a source of conflict. This goes beyond the 1954 Hague Convention recognition that cultural property can be endangered in armed conflicts. The emphasis on protection and respect for all cultures in the 1972 and 2003 conventions hints at potential underlying issues of appropriation, misinterpretation, and misuse of cultural heritage. Nevertheless, the explicit dis-

cussion of heritage as a source of disagreement and conflict is not a central theme of these conventions; the focus is more on protection, preservation, and fostering a positive understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity.

These conventions are primarily governmental agreements. The 1954 Hague Convention is based on States Parties that commit to protecting cultural heritage during armed conflict. It establishes legal frameworks and obligations for the signatory states to prevent the destruction or theft of cultural properties in their territories and during conflicts abroad. The 1972 World Heritage Convention also operates on the level of States Parties, and only they can nominate sites within their territories for inclusion on the World Heritage List. The World Heritage Committee, composed of representatives from 21 elected States Parties, oversees the implementation of the convention, including the inscription of sites and the allocation of financial and technical assistance. The 2003 Intangible Convention involves States Parties in its governance and implementation; however, in its Articles 11 and 15, it places a strong emphasis on the role of communities, groups, and individuals in identifying, safeguarding, and transmitting intangible cultural heritage. It requires states to collaborate with communities in the documentation, protection, and promotion of intangible heritage, reflecting a more bottom-up approach compared to the other two conventions.

The concept of endangerment in these three conventions—1954 Hague Convention, 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention, and 2003 Intangible Cultural Heritage—primarily focuses on threats to cultural heritage that originate from external factors. These can include armed conflict, environmental degradation, rapid urbanisation, globalisation, and neglect. Each convention approaches endangerment within the context of its specific focus, whether it be protection during conflict, conservation of outstanding universal values of sites, or safeguarding living traditions.

The endangerment concept in the 1954 Hague Convention is closely tied to the context of armed conflict. It considers damage or destruction due to military actions as the primary threats to cultural heritage. Thus, the threats are viewed as external to the heritage itself, coming from the actions of combatants during conflicts. It recognises that 'cultural property has suffered grave damage during recent armed conflicts and that, by reason of the developments in the technique of warfare, it is in increasing danger of destruction' (UNESCO 1954). The 1972 World Heritage Convention broadens the concept of threat to include natural hazards, environmental changes, unchecked development, and tourism, alongside the potential for neglect or mismanagement: 'cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction not only by the traditional causes of decay, but also by changing social and economic conditions which aggravate the situation with even more formidable phenomena of damage or destruction' (UNESCO 1972). Again, these threats are generally external, impacting cultural and natural heritage from the outside rather than arising from the heritage itself. The threats identified in the 2003 Intangible Convention include globalisation, social transformation, and loss of relevance for younger generations, among others: 'the processes of globalization and social transformation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular owing to a lack of resources for safeguarding such heritage' (UNESCO 2003). While still largely external, the nature of these threats also hints at internal challenges, such as the loss of transmission of knowledge and practices within communities and the phenomenon of intolerance. However, the primary focus remains on external pressures.

This approach, embedded in numerous international conventions, charters, principles, documents, and guidelines, has led to a clear distinction between heritage and non-heritage, treating heritage sites as isolated "islands." Therefore, the primary focus of the conservation movement over the past 150 years has been on mitigating the negative effects of external factors on a limited group of recognised cultural heritage, or those 'islands'. This approach, with the expanding concept of cultural heritage, the democratisation of decision-making processes about heritage, and post-colonial interactions, no longer seems sustainable (Boccardi 2015: 89-90).

These conventions and approaches tend not to address the internal dynamics of cultural heritage that might contribute to its endangerment, such as inherent contestation, weaponisation, or divisive aspects. This approach can be seen as stemming from the conventions' foundational goal to protect and promote cultural heritage as a universal good that contributes to mutual understanding and peace.

The philosophical roots of the concept of universal values in cultural heritage and authenticity in this context can be traced back to several key ideas and traditions in Western philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics that have evolved over centuries (Jokilehto 2006). These ideas collectively contribute to the understanding of cultural heritage as possessing value not only for the originat-

ing culture but for humanity. Key philosophical underpinnings, include those from the Enlightenment and Kantian moral philosophy. Kant's 'Critique of Judgment' posits that aesthetic judgments are universal, a product of common sense and a consensus on the value of art, suggesting that certain experiences and appreciations of art and beauty are universally accessible (Labadi 2013: 12). Kant's concept of the 'categorical imperative,' suggests that certain principles (such as respect for others) are universally valid (Johnson and Cureton 2022). One might argue that respecting and preserving the cultural expressions of any civilisation is a moral duty that applies across cultures, recognising their inherent value to humanity. The romantic movement introduced a deep appreciation for the beauty and sublimity of nature and human creativity at the start of the 19th century. This perspective contributed to seeing cultural and natural sites as possessing inherent worth and being capable of inspiring universal feelings of awe and connection (Shaw 2017), reinforcing the idea that some aspects of cultural heritage carry universal significance, which also contributed to the fascination with ruins, enhancing a romantic mood and its associated sentiments (Zucker 1961). In his theoretical discussion "The Modern Cult of Monuments," originally published in 1903, Austrian art historian Alois Riegl discussed the various and sometimes contradictory meanings and values attributed to monuments, in carrying collective memory (commemorative value) and in current aesthetics or use (present value) (Burgos Vargas and Mora Alonso-Muñoyerro 2022). Monuments also possess value as historic documents revealing insights about past cultures (historic value) and mark the passage of time (age value) (Riegl 1982). While preservation efforts often focus on restoring ruins to protect their historical value, this can conflict with the appreciation of their age value, which finds beauty in their decay (Korsmeyer 2014: 429-430).

Globalisation, facilitated by advancements in transportation and communication, has made the world's cultural heritage more accessible to a worldwide audience. People can now visit heritage sites virtually or physically with greater ease, leading to a broader exchange of cultural experiences and understanding. Both natural and cultural heritage are valuable assets that are readily available—despite maintenance costs, they do not require heavy initial investment to capitalise on. This aspect is especially crucial for less affluent countries, where such heritage might be among the primary sources for creating income. In this context, World Heritage is used as a tourism attraction and advertisement (Long and Labadi 2010: 6-7). Tourist infrastructure often draws the interest of overseas and international funders, presenting a feasible avenue for economic growth in countries with limited local investment capacity. However, as with other such opportunities, a significant portion of the earnings from tourism may be transferred back to the investor's country. Equally problematic can be the tourism itself, whether a direct physical threat to the fabric of ancient sites, or as a cultural disruption to intangible heritage.

The digital era has revolutionised the way cultural heritage is experienced and engaged with, potentially mitigating at least some of the problems of mass tourism. Digital archives, virtual tours, and 3D reconstructions have made it possible for people from all corners of the world to explore and appreciate heritage sites that they might never visit in person, although this can reduce the opportunities to generate income from heritage. Mass media, including television and film, often showcases cultural sites and practices, bringing them into the public eye and shaping collective perceptions of their value. While initiatives like the Google Arts & Culture project document and share cultural and artistic treasures online, fostering a sense of global stewardship, they may also serve as advertisements for unsustainable travel. Social media campaigns can raise awareness and mobilise resources for conservation efforts. Modern technology has facilitated swift and convenient access to heritage resources, encompassing both tangible heritage and digital assets—whether they originate in digital form or are digitised versions of physical items. The data harvested from these can now be utilised to craft detailed 3D models and prints, even of destroyed or contested heritage, significantly enhancing the global accessibility and interaction with cultural heritage; however, the question of who benefits from these digital endeavours remains crucial, especially in the context of contested heritage (Rouhani 2023: 5). And another facet of the digital age involves making culture widely accessible and portraying it as possessing inherent universal values. This translates into digital platforms that disseminate the "universal values" of cultural heritage directly, extending beyond mere concerns for physical preservation.

Universal Values: Culture Wars and Identity Politics

The question of values has been central to 20th-century thinking and criticisms about the universal idea of culture and cultural heritage. It has been acknowledged that values are not static or inherent traits but are rather variable, shaped

by a multitude of factors in constant flux, as described by B. H. Smith (1988: 30). These values, formed and altered by the interactions and collective dynamics of society, reside in collective perception rather than being an intrinsic part of the objects themselves. The process of assigning value to physical sites is thus external, influenced by the varying perspectives and designations of worth from different groups and cultures. Over time, these values shift to reflect the changing ideologies, cultural backgrounds, and geographic settings of the communities that engage with them. The increased recognition of intangible and living heritage changes the dynamic of how heritage is valued – in the same way the latest convention recognises the importance of the communities engaged in this heritage, its value is often internally recognised – an important and under-discussed change to the principles of universal value. Arjun Appadurai's works on modernity and globalisation discuss how cultural elements flow across borders, influencing identities and heritage (1996).

Deconstructing the concept of culture's universality involves exposing the ideological underpinnings that can cause subjugated groups to internalise their own cultural displacement. As Roy (2024) discusses, this critical approach has roots in various intellectual traditions: Marxism's critique of class structures, Nietzsche's challenge to established values, and psychoanalysis's exploration of underlying desires and moral illusions. Such critical frameworks have been further advanced by Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction, which dissects and interprets the layers of meaning in texts and cultural practices (Derrida 2006; 2016). Similarly, postcolonial studies, particularly influenced by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, examine how Western narratives have constructed and dominated non-Western cultures (Said 1979; Spivak 1988; Bhabha 2012). Pierre Bourdieu's sociological investigations also contribute to this discourse by analysing how cultural preferences and tastes reinforce social hierarchies (Roy 2024: 59). In his work on *The Crisis of Culture* (2024), Roy argues that modern identities are now shaped by a repudiation of shared histories and values, leading to a culture characterised by its fragmentation and the rise of identity politics, and these shifts have propagated through generations influenced by neoliberal policies and the internet, resulting in a highly individualised society. In this new context, identities are less about shared cultural narratives and more about personal traits, leading to the creation of sub-cultures that often seek safe spaces. This fragmentation, according to Roy, signals a deep crisis in our cultural and community bonds, a situation exacerbated by the digital era where communication and cultural expressions are increasingly mediated through simplistic and universal codes. Altogether, these schools of thought encourage a re-evaluation of the so-called universal aspects of culture, arguing for a recognition of its diverse and contested nature.

Heritage Recognition

At the core of modern cultural heritage practice is the crucial recognition and documentation of such heritage. This recognition is vital for heritage protection and the transmission of its values. Recognition of the universal values of heritage and its role in promoting international peace is intended to extend beyond the confines of nation-states. The UNESCO Constitution's preamble eloquently underscores that 'since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed' (1945), hoping to achieve peace 'by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture' (Article I). Within the UNESCO framework, responsibility for this lies primarily with States Parties and is formalised through international conventions, manifesting nationally in official registries and lists. Cultural heritage, whether tangible like historical sites and artefacts or intangible like traditions and practices, is therefore identified and protected within both national and international frameworks.

While there have been attempts to integrate community rights and perspectives into heritage practices, the formal recognition and definition of what constitutes cultural heritage still predominantly reside at the state level. This can mean that the state's priorities and interpretations often overshadow community voices and interpretations, which may lead to a top-down approach in the management and preservation of cultural heritage. The tension between collective and individual rights within cultural heritage debates highlights the challenges of integrating community identities with legal frameworks in constitutional states. While collective identities are central to heritage processes, they complicate analytical and normative critiques due to their static nature in political discourse (Groth 2015: 77-78).

The ancient site of Petra, Jordan, was long home to the Bedouin tribes, who used the area for grazing and lived in the rock-cut monuments. In 1985, Petra was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site, and this resulted in the government forcibly relocating the Bedouins as part of a heritagisation process. This relocation was justified by claims that their presence and livestock were damaging the archaeological ruins and disrupt-

ing tourist experiences (Shoup 1985: 283). The forced relocation of the Bedouins from Petra disrupted their social life and impacted their intangible heritage by severing their traditional connections to the land and altering their way of life, which was deeply intertwined with Petra. This has led to ongoing disputes and tensions as the Bedouins struggle to maintain their cultural practices and livelihoods amidst growing tourist developments that prioritise economic gains over genuine cultural preservation. Al-Mahadin (2007) argues that Jordan's national identity has been shaped through significant events like the annexation of the West Bank and its subsequent loss, fundamentally influencing citizens' self-perception. The Bedouins were transformed into national symbols, their identity revamped to support regime survival amid political challenges, especially from the Palestinians. This identity shift strategically repositioned Bedouins from a military role to cultural icons, encapsulating Jordanian values and heritage, particularly post-1970 when the Hashemites sought to redefine legitimacy through historical and tribal narratives (Al-Mahadin 2007: 100-101). The intertwining of heritage preservation, tourism, and the complexities of international influence is starkly portrayed in Petra. Efforts aimed at preserving Petra have often been overshadowed by the drive for tourism development, influenced by both American and European approaches to modernisation and cultural management. This dynamic has led to cycles of conservation followed by aggressive tourism promotion, which has not always aligned with the needs or the welfare of the local Bdul Bedouin community. While the Bedouins from Petra were displaced as part of what was seen as the necessary management of the World Heritage site, they were re-incorporated by the promotion of a sterilised version of their culture for tourism, ignoring their real needs and rights. While this more tourist-friendly facade marginalised the Bedouins, their identity was actively being utilised in reshaping a national identity for political reconstruction (Meerpohl 2015). The Bdul, oscillating between being viewed as barriers to progress or as assets to cultural tourism, highlight the recurring manipulation of archaeology for broader geopolitical or economic agendas (Meskell and Luke 2021).

Relocating local populations from ancient sites for archaeological excavations or to protect "historical" values wasn't unique to Petra. Many colonial archaeological projects, such as the excavations in Palmyra, Syria, also resulted in the forced displacement of local people. In Palmyra, local Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities had lived within the ancient city for at least a mil-

lennium after its "glorious ancient" period, until a major French archaeological excavation project forcibly relocated them to a new village named Tadmor (Aruz 2017), making the site ready for 'scientific research' and reconstruction. In reporting on the recent war in Syria, Western researchers and media primarily focused on the destruction of ancient ruins in Palmyra by ISIS/Daesh rather than the impact on the cultural heritage of local communities.

In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, significant development projects led by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's administration have dramatically altered the cityscape, leading to the demolition of culturally significant sites. Historic neighbourhoods like Piassa have been cleared, making room for new constructions like the Adwa Victory Memorial Museum. These developments are believed to be largely financed by international funders, particularly from the United Arab Emirates, and are seen as serving political rather than urban planning objectives. This aggressive approach to urban renewal has often sidelined the preservation of historical sites and has stirred social discord. Heritage houses have been neglected until they fall into disrepair, aligning with what appears to be a governmental strategy of deliberate neglect to justify their eventual demolition (Birara 2023: 87).

In 1995, Ethiopia's new constitution identified Addis Ababa as both the federal capital and the capital of Oromia, acknowledging Oromia's special interests due to its contributions to the city's resources. This decision led to conflict, particularly with the Amhara, who claimed historical ties to the city and opposed its designation as Oromia's capital. The disputes over city governance and ownership rights continue, exacerbated by historical narratives and myths about the city's origins, leading to ongoing tensions between the Amhara and the Oromo over the control of Addis Ababa (Benti 2024). Notably, a city expansion plan launched in 2014 triggered severe conflicts with the Oromia region, highlighting the clash between development ambitions and local community rights (Samuel and Terrefe 2021; Guardian 2024). The 2014 "Addis Ababa and Its Surrounding Oromia Special Zone Integrated Master Plan" aimed at extensive land acquisition by government officials and associates, leading to the eviction of millions of Oromos and sparking a significant uprising that eventually contributed to a major political shift in Ethiopia (Benti 2024). The complex history and ongoing struggles over urban land rights and Indigenous Oromo- a Cushitic people of the Horn of Africa- territorial claims within the context of Addis Ababa's expansion highlights the dynamics between state-driven urbanisation and Indigenous Oromo

responses, which include land claims based on cultural, legal, and historical grounds, and civil disobedience against expansion plans that significantly alter indigenous lands and identities (Abate 2019).

Conflicts of interest between the state and heritage activist groups, often motivated by political and economic reasons, are common. For example, in Cairo, historic cemeteries are demolished to build highways and modernise the cityscape. Similarly, in Iranian cities like Shiraz, historic neighbourhoods are cleared to make way for religious spaces and shrines with commercial interests. These actions typically receive unwavering support from political powers. It's important to recognise that modernisation projects threatening heritage values are not confined to the developing world. Notably, two of the only three World Heritage sites ever removed from UNESCO's list are in developed countries due to development projects: Britain's Liverpool - Maritime Mercantile City (delisted in 2021) and Germany's Dresden Elbe Valley (delisted in 2009).

However, when development and modernisation involve constructing 'new' heritage by creating selective histories and erasing others, construction and destruction become inseparable, potentially leading to violent outcomes. Saudi Arabia's multibillion-dollar heritage projects in Riyadh coincide with the destruction of religious and historical sites in Mecca, justified by iconoclasm but actually benefiting real estate and tourism development (Bsheer 2017). Benvenisti's work details how over 9,000 Palestinian natural features, villages, and ruins were systematically renamed with Jewish names, reshaping the physical and human landscape into a Jewish state, reflecting profound changes and cultural erasure (Benvenisti 2000). The 1948 Israeli-Palestinian war transformed Palestine's cultural landscape, with the systematic destruction of village landscapes as a key Israeli military strategy. The surviving ruins, representing a lost cultural topography for Palestinians, challenge claims denying their historical ties to the land (Falah 1996).

In both peace and war, heritage sites become symbolic battlegrounds where destruction serves as a political display of power. Heritage can be a source of pride for some and harm for others.

Heritage ladder and identity pickaxe: Babri Masjid Case in India

Modern identity politics and culture wars have cast a significant shadow over political and social landscapes. In this context, the past and its various interpretations are not merely factors that intensify these conflicts; rather, the past is 'constructed' for contemporary consumption and conflict engineered for current purposes.

The 1992 demolition of the Babri Mosque (*Babri Masjid*) in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh state, India, not only fuelled and amplified intense Hindu nationalism and religious zeal but also acted as a ladder for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), at that time a relatively minor political entity, to ascend to power and maintain its influence up to the present. The demolition of this 16th-century mosque, built by Emperor Babur, was based on the claim that it was constructed over the ruins of a temple marking the birthplace of Rama, a major deity in Hinduism. The mosque's destruction led to widespread sectarian violence in India and among Hindus and Muslims abroad, resulting in approximately 3,000 deaths (Muzaffar 2005: 57).

The Babri Masjid symbolised historical Muslim conquests for Hindu nationalists, who associated it with violations of Hindu femininity and honour and Hindu male humiliation. Its destruction was claimed as a restoration of Hindu dignity (Bacchetta 2000: 279). Leveraging the mosque demolition to foster communal division, the BJP emerged as the largest party in India's parliament in the 1996 General Elections (Masood 2014: 10).

Since 2019, the Babri Masjid site's dispute has seen significant developments. In 2019, India's Supreme Court awarded the mosque's land to Hindus, with an alternate site for Muslims. In January 2024, just before the general election starting in April, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, running for a third term, inaugurated a temple on the original mosque site. This event, heavily covered by the media and attended by celebrities, occurred amidst heightened religious and political tensions (Limaye 2024; Pandey and Limaye 2024). Cultural heritage had been used here, successfully, for political gain.

Heritage Propaganda and International Conflicts: Example of Persian Heritage amidst the recent Iran-Israel conflict

The long-standing dispute between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Israel escalated into a new phase in 2024, including military confrontations, the first time both countries attacked each other directly (Landale 2024). This deep-rooted conflict dates back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the new anti-Israeli doctrine of Iran. Before the Islamic Revolution and during the Pahlavi monarchy, Iran recognised Israel de facto, and relations were generally positive, with Israel viewing Iran as a non-Arab ally in the region (Roshandel and Lean 2011: 35-36). However, these relations quickly turned hostile after the revolution.

The continuous presence of Jews in Iran for 2,700 years and the ancient connections between the kingdoms of Persia and the Jewish community have turned cultural heritage into a part of the modern conflict between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Jews have resided in Persia since approximately 721 BCE, with the most significant migration occurring under Cyrus the Great around 539 BCE. Cyrus liberated Jewish captives in Babylon, facilitating their return to Jerusalem and restoring the Temple or further settlement within the Persian Empire, where they thrived and attained prominent governmental roles (Sarshar 2012). Cyrus the Great is a revered figure among Jews due to his role in liberating them from Babylonian captivity. He is favourably mentioned in the Bible, particularly in Ezra and Isaiah, and in Judeo-Persian texts as a heroic liberator (Netzer 1974). Over the centuries, particularly during the Enlightenment, his image as a liberator has evolved to align with that of a tolerant ruler (Kuhrt 2007: 170).

The Jewish community in Iran has been continuously present since the Achaemenid era, through the Parthian, Sasanian, and Islamic periods but despite this long-standing cultural and social integration, only a small part of this shared heritage, particularly that related to Cyrus the Great, has drawn the attention of contemporary politicians in Israel and Iran. Over the last two decades, and during Netanyahu's leadership, tensions between Iran and Israel intensified, particularly due to Iran's nuclear ambitions. Israeli propaganda highlighted the historical peaceful coexistence between Jews and Iranians, painting the current animosity as solely a product of the Islamic Republic, which former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, Netanyahu, and other Israeli politicians have described as the "head of the Octopus" (Mens 2024: 7; Mekelberg 2023; Frantzman 2022). Netanyahu argued that overthrowing the Islamic regime could restore peace in Southwest Asia, noting that Iran's hostility towards Israel was not permanent and suggesting that any conflict with Iran would target only the regime, not the Iranian people, perhaps casting himself in a liberator role reminiscent of Cyrus the Great. Netanyahu:

> Today our hope for the future is challenged by a nuclear-armed Iran that seeks our destruction. But I want you to know, that wasn't always the case. Some 2,500 years ago the great Persian king Cyrus ended the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people. He issued a famous edict in which he proclaimed the right of the Jews to return to the land of Israel and rebuild the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. That's a Persian decree. And thus began an historic friendship between the Jews and the Persians that lasted until modern times (United Nations 2013: 32).

After his speech at the United Nations, Netanyahu, in an interview with BBC Persian TV, clarified that he did not speak against the Iranian people at the UN, expressing great respect for them and for Persia. He again referred to Cyrus the Great, describing the ancient friendship between Iranians and Jews that Cyrus epitomised by enabling the Jews to return and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. He called this friendship profound, enduring until modern times but disrupted by the current "Ayatollahs' regime". Netanyahu said despite his limited Persian, he knew Iran's history well and praised Iran's ancient civilisation, noting the long history of growth alongside Jewish civilisation (Netanyahu 2013).

In his 2016 UN General Assembly address, Netanyahu, while mocking Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's intent to sue Britain over the 1917 Balfour Declaration, humorously suggested the Palestinians might as well sue Iran for the Cyrus Declaration, which helped Jews rebuild their temple in Jerusalem 2,500 years ago (United Nations 2016: 30). In 2015, Israel Post released a commemorative stamp showcasing the Cyrus Declaration or Cyrus Cylinder, set against a background inspired by Persian art and featuring a verse from the Book of Ezra (Israel Around the World 2015).

In a speech in 2018 at the White House following Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the U.S. Embassy's relocation there, Benjamin Netanyahu compared Trump to Cyrus the Great. Netanyahu emphasised that Jews have a long memory, recalling Cyrus's proclamation for Jewish freedom and return to Jerusalem, the 1917 Balfour Declaration, which facilitated a Jewish state in present-day Israel, and the former US President, Harry Truman, the first head of state to recognise Israel post-establishment.

Discovered in 1879 in Babylon, now modern Iraq, the Cyrus Cylinder is a clay artefact inscribed with an account of Cyrus the Great's peaceful conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. It details his preservation of the city and religious sites, and the restoration of sacred statues to temples (British Museum n.d.). Since its discovery, it has been housed at the British Museum and has become a significant symbol in Iran's national politics and international relations. Netanyahu and other Israeli political figures frequently invoke ancient Iranian history, particularly Cyrus the Great and his Cylinder, not just to reference historical facts but also to exploit the social and political divisions within Iran. For many Iranians who are dissatisfied with the Islamic Republic, figures like Cyrus symbolise the freedoms and values they feel have been suppressed. There is a push to officially recognise October 29th as 'Cyrus the Great Day,'

marking his entry into Babylon. This proposal has gained traction in Iran's semi-official media, aiming to institutionalise the date (Ansari 2021: 417). The day also serves as a platform for various dissident groups to voice their opposition to government policies. On this occasion, security around Cyrus's tomb in Pasargadae intensifies, including road closures and the arrest of event organisers, with some facing several months in prison (VOA 2017). Although the Islamic Republic had long shown disfavour towards commemorating Cyrus the Great, associating any reference to him with the Pahlavi dynasty's use of ancient heritage, especially by Mohammad Reza Shah, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former president of the Islamic Republic, made a notable shift. During his presidency (2005-2013), he borrowed the Cyrus Cylinder from the British Museum and displayed it in Tehran, attempting to blend national, religious, and ideological symbols. At the opening exhibition of the Cyrus Cylinder in Tehran, which faced significant criticism, Ahmadinejad placed a keffiyeh around the neck of an actor dressed as Cyrus. In Iran, the keffiyeh is part of the uniform of the Basij paramilitary force, a subsidiary of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Esfandiari 2010).

In January 2024, three months after the Israel-Gaza war began, Iran strongly reacted to news of the potential display of the Cyrus Cylinder at the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem. The British Museum had approved the loan of the Cyrus Cylinder to the National Library of Israel and Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History in the United States in March 2022 (The British Museum Board 2022: 2), over a year before Hamas's attacks on Israel and the subsequent Israeli assaults on Gaza in October 2023. This decision took on new dimensions with the onset of the Gaza conflict and huge humanitarian casualties. When the January 2024 announcement stated that the cylinder would be sent to Yale and potentially from there to Jerusalem, Iranian officials from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts strongly protested to the British Museum. They sent a letter to the National Commission for UNESCO in Iran, emphasising Iran's ownership rights over the cylinder and requesting the cancellation of its transfer to Jerusalem due to potential conflict-related risks (Harris 2024).

Further objections note Israel's destruction of Palestinian heritage during the Gaza war, pointing out the irony of the cylinder's loan as it contrasts sharply with the cylinder's text, which exemplifies just rule, respect for others' traditions, and the protection of heritage during conflict (Jahani 2024). In April 2024, UNESCO confirmed the destruction of at least 43 historical sites in Gaza, including a museum (UNESCO 2024). However,

other media reports estimate a much higher number of destroyed historical, cultural, and religious sites and institutions in Gaza since the beginning of Israel's offensive operations (Kansara and Nour 2024).

Ancient Iranian heritage, particularly Cyrus the Great and his relics, plays a significant role in the Iran-Israel conflicts. The unprecedented visit of Iran's former crown prince, Reza Pahlavi, who is also called Cyrus by his supporters, to Israel in April 2023—just months before the Gaza war and his meeting with Netanyahu—re-emphasized the Achaemenid legacy amid complex disputes involving the Islamic Republic, Israel, and Iranian oppositions of the regime. During his visit, he expressed hopes for establishing a "Cyrus Accord" between Israel and Iran (Iran International Newsroom 2023). The 'Cyrus Accord' is an 'aspirational' model envisioned by some in America, Israel, and opponents of the Iranian government, akin to the Abraham Accords between Israel and a few Arab countries for Iran and Israel (Coates and Khodorkovsky 2021).

Art and Intangible Heritage as a battlefield

The 2003 Intangible Convention was adopted to expand the scope of cultural heritage and spread its universal values beyond tangible and physical aspects. Unlike tangible heritage and the 1972 World Heritage Convention, intangible heritage is fluid and not bound by physical boundaries and territories. However, this conflicts with the implementation mechanism of the 2003 Convention, which is inherently political as it requires nomination by States and negotiations between them. This reality has exposed the 2003 Convention to the vulnerabilities of nationalism and identity politics (Bortolotto 2016). States Parties often use the Convention to assert national identity and claims, leading to conflicts, as seen in disputes over culinary traditions between Armenia and Turkey or Iran and Azerbaijan over the inscription of Chovgan (Polo) (Aykan 2016; Bortolotto 2016). Despite encouraging multinational cooperation, the Convention sometimes accidentally fosters nationalist claims, with countries using the lists to register shared traditions as their own national heritage, generating conflicts over origin and ownership (Aykan 2015). These challenges illustrate the tension between the Convention's transnational ideals and the political realities of national interests and identity politics.

Intangible heritage is often what gives meaning to the tangible. In the examples in this paper, it is not actual history that is most important; it is the still living stories. In a sense, it does not

matter whether Babur destroyed a Rama temple to build his mosque, that is the story. Netanyahu does not debate the historicity of his claims, just the story. That element of living heritage is vital to many issues, such as the art objects that commemorate individuals who were involved in the slave trade. Their role as commemorative inevitably becomes entangled with the difficult histories of the past. The Rhodes statue in Oxford, or the many statues of individuals who made their wealth in the slave trade, have an unintended but direct connection to the lives of the victims of slavery and colonial wars. The destruction of Lord Balfour's painting in Cambridge in March 2024 by pro-Palestinian activists (Heywood and Farmer 2024) is a reflection of that commemorative role – part of the same propaganda war as Netanyahu was engaged in when he thanked Balfour for his declaration.

For climate activists, museums and monuments serve as platforms to communicate the risks associated with climate change and to rally for collective action. Climate activists have employed non-violent yet disruptive actions, including instances of perceived 'vandalism,' in notable museums such as the National Gallery in London, the Louvre, and others across Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, and France. These tactics, which peaked in 2022, aimed to garner extensive media attention (Kinyon *et al.* 2023). Given the urgency of the climate crisis, it is argued that cultural, scientific institutions and museums cannot remain neutral (Lyons and Bosworth 2019). Climate activists use museums and art galleries not to challenge the values or histories (or stories) of the artworks themselves but rather as shared social spaces to engage more broadly with communities about climate change risks. While large museums and organisations like the International Council of Museums (ICOM) acknowledge the risks of climate change and support actions for sustainable development and climate adaptation, they do not typically endorse the disruptive methods employed by climate activists (Marambio 2023).

There are significant differences between damaging historical artefacts due to the contentious histories they represent and vandalism in museums aimed at highlighting the risks of climate change. However, in both cases, the focus extends beyond the artistic value of these works and sites to encompass broader social, political, and environmental issues. Activists challenge the notion of "neutrality" in historical and artistic works and their display contexts. For instance, statues of slaveholders or colonisers, or portrayals like Lord Balfour's, are seen by those activists not just as neutral historical relics but as active reminders of historical and ongoing injustices. Discussion of the historical con-

texts on plaques with statues associated with slavery is not simply gesture politics but is an attempt to change the story and how we see the material heritage. Likewise, amid escalating climate crises, climate activists argue that the role of museums should transcend preserving and showcasing purely artistic values, advocating for museums to engage actively in contemporary issues.

Discussion Points

Rico (2008) highlights a significant gap in the UNESCO World Heritage List: the lack of sites that represent negative heritage, such as those commemorating conflict and trauma. This absence underscores the difficulty of the World Heritage Convention in capturing the contested nature of heritage and raises concerns about the List's educational value as an archive supporting diverse historical interpretations. The nomination process further complicates this by discouraging contestation and isolating sites within strict criteria and geographical boundaries, suggesting a need to reevaluate how the World Heritage model addresses these issues (Rico 2008: 349-350). This gap in the UNESCO World Heritage List points to a broader misunderstanding of cultural heritage. We typically view cultural heritage as inherently positive and worthy of protection from external threats, embracing universally accepted values. However, the intrinsic contentiousness of these values and the biased nature of preservation efforts often go unrecognised. Preservation, and sometimes reconstruction, can lead to the destruction of other aspects as they emphasise certain meanings, values, or identities, while overlooking or eliminating others.

The concept of universal heritage values, as framed by the UNESCO conventions, and more specifically, the 1972 World Heritage Convention, assumes that certain heritage sites possess inherent values significant to all of humanity. However, this notion encounters challenges, particularly when heritage becomes contested in socio-political conflicts. This paper argues that heritage is not always a force for good as it can be weaponised or manipulated to serve specific nationalistic or ideological agendas, often at the expense of other cultural narratives and memories.

Heritage values are not static; they are dynamic and constructed by various actors who have the power to influence what is preserved, highlighted, or erased. The process of heritage valorisation often involves negotiation and contestation among diverse stakeholders, including state actors, local communities, and international bodies. These stakeholders may have competing interests or divergent understandings of what constitutes heritage and who it belongs to.

Our tools and records for recognising and preserving selective values in heritage are often biased, much like historical photographs and visual documents of cultural heritage sites. Visual archives, especially those featuring photographs of 'authentic' ruins devoid of local populations, heavily influence the global perception of heritage sites. These representations focus on physical preservation while often overlooking the social and communal contexts that are equally integral to these landscapes (Brusius and Rico 2023).

The weaponisation of heritage is evident in scenarios where cultural sites and practices are strategically used to forge national identities or marginalise others. This is particularly prominent in regions with ongoing conflicts or disputed territories, where heritage sites can become symbols of legitimacy and sovereignty for one group while representing oppression and erasure for another. The manipulation of heritage can lead to its destruction or the deliberate neglect of certain aspects of it, which might conflict with the dominant narrative promoted by those in power. In areas where societal and governmental divides are growing, cultural heritage can be weaponised for foreign interventions and to support internal opposition, influencing international conflicts.

Moreover, the international heritage protection framework, while aimed at safeguarding cultural diversity, often falls short in addressing the contested nature of heritage. The nomination process for UNESCO listing, for instance, tends to prioritise sites that fit a certain narrative of global significance, potentially sidelining less monumental but equally important cultural expressions that are vital for local communities' identity and history. This reductionist approach can also lead to perceiving the post-war reconstruction of cultural heritage as a quick fix for reconciliation and peace-building, neglecting the potentially divisive nature of heritage.

The challenge lies in expanding the scope of what is recognised as heritage and ensuring that the recognition and protection mechanisms are inclusive and sensitive to the nuances of local contexts. This might require rethinking the criteria for heritage recognition to include sites and practices that represent difficult or uncomfortable aspects of history.

In conclusion, questioning the universality of heritage values is essential in an increasingly pluralistic world. In an era where culture is profoundly influenced by identity politics and is becoming increasingly individualised, and where policies are designed to reinforce and widen identity and social divides, the potential for cultural heritage to be weaponised is being increasingly exploited by politicians, governments, and social activists. This places a greater responsibility on cultural heritage professionals. Acknowledging and addressing the inherent conflicts within heritage conservation is vital for developing a more inclusive and equitable approach to preserving the cultural and natural legacies for future generations. This approach should strive to balance safeguarding significant sites and respecting the diverse narratives and memories associated with them.

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