

## Lecture 4 “Fostering Cultural Identity and Diversity in the World Heritage System”

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses the ways in which the World Heritage system can foster cultural identity and diversity among its member states.

The paper begins with a brief discussion of some of the initial concepts of the World Heritage system which at first limited its effectiveness in this area. They include Eurocentricity, the split between natural and cultural values, the stress on tangible remains, and the lack of connection between universal and local values in the management of World Heritage Sites, and the dangers of commercial exploitation, especially tourism. The paper goes on to describe the gradual change in the World Heritage system, which makes it much more able to contribute to fostering cultural identity and diversity. This change was brought about by member states, conscious of the importance of this concept to their own national life and development.

Two case studies from Australia – Uluru- Kata Tjuta World Heritage Area, and the Australian Convict Site World Heritage serial nomination are used to show the positive way in which current World Heritage designation and management systems can demonstrate and encourage cultural identity and diversity, and the outcomes from this in cultural tourism and education.

### **Introduction**

When I was asked to give this presentation I spent some time thinking about the concepts of cultural identity and diversity. The first thing that occurred to me, as I tried to tease out on the variety of meanings which these complex phrases could have was that there is a potential for them to be in conflict. By this I mean that the fostering of a strong sense of cultural identity in a nation's majority population, in the sense of homogeneity or sameness, can be inimical to the acceptance of the cultural diversity of minorities and has been known to result in persecution. So my definition of cultural identity actually includes the concept of cultural diversity, in the sense that the fostering of true cultural identity includes the acceptance and celebration of difference and diversity within national states and cultural regions

So is the World Heritage Convention and system a good vehicle for fostering such cultural identity?

At first glance it obviously is. The World Heritage System lists places of outstanding universal value from many cultures and regions of the world. Great and universally known symbols of these different cultures are on the world Heritage list; for instance:

The Parthenon

The Pyramids

The Great Wall of China

The Taj Mahal

The Monuments of ancient Kyoto

Great Zimbabwe.

These places show the very different ways in which different civilisations have expressed their cultural identity, and taken as a group they demonstrate the cultural diversity of humanity. Visiting them and learning about them, tourists and students can explore both of these elements.

However there are aspects of the World Heritage Convention which have been seen as inimical to the fostering of a cultural identity and diversity. What I would like to do in this paper is to

look at some of these issues, to discuss ways in which they are being overcome, and then to illustrate the successful fostering of cultural identity and diversity by looking at two Australian case studies.

### **World Heritage and Cultural Identity**

Why do I say that the World Heritage Convention has been limited in its fostering of cultural identity and diversity, and has in some instances actually caused problems in this area? There are a number of reasons.

The Convention and its membership were initially (and to some extent still are) rather Eurocentric. Standards for judging 'universal value' were unconsciously set in the European /Western mode (from whence came the majority of initial listings) and tended to exclude or minimise the cultural traditions of other societies not so well understood. The World Heritage Committee, in its listing of cultural heritage places, aimed at listing and protecting 'the best of the best' examples of human development, artistic endeavour and significant historic events. Early listings show us that this led to an emphasis on monumentality, grandeur or craftsmanship, and on information-rich sites which could supply important historic data. This emphasis on tangible values has been in the past a hallmark of World Heritage listings, yet for many societies monumental sites or tangible values are not what is most important for their cultural identity.

Places with no tangible values, but with strong emotional or spiritual values and associations are highly valued in many societies and have the most need for conservation and listing. Conservation of these places can be a challenge for world heritage practitioners, both technically and emotionally and especially in the early days of the Convention they tended to be neglected. In the same way management of places listed under the World Heritage System tends to concentrate on the conservation of tangible values. Authenticity has been equated with original fabric, and the 'freeze frame' conservation methodology has prevailed. Only gradually has a very different approach to heritage value and authenticity been developed. One example of this new practice which will be known to you is the Nauru Declaration on Authenticity, which acknowledges traditions of rebuilding and replacement as part of the cultural significance of some sites and allows regular rebuilding and replacement of fabric to continue on site as part of its conservation. This allows traditional practices to continue, and hence enhances the cultural identity of the traditional owners and managers.

World Heritage selection was designed to select the best, the outstanding or the unique. By selecting the best, nations have been inadvertently encouraged to privilege these places above the more 'ordinary' or more common heritage places. Yet it is these common or ordinary places which are often at the heart of cultural identity and the pride and love of the ordinary citizens who together make up the whole story of a national or regional identity. In the same way the sites of minority groups can be equally ignored.

After we choose 'the best' for World Heritage listing, we tend to put a fence around it and designate anything within that place as special in some way, often ignoring the fact that intellectually, emotionally and physically that place exists in a cultural landscape which supports it and is essential for its continued existence and cultural value. So we are choosing to conserve one aspect of cultural identity and diversity-- place -- often at the risk of losing other aspects.

For instance, the great Khmer city of Angkor in Cambodia has breathtaking artistic, design and planning values -- it is justly described in World Heritage terms as *a unique artistic realization, a chef d'oeuvre of the human mind*. For 200 years the whole focus of management has been on the restoration and physical conservation of these spectacular monuments, and their outstanding

values were certainly the reason for World Heritage listing. But the ongoing traditional and religious connections between the local population and the remains of Khmer civilization do not form part of the reasons for World Heritage listing. These connections have been all but ignored, and have in fact been replaced in the popular imagination with a picture of mysterious jungle-covered ruins of unknown origin. Locals have been excluded from management decisions, have laboured as workmen under the direction of foreign "experts" and their long-standing rights to farm and utilise the area are increasingly restricted in the interests of the conservation of these World Heritage values.

This case illustrates neglect of some aspects of cultural identity (though recently efforts had been made to address this including important work with the local community by Japanese experts.) Sometimes World Heritage Declaration can actually damage local or regional cultural identity and diversity. This occurs when there is a conflict between the universal values for which the place is listed on the World Heritage list, and the local values which are important to the population living in and around the site. A good example is the site of Great Zimbabwe in Zimbabwe, the great drystone architectural monument and settlement which is so important to the cultural identity of the Zimbabweans that it gives the country its post-Independence name. It is a spectacular architectural site, and it is listed on the World Heritage list for all six criteria including the spiritual and symbolic importance of the site. However, the local people were not consulted when the listing was made, and the management arrangements were put in place. Dawson Munjeri takes up the story –

.... the spiritual significance of the site.... was downplayed in management policies. To the local community, however, the spiritual dimension is at the core of the site's worth.

[In a 1991 petition, addressed by local elders to the site authority the elders wrote:]  
'we feel it is necessary to tell you what pains us most with regard to the keeping of traditional customs with respect to Great Zimbabwe. Every month, every season and every year customs and traditions were practiced, culminating in one major sacred gathering at Great Zimbabwe. This was stopped by the white governments. When independence came and we Africans took control the traditional leaders celebrated because we felt we could now practice our own customs and traditions. But we soon discovered that our new government was equally tough in preventing traditional customs being practised. Our ancestral spirits are not happy with what the government is doing' (Munjeri n.d. p 76)

Here we have a clear case of the prominence given to some of the universal values of the site by the national government actually damaging the cultural identity of people whose ancestors created it. The ceremonies carried out at Great Zimbabwe by local community and elders are not the reason why the site is on the World Heritage list -- this is because of its spectacular tangible values as a great feat of architecture and engineering -- however the steps taken to 'protect' these tangible universal values had the capacity to actually diminish and interfere with regional and local cultural identity

Another key issue which relates to this is that the World Heritage system is essentially a centralised one. Major decisions about nomination and management are made by the nations to the Convention. Often the nations which nominate places have no effective system for consultation with or involvement of their own populations, who have in the past and really been consulted about listing or management. In fact in some cases in my own country, the Australian government has nominated places to the World Heritage list because it was the only legal means they had to stop state and local authorities from taking what they considered to be inappropriate land management decisions which would have destroyed these places. A case in point is the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage listing which prevented the building of a hydroelectric dam which would have destroyed very important wilderness areas and Aboriginal

sites. This action, although undoubtedly justified in terms of protecting major natural and indigenous values, left embittered and belittled local population, who with the creation of a National Park were excluded from an area which was important to their cultural identity as pioneers, hunters and mountain dwellers. For many disempowered groups in our communities, World Heritage Declaration is seen to impinge directly on their particular cultural identity, and they see the conservation of 'universal values' as damaging their own particular cultural identity, and furthermore, they (and many local politicians who support their cause) see the World Heritage Committee as a rather sinister arm of the United Nations impinging on their rights and trying to take control of the lives of individuals

And of course, there is the issue of tourism. As the concept of World Heritage listing has grown in status, and has become more popular and well-known as signifying the best cultural and natural heritage sites in the world, tourism to the sites has grown exponentially. Leaders of developing nations in particular are therefore increasingly enthusiastic about World Heritage listing for some of their sites. The Prestige of World Heritage listing is very important to developing national pride and identity and leaders and policymakers see the resultant tourism as a way to gain much needed revenue for development and improvement in living conditions for their citizens. However, tourism is a good servant but a dangerous master. Many World Heritage sites have been overrun by tourists -- causing physical displacement of local and regional groups, and the destruction of much traditional life to make way for tourist services, and accommodation. In some cases the story of the place, so important to cultural identity, undergoes subtle changes to make it more marketable for visitor consumption.

So these are some of the challenges which the World Heritage Committee faces in its earnest endeavour to create a paper World Heritage List which enhances rather than diminishes cultural identity, and which allows free rein to the concept of cultural diversity. Despite the significant problems it is pleasing to see the way in which the World Heritage system has been and continues to be reshaped to make it more responsive to these issues. The World Heritage idea has proved to be a more powerful and adaptive concept than its creators probably envisaged -- like the spreading ripples in a pool, the unsophisticated original Eurocentric idea has widened and deepened, affected by the range of societies and ideals which it has reached, so that the paradigms of World Heritage now include cultural landscapes, living sites, intangible values, and associative cultural values. There is now encouragement of local community involvement, and the recognition of local and regional values as well as universal values. The World Heritage Global Strategy is aimed at ensuring that the cultural identity and the associated sites of all regions and societies are recognised on the list. Significant steps are being made to try to deal with the problems which tourism often brings, in particular by good planning, community involvement and training at an early stage. All these developing concepts help to fulfil the original intentions of the writers of the Convention, and its signatories, including the development of the World Heritage List as an important potential tool for fostering mutual respect and understanding between member nations about of the vast range of human cultures, and for educating people about them.

#### **Uluru- Kata Tjuta World Heritage Area**

Having talked about some of the problems, I would now like to go on to describe some instances in which the World Heritage Committee, through its listing and management arrangements, has contributed remarkably to concepts of cultural identity, and diversity. The first site I would like to talk about is the associative cultural landscape of Uluru- Kata Tjuta World Heritage Area. Uluru- Kata Tjuta is located in the centre of Australia. The World Heritage Area covers 6,325 square kilometres and is 500 kilometres from the nearest town, Alice Springs. The area contains spectacularly beautiful rock monoliths, named in English Ayer's Rock and The Olgas. These monoliths are important cultural icons to Settler Australians, and of great cultural and religious significance to their traditional Aboriginal

owners. The area of the listing is owned by these groups of indigenous people from the Anangu Clan, and is jointly managed by them and the Australian National Parks service. The area was originally listed for specific natural and cultural values, relating to the rock formations, the present of rare and endangered species and evidence of Aboriginal traditional life, but when the World Heritage Committee created the concept of an associative cultural landscape, the site was renominated in this category.

The World Heritage Committee created the rather clumsy title of 'associative cultural landscape' to cover places which have intangible rather than tangible values. That is, though the landscape may not be modified in any dramatic or obvious way by humans, there is strong evidence of their association with the landscape, through story, ceremony, practice or traditional use. This category was specifically created to allow the expression of cultural identity of a non-tangible sort. The major reason why the Uluru was listed as an associative cultural landscape is that it is a place in which the landscape is a living expression of Anangu religious belief. To non-Aborigines it is an almost pristine and empty natural landscape. But in fact it is covered with a complex web of interacting Anangu stories which tell of the travels of sacred ancestors moving across the landscape, creating its features. These stories and this landscape shaping are not seen as being in the past as we recognise the past, but as in a way always happening and always creating the land. Maintenance of the knowledge of these stories, ceremony and story re-enactment, and ways of living and behaving which are the lessons of these stories, are all essential for the continued well-being of the created landscape and its people. So the major cultural value of the site is intangible -- it can be seen in story, ceremony and custom, rather than in physical changes to the environment such as impressive built monuments or engineering structures. Instead, the land is a living cultural landscape inhabited by sacred beings whose presence affects every facet of Anangu life. The World Heritage Committee has recognised these values and has put them on a par with the great human-made physically dominating monuments of the world, such as the Pyramids or the Great Wall of China.

The World Heritage area is managed to maintain these values. For the Anangu and the National Parks service this essentially means the maintenance of Tjukurpa. Tjukurpa (often translated as the dreamtime) is a set of beliefs, laws and practices which is necessary to respect and maintain the presence of the living ancestral figures in the landscape. It embodies the principles of religion, philosophy and human behaviour which need to be followed in order for people to live harmoniously with each other and the natural landscape.

World Heritage recognition of these values, by the listing of Uluru Kata Tjuka as one of the first to associative cultural landscapes in the world, was a very important step in enabling the Anangu to express and to strengthen their cultural identity which is quite different from the cultural identity of most Australians. Nomination to World Heritage status was enthusiastically supported by the Anangu who have such a strong sense of their uniqueness and the importance of the cultural landscape -- the centre of the world for them -- that nomination to the World Heritage List seemed only fitting in their eyes.

The Plan of Management, written jointly by the Anangu and the National Parks Service, in both their languages, in accordance with these recognised World Heritage values, has as its major goal the maintenance of Tjukurpa. (Uluru kata Tjuka Board of Management and Parks Australia 2000) Hence it focuses first and foremost on the importance of the distinctive cultural identity which makes the storied landscape unique. This has significant consequences for the management of the Park, and for the interaction of these traditional owners with tourists.

The centre of the Park, for tourists is Uluru -- the great red rock monolith which dominates the landscape for more than 100 kilometres any direction. It is a strange, beautiful and arresting

natural monument at the centre of Australia which it is the ambition of most Australians to visit at least once in their lifetime. It stands beautifully and challengingly in the vast desert landscape of centre Australia and for many Australian and international visitors (including many from Japan) it is seen as a very powerful destination which they wish to experience fully. They have a strong urge to challenge themselves by taking the arduous climb to the summit and conquering the rock -- for the experience, for the adventure, and of course for the unsurpassed view.

But Anangu see the rock differently. For the Anangu the rock is the literal embodiment of living ancestral figures and many places on the rock and at its base are sacred to particular groups within the Anangu culture -- both women's and men's secret/sacred places. Here is one of the three major ancestral stories about the rock. Size of Uluru?

### **The Kuniya Story (the Pythons)**

The Kuniya converged on Uluru from three directions..... one of the Kuniya women (pythons) carried eggs on her head using a *manguri* (grass head pad) to cushion them. She buried these eggs at the eastern end of Uluru. While they were camped at Uluru they were attacked by a party of Liru (poisonous snake) warriors . The Liru had journeyed along the southern flank of the Peterman ranges from beyond Wangkari.....

[The evidence for the truth of this story can be seen in many features around the rock]. At Alyurungu, on the southwest face of Uluru pock- marks on the rock, the scars left by the warriors' spears; two black- stained water courses are the transformed bodies of two Liru. The fight centred on Mutitjulu... here a Kuniya woman fought using her *Wana*; her features are preserved in the eastern face of the gorge. The features of the Uluru warrior she attacked can be seen on the Western face where his eyes, head wounds... and severed nose form part of the cliff. (Layton 1986 page 8 - 9)

As Bob Layton comments

The idea that ancestral beings shaped the landscape is known to the many white Australians through the concept of sacred sites. It is possible to think of the features at such sites as a photographic record of the ancestral saga, because a particular being leaves the visible imprint of his activities at a series of localities. Aboriginal people can point to them, saying, here is the mark of the Carpet Snake coming over the sand hills; here is the head pad on which she carried her eggs; here is the spear wound in her body. Each one of these places embodies the physical proof that the events of the Tjukurpa really did take place but there is a crucial difference to a photograph; many of the sites preserving the mark of the ancestor also contain his or her spiritual power, a force that can be released through ritual. (Pages 15 -- 16)

Anangu consider it sacrilege to climb on the remains of these ancestral beings.

Now a lot of visitors are only looking at sunset and climbing Uluru. That rock is really important and sacred. You shouldn't climb it! Climbing is not proper tradition for this place. (Uluru Kata Juka Board of Management and Parks Australia 2000 page 119)

Anangu are also very concerned about visitors' safety. Each time a visitor is seriously or fatally injured at Uluru (which does happen on this climb) Anangu must share in the grieving process and the rituals associated with it. Tjukurpa requires that the traditional owners take responsibility for visitors to their country and this duty of care is the basis of their stress and grieving (Uluru Kata Juka Board of Management and Parks Australia 2000 page 119)

So here we have a direct conflict between the upholding of the cultural identity of the traditional owners of the World Heritage Area and the customs and wishes of visitors. But in

part because of World Heritage recognition of the central role of Tjukurpa in the significance of the Park the Anangu are strengthened and supported in their position. They have chosen not to close Uluru to climbers -- which they could do, but to teach, persuade and encourage respectful behaviour. Signs warn people about Anangu wishes at the foot of the climb:

. Nganana Tatintja Wiya ' *We don't climb*'.

An extensive Aboriginal-run cultural centre educates visitors about Anangu culture. Walks around the base of the rock tell the stories associated with each part of it as well as warning people away from sacred areas, and the Anangu themselves run a tourist operation which gives many guided tours in which they tell the public part of the dreamtime stories and teach people about the abundant natural resources (bush tucker) of the desert landscape. The result is that a decreasing percentage of visitors climb the rock and many who do regret it when they learn about its Aboriginal significance. Recently an important senior traditional owner of Uluru died. As part of the mourning ceremony, the Anangu did close the Uluru climb for several weeks. The Northern Territory Government, which at that time was opposed to the current management regime at Uluru, and who were obsessed by the needs of tourists, rather than the World Heritage significance of the site complained bitterly and publicly that the tourists would be disappointed and would cease to visit Uluru Kata Juka. However this was not the case. Visitor numbers did not fall, and in fact a survey conducted among tourists by an Alice Springs newspaper showed that the tourists not only clearly understood the reasons for the closure, but that they respected these reasons and some in fact felt that their trip was enhanced because that they were experiencing a privileged glimpse of another culture.

The World Heritage listing of Uluru and its subsequent international profile are teaching many people about the cultural identity of a minority group, and more broadly giving them an insight into the validity and strength of a variety of cultural traditions, which perhaps they will take home and apply in their own culture. The model of joint management established in this World Heritage area is also more generally a model for the development of joint management systems elsewhere, which protect and enhance the culture of a variety of minority groups.

### **The Convict Nomination**

The World Heritage Committee's Global Strategy seeks to redress the balance in the representation of a rather limited range of cultures presently on the list by ensuring that all major themes in human history, spread across all regions of the world, are represented by places on the World Heritage List. One of these themes in human history is a history of forced migration -- the movement across national borders or across the world of large groups of people against their will. A preeminent example of this is the African slave trade. The Committee has listed a number of African sites which were centres or depots on the slave trade route. The Committee has not listed these sites because of their physical characteristics as much as because of their historical importance and their deep significance to particular cultural groups, seeking to retrieve or strengthen their cultural identity, itself a past victim of the slave trade.

Australia has a similar history of forced migration. The British Government founded Australia as a penal colony, to deal with the rising crime wave which was a result of the displacement and disruption of the Industrial Revolution, and the growing struggle for social and political rights in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Until relatively recently some Australians, and some Australian governments, were slightly ashamed of this convict past, and tended to downplay it. However it is a crucial part of white Australia's history, and an essential element of Australia's cultural identity. It is also unique in World Heritage terms, as the longest forced migration in human history and the only one which founded a nation. Australia is therefore preparing a nomination to the World Heritage List of places within Australia which represent the many facets of the convict history, convict experience and the convict contribution to settlement and

nation building, and of course to the national character. The nomination will encourage the development of a more real and nuanced understanding of Australia's true cultural identity.

The story told in the convict nomination is in part a story of injustice, suffering and tyranny but is also of course a story of redemption. So here (if the nomination is accepted) we have another example of the World Heritage system fostering and promoting key aspects of cultural identity and diversity, which some have been reluctant or ashamed to recognise and celebrate in the past, and which are significant not so much to their physical fabric as for their symbolic and historic values. The values of places such as this are subtle, and not at first glance apparent to many. But the World Heritage Committee has realised that it needs its list to tell the people of the world all the world's great stories even though they are sometimes unpalatable, and a cause for reflection about our human history, rather than simply the celebration of human achievements. In so doing it fosters the development of a true and tolerant vision of cultural identity and diversity.

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