# Cultural Heritage in the 21st century - Opportunities and challenges

Prof. Dr. Marie-Theres Albert, Krakow, May 2010

## Culture, Heritage and Identity

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## Introduction

The protection, collection, and development of natural and cultural assets, as well as their presentation and dissemination for all social strata, are important tasks for present and future generations. This, in short, is stated in the preamble of the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which was adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in November 1972.

With this Convention the international community has created a tool to protect directly and in a sustainable way its tangible and intangible heritage in the short, middle and long run. Apart from that, with protecting material assets, the Convention indirectly also protects cultural identities. This is where the concepts of Intangible Cultural Heritage and cultural diversity come into play. Heritage is protected on account of heritage forming identities and transforming them at the same time. And due to this, namely due to this immanent attribute, the heritage of mankind has become an irreplaceable resource for humanity.

In the meantime, 878 World Heritage Sites have been nominated. Out of these, 679 Heritage Sites are listed as cultural properties, 174 as natural and 25 as mixed properties. 185 state parties have ratified the "Convention" and it can be truly said that the global networking of the concept, its global recognition, and the world-wide endeavours to protect the heritage of mankind have become an important concern for all peoples. This also shows that the cultural domain has caught up with globalization in science and economy.

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As you can see, the ratification process takes usually two to three years. However, the Convention adopted in 2005 entered into force within only 17 months, showing that the world community recognized the need to protect the diversity of cultural expressions as a prerequisite for peaceful cooperation of the world's cultures.In the following, the meaning of cultures, material and immaterial expressions and identity in the era of globalization will be presented.

## *Dimensions of Culture and Identity*

Cultures are created by man and similarly, they are destroyed by man. This concerns the material and immaterial culture and their cultural expressions as well as the arts and their cultural institutions. Cultures are integrated units of mankind, technology and society which have been formed in historical processes and which equally develop further in precisely those said processes. In this sense, the concept for the protection of cultural heritage exhibits a double dimension.

 On one hand, cultural heritage is a representation of the immaterial elements of cultures. It consists of those elements of the history of cultures, which are handed down from generation to generation. In other words, cultural heritage is a representation of the culture's spiritual and intangible heritage, its traditions, values, and norms.

On the other hand, cultural heritage comprises the material elements of cultures. Cultural heritage are monuments, statues, documents, or other tangible assets. It is both elements of the heritage of mankind, which forms the background of experiences to which societies refer in constructing their present. It is both, the material and immaterial heritage which shapes the collective identity of the cultures and the nations of the world. At the same time, this collective heritage of mankind creates the basis for the formation of respective individual identities. However, we have to note concerning the formation of identities, we have to look at history as a holistic process. Identity includes the production of material assets as well as intangible traditions. Even though it is both material and immaterial heritage which constitute the collective identity of peoples, it had been mostly the material elements of heritage which were brought to our attention by UNESCO's World Heritage Convention. If we reflect on cultural heritage and its protection, we still mostly focus on material heritage.

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This one-sided view of cultural heritage and its significance is definitely outdated. In the mean-time conventions have been adopted for the safeguarding of intangible heritage and the promotion of cultural diversity. Furthermore no monument, no historic structure, and no historic site will by itself guide experiences or form identities. Cultural assets – whether they are authentic and of "universal value", to stay with UNESCO's definitions, or not – will only become significant for the formation of identities, if they are declared to be "representative". Only then the products of the past will endow current identities with meanings.

Which elements of culture will be granted with the status of cultural heritage, worthy of protection, does consequently not depend on the past. It is always contemporary society which defines its history. It is the aims, values and judgements of the present, which motivate and guide reflections on one's own past. Consequently, cultural heritage is in a twofold way 'present' in the present. Concerning the intangible aspect, cultural heritage guides people in their lifestyles and in interpreting their everyday lives.

From a material perspective, cultural heritage is always a product of a social interpretation of both the present and the past. More precisely: Cultural heritage is the product of a reconstruction of the past, which is determined by the needs of the present. Cultural heritage, be it that of individuals or of societies, be it that of local or of the world community, should simply be protected for the reason that it constitutes the present.

And it is the present, forming the ground of experiences, on which projections for the future are based. In so far the protection of heritage aims at constructing and shaping the future. To become aware of these interdependencies, namely the relationships between past, present, and future, is consequently one of the challenges, with which we have to deal with in protecting heritage.

The formation of identities takes place by actively defining values and creating products. At the same time, values and products may not be created without cultural identities. The formation of identities thus always takes place in inter-depending processes of past, present and future. This means that we cannot develop by simply producing values, we need cultural identity as one of the most important prerequisites for any kind of development.

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Against this background, heritage forms identities by allowing the world's cultures to transfer meanings which they gave to their material and immaterial products from the past to the present to future generations. However, concerning the formation of identities we have to note that we have to understand history as a holistic process. Identity thus includes the production of material assets as well as intangible traditions.

The idea to protect the heritage of mankind derives its importance from the inherent quality of heritage itself. Every item of heritage has the quality to form and uphold identities. The heritage of mankind has thus become itself an irreplaceable resource for humanity. This particular inherent quality of heritage prompted the world community to protect the heritage of mankind in its material, immaterial and its diversity of expressions. Similarly, the world community recognized the different elements to be of equal value.

Of course, what is true for cultures as systems is equally true for the most important mediators of cultural experiences: the relationship between past, present and future is of course significant for the human being as a cultured being. Of course, human experiences are likewise not independent from history. And it is the historical determination of each individual, which constitutes our respective individual, social, national, or cultural identities.

For this reason, "identity" is equally a dynamic construct. Culture and identity shape the life expressions and needs of people. And precisely those expressions and needs of the cultures of the world basically constitute the diversity of cultures and the wealth of heritage. The need of acknowledging diversity has been emphasised by UNESCO's "Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity" of 2001 and, to a certain extent, by the "Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions" of 2005.

This is at least how UNESCO'S Secretary General Koïchiro Matsuura phrased it on the opening ceremony for the World Heritage Convention's 30th anniversary celebrations in Venice in November 2002. "The identity of peoples and the cohesion of societies are deeply rooted in the symbolic tissue of the past. Or, in other words, the conditions for peace reside, to a large extent, in each individual's pride in their cultural roots, and the recognition of equal dignity of all cultures." (Koïchiro Matsuura 2003)

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### *Destruction of Heritage Aims at Destroying Identities*

Both tangible and intangible culture and heritage are highly important for the formation of identities. The protection of both is consequently important to safeguard peace. However, in the course of history, this realization came about first by the annihilation of cultures and the destruction of their material and immaterial assets. The destruction of cultural assets has been part of historical processes throughout many social systems and many generations with the aim to establish new political orders. Allow me to give you two striking examples from considerably different eras and cultures.

The first example ist the Terracotta Army of X'ian. The Terracotta Army was declared World Heritage in 1987. It was created by the first Chinese emperor Qin Shihuang in X'ian. This emperor went down in history as a cruel tyrant. He was just one of the many despotic rulers who wanted to become immortal by leaving a memorial for themselves. Additionally Quin Shihuang created a replica of his army. Thousands of soldier figures were cast in clay.

Small wonder then, that his successor after having seized power with a rebel army obliterated all visible traces of his predecessor. This ruler was no less despotic than Qin Shihuang. He ordered the terracotta soldiers to be burned because they were a representative cultural heritage of his predecessor.

The Second Example: The Giant Buddhas of Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan: The Giant Buddhas of Bamiyan valley were destroyed in March 2001 due to the religious and political fundamentalism of the Taliban. Since 2003 the remains of the statues and the archaeological remains within the cultural landscape of Bamiyan valley are listed as World Heritage. The reason for the Buddhas' destruction was the Taliban's Sunni Islamic fundamentalist and doctrinary claim to power which destroyed the expression of another religious culture.

With the unbelievable destruction of these 1,500 year-old statues the Taliban tried to secure their religious belief by annihilating Buddhist cultural heritage. Previous attempts to deliberately desecrate and neglect the site apparently did not have the desired effects in the local population.

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Last but not least, we have to mention the destruction of heritage due to political and ideological interests. And here it can be analysed that the first initiatives for the protection of people's cultural heritage date back to the period after World War II. The war-waging countries did not stop at destroying cultures and their heritage. They obliterated monuments and entire cities to force their respective ideologies and political strategies on people. The cities of Warsaw and Dresden are striking examples.

Warsaw was destroyed at least twice by German Nazi troops. The first time: once, late in 1939, in the fascist attack on the country; then again during the Warsaw Uprising between October 1944 and January 1945. Approximately 80% of the city had been destroyed. Around 700.000 citizens lost their lives. However, we have to emphasize that Warsaw's reconstruction between 1945 and 1947 is noted as one of the biggest cultural achievements of the post-war era. To this day, the reconstruction inspires the nation's cultural identity to a high degree. As a result, since 1980, the old town centre of Warsaw is listed as World Cultural Heritage.

Dresden's destruction by allied forces in February 1945 was based on a completely different political ideology. Nevertheless, again, the main objective was to destroy cultural heritage in order to destroy those cultural identities which represented the system. It is important to note that Dresden represented German identity mainly in terms of a historically developed social and cultural centre, which experienced from the 17th century on an unbroken industrial, infrastructural and cultural growth and boasted of a wealth of magnificent buildings.

The population of Dresden was neither less nor more fascist than the rest of the German population, yet the town was bombed in February 1945 by allied forces. Approximately 25% of the city's area was destroyed and a great number of people killed, which cannot be ascertained precisely to this day. But also in this case the reconstruction of the city was of high symbolic value. Particularly the Protestant *Frauenkirche* (Our Lady's Church) which was reconstructed from 1994 to 2005 with the help of international donations became a symbol for reconciliation. In 2004 UNESCO nominated the Dresden Elbe valley including this unique church as World Heritage. The nomination specifically referred to the city's destruction in the Second World War and its reconstruction.

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The destruction of cultures by the political systems of the subsequent generations is a constituent component of the historical process of mankind. It continues to the present. The destruction of tangible and intangible cultural assets aims at destroying identities. And this is precisely the underlying and never-changing intention of all those who destroy. From a historical perspective, people tried to achieve the aim of destroying identities, not just by simply destroying tangible and intangible cultural assets. The destruction of identities aimed at the establishment of new systems. And with this purpose systems even went as far as systematically denying whole populations the right to live.

This was the case in antiquity, it was decidedly the strategy of colonialism and it continues to the present day, to the here and now. From a contemporary and historical perspective, securing and exercising power frequently involves to drastically sever the roots of people. This occurs across the whole world and independent of the respective political system. This happens always along the same lines. The most important material and immaterial expressions of a given human culture and cultural identity are destroyed, desecrated and devalued in order to create space for new power structures. The destruction of identities aims at the establishment of new systems. And with this purpose systems even went as far as systematically denying whole populations the right to live.

Again, we need to turn to very dark sides of history. It needs to be said, systems have generally used all means to achieve their aims indiscriminately, even until today. Whereas destroyed material assets were frequently reconstructed, the annihilation of whole peoples, as it was practiced especially by fascism, colonialism and imperialism, had a lasting effect.

Last but not least, the destruction of heritage due to political and ideological interests has to be mentioned. And here I'd like to mention two very striking examples of destruction and reconstruction in the 20th century, namely the Bridge of Mostar on the one hand and the Berlin City Palace on the other. Whereas the Mostar Bridge is a symbol for the Balkan War, the Berlin City Palace shows the fault lines of German history and political power: the German division during the cold war and its reunification.

Compared to the above examples, the Hohenzollern City Palace in Berlin may be a trifle; however, it illustrates well the political interests involved. On the basis of the City Palace we may

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not only show the political and ideological understanding of the former GDR and its approach to history and heritage, but also that of today's German government. The Palace was completely demolished on 7.9.1950. One of the reasons for the demolition was that the decadence ascribed to the Hohenzollern did not match with the Socialist image of a society of workers and farmers as it was propagated by the GDR.

Therefore the material traces of Germany's monarchist history and heritage needed to be destroyed in order to lay the foundations for a new ideology. And as it has been mentioned before, the new ideology of the GDR socialism was supposedly to be implemented "without history" and thus "untainted" by the past. In it's stead the Palace of the Republic was erected, a building which reflected the political ideology of the GDR. Its use concept consisted in satisfying real and imagined needs for entertainment, communication, and an administration, which was close to the people. So much for history; but how about the present? Let us return to the Berlin City Palace or respectively to the Palace of the Republic, a currently hot topic in the capital of Germany.

In the last months, the Palace of the Republic has been destroyed; the demolition is due to be completed in 2008. The goal is to resurrect the former Hohenzollern Palace, of which at place, no stone is left. If you listen closely to the undertones in the arguments for this demolition and the planned reconstruction of the former City Palace or at least its facade, it is again about history and it is again about political ideologies.

The justifications for the reconstruction of the Hohenzollern City Palace simply turn back the wheel of time to a period before the foundation of the GDR. Thus, they implicitly devalue the history of the GDR and the cultural identity of the GDR population.

## *Conclusion*

Seen from a historical perspective, to secure and to exercise power always went hand in hand with severing the roots of people. This happened irrespective of geographical location and political system. Those hungry for power have always followed the same strategy:

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The most important tangible and intangible expressions of a given human culture and identity were destroyed, desecrated, or defaced in order to pave the ground and to establish the framework for the introduction of new power structures.

The destruction of heritage aims at the destruction of identities, and the latter gives the new rulers enough space to establish their new ideologies without any burdens from the past.

Thus, with the adoption and the application of the "World Heritage Convention", the "Intangible Heritage Convention" and the "Convention on Cultural Diversity", UNESCO has not only created the possibility to recognize the heritage of mankind in retrospect and with a perspective for the future, but it also created a framework to understand the destructive and constructive potentials of mankind's historical process explicitly.