

“It is essential that heritage is safeguarded as well as being kept alive”

by Paul Sherfey

A conversation with geographer Mark McCarthy and anthropologist and human rights lawyer Adriana Arista-Zerga on the clashes, conflicts, but also cooperation, when rural areas and historical narratives become cultural heritage and tourism attractions.

PAUL SHERFEY: How do you understand critical heritage studies and its role in reminding us that there are other pasts to tell than 'the official story'? How does it help us to value other heritages that conflict with hegemonic ideas of social, economic or political progress?

ADRIANA ARISTA-ZERGA: To answer this question I would like to point out the close relationship between critical heritage studies and memory. Heritage itself is a reminder of the history and the culture of people and communities, but at the same time, it is an element that converges different ideas of power, identity, etc. and creates a different kind of relationship with the population who consider themselves the “owners” and therefore have the right to protect it in a moment of danger.

This is one of the moments when cultural heritage and memories can be related, when the feeling of danger and loss arises, as well as the need to claim recognition and protection of cultural goods/memories that were not recognized or were invisible. This is what happened for example in post conflict societies, where the “official story” coexists with different memories of a conflictive past, and where the cultural goods of that past are “uncomfortable” for the *status quo*.

Thus, the role of critical heritage studies is to analyse and understand the cultural heritage from this non hegemonic idea, which could help to understand that sometimes cultural heritage is not related exclusively with the idea of economic progress (through tourism) but also valuing other stories and recognizing its power in the idea of a common heritage, the identification and the feeling of belonging to a specific geographic area, etc., which at the same time could help to build cultural citizenship, which respects the diversity of stories and the different ways of interactions that the population built with those cultural goods and traditions.

MARK MCCARTHY: The interdisciplinary field of critical heritage studies involves the scholarly analysis of myriad relationships – both tangible and intangible – that may exist between the past and the present and/or future. The wide scope of the field, from the local to the global, helps us to discover and empathise with heritages that may vary substantially from state-centred ideas about what constitutes economic advancement or political progress in reflective societies.

Do you see a particular role for this in how we should engage with rural communities, especially in the context of heritage tourism, historical preservation, and their impacts on traditional ways of life?

ADRIANA ARISTA-ZERGA: The protection of cultural heritage changes with time, not only the international documents or conventions, but also the concepts and the studies about it focus on different aspects, such as the tangible heritage, the landscapes, community participation, etc. In the same way, the idea of the participation of the communities into the cultural heritage protection is changed, ruled by international and national bodies, but also because of the interest in their own communities. There are some things that in my opinion we have to take into account when we want to engage with rural communities, but also with urban communities.

On the one hand, disregard the idea of cultural heritage as a static element, and this idea is related as well with a new observation, the study of tangible and intangible cultural heritage as two subjects that are closely related. All the tangible goods have a meaning, importance and relationship with a community, which used, uses or will use them per generations creating at the same time new cultural expressions, showing in that way how dynamic is the cultural heritage, and with that dynamism come together different ideas of identity, power, management, etc.

“We have to recognize that the relationship between cultural heritage and communities is in many cases very conflictive.”

We know that there are people related to the tangible and intangible heritage (because they live near the place, because they keep using the traditional knowledge, etc.) and that their participation is necessary, not only to protect the cultural heritage but also for this to become an important element of development and change as part of their identity. At the same time we have to recognize that the relationship between cultural heritage and communities is in many cases very conflictive, sometimes they are perceived as “enemies of the development” (when they claim the intangibility of the area which stops, for example, the exploitation of natural resources) or people that could destroy the cultural heritage if they continue using it as part of their daily life.

Moreover, most studies or work carried out in rural communities, whether academic research, government projects or projects of non-governmental organizations, do not take into account the social structure of the community, its way of life and the interactions that they have with their cultural or historical heritage, this generates a lack of real participation from the community and therefore often generates conflictive relationships or conflicts that harm them despite working in the name of their “development.”

At the same time, there is a large gap between academic studies and what returns to rural communities, because they are not considered active stakeholders in these academic works or tourism projects. In spite of this, it is important to understand that in rural communities they also have social, political, economic, etc. internal conflicts, and therefore we have to stop to think about them in an idealized way, understanding the degree of the internal conflicts and the conflicts between

different communities, not only see them as places where the interactions were governed by fixed values of democracy, solidarity, reciprocity, etc. which in fact exist, but understand that they are not exempt from ancestral and everyday conflicts. These conflicts are quite often over land and boundaries, and are still a latent issue to this day; conflicts within communities and between them are spaces in which one more activity, such as for example tourism linked to the cultural heritage, could accentuate quarrels and breaks internally and externally.

MARK MCCARTHY: By advancing our understanding of the multiplicity of stories that impinge upon the forging of cultural memory traditions across the world, I believe that the idea of exploring pasts to comprehend presents and secure futures should be central to the mission of people working in the field of critical heritage studies. If one takes

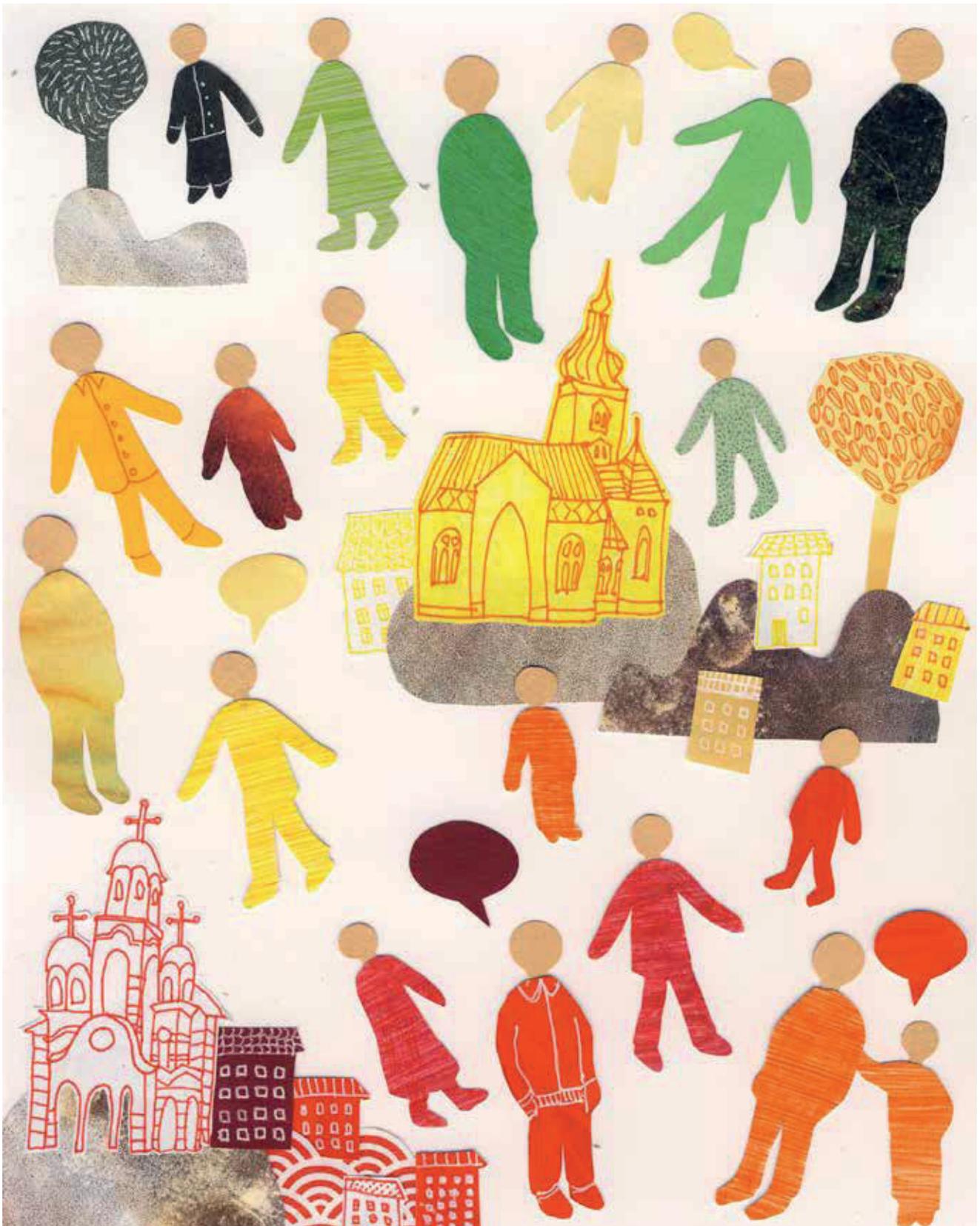


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this as a starting point, then there is certainly a case to be made for reaching out and engaging with rural communities on issues pertaining to past-present-future relationships.

One obvious example would be working on knowledge-exchange initiatives aimed not only at enriching people's appreciation of the past, but at utilising applied research to support rural communities by means of the practical use of the past in the contemporary cultural heritage, historic environment, and tourism industries. Some of this could be done by conducting research on initiatives such as: the compilation of heritage inventories, the mapping of heritage sites, the making of heritage trails, and/or the design of exhibitions in heritage centres and museums.

In addition to keeping heritage alive and making it accessible, it is essential that it is safeguarded as well. Thus another potential avenue for engagement is by providing expert advice on issues to do with the preservation of historic sites. In this day and age, there are also great opportunities to engage by highlighting the future-building capabilities of heritage, especially in relation to matters such as: commemorations, sustainable and balanced regional development, peace and reconciliation goals in post-conflict societies, and resilience in climate action.

How would you respond to defences of heritage-based tourism and its potential to lift up the standard of living in rural communities through economic development, despite potential impacts on traditional ways of life? How do you reconcile the tension between culture and economy that emerges in such situations, and is there a “right way” or balance to be found between the two?

ADRIANA ARISTA-ZERGA: As I previously highlighted the communities are active stakeholders, and they have a way of organizing their social, cultural and political interactions that needs to be understood and observed from the beginning of any academic or non-academic project. It is important as well to know their hopes and needs and the kind of relationship they have with their cultural heritage, how they perceive the idea of development that probably is not the same in every place and in every moment. By doing this, we may find a way to make them related with the projects, and figure out how we can incorporate all that information to our main objectives.

In the management of cultural heritage, there are different stakeholders and different levels of participation, from the international level mainly with UNESCO, on the national level with governments and their cultural bodies such as the Ministries of Culture, cultural experts, local and regional governments, and also the population on the level of communities. At all these levels, cultural heritage is conceived in many ways, although there may be general guidelines for its protection, management, and promotion, ruled by international or national influences. In one of the levels of this framework there is an important experience related with communitarian participation in Peru, in the Qhapaq Ñan Project. The Andean Road or Qhapaq Ñan inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in the category of Cultural Route on June 21, 2014 (single nomination from Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Chile and Ecuador).

In the case of Peru I only want to highlight that with the declaration of the Qhapaq Ñan and the situation of cultural heritage in the country, that it is part of a global and local frame, also affects differently other countries, but also the indigenous and communitarian movements and the claims against some governmental decisions showed the need for a different approach to the population and its relationship with the cultural heritage.

It's in this line that the Communitarian Participation Area from the QÑ-Peru project has been working alongside and with the communities to disseminate the objectives of the Project, by focusing not only on the use of cultural heritage but mainly in its participatory management through a participatory methodology. The work with the communities builds new and strong relationships, a job that was of a key importance for the UNESCO declaration. The Communitarian Participation Area took a substantial step forward: an interdisciplinary team in a participatory way focuses on fieldwork and linking it to the development of a conceptual and methodological framework, a kind of formalization of what they did in the visits and work with the communities. It is in this area that different concepts were developed, a new idea of community, different from the one that relates it to the peasant communities legally recognized by the national legislation or from the one that focuses the attention just on ethnic characteristics. Moreover, the concept of communitarian participation differs from the prevailing idea of participation only related with the enjoyment or cultural/educational use of the cultural heritage. The main concept developed was the PUESTA EN USO SOCIAL concept: introducing a new idea of the participation of the communities in all the process man-



ADRIANA ARISTA-ZERGA holds a PhD in Social and Cultural Anthropology, MA in Human Rights and is a lawyer. She has an expertise as a researcher

about different topics like cultural heritage, cultural law, cultural human rights, identity, museums, communities, intercultural studies, cultural tourism. She is

currently a Teacher Associate, and researcher at the Department of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Studies at the University of Nottingham.

agement, protection and enhancement of the QN, using their own spaces of decision, local assembly and arriving to agreements with the support of the community. With the same methodological approach, they are currently working alongside with people suffering from visual impairment, creating accessible routes and material in braille alphabet.

I think that work is a good example of how there are too many ways to establish relationships with the communities, cultural heritage, etc. It is difficult to know if there is a successful way to reconcile hastily the tension or decide which one is the right way, but to promote since the beginning the participation of the community, observe and analyse the different structures they have, could be a new approach that would be beneficial for all the stakeholders maybe in a more balanced and fair way.

MARK MCCARTHY: Whilst it is a fact of life that heritage tourism is essential to the livelihoods of a lot of people living in rural locations, tensions can emerge when pressures are put on traditional ways of living by an overflow of tourists into the countryside. In addition to potential damage to heritage sites themselves, another negative consequence of the commodification of the past can be the undermining of the integrity of a location's 'personality' or sense of place. An excess of tourist numbers can also place immense pressures on the cost of living, especially on the price of properties and the cost of rental accommodation.

Whilst there is no easy solution to reconciling tensions between culture and economy, society needs at the very least to strive towards sustainable heritage tourism. Those engaged in critical heritage studies can certainly play a role in pointing to how a healthy balance may be achieved, by offering training and education opportunities, advising on policy-making, and/or engaging in activism and advocacy. Ultimately, there is an onus on governments, regional authorities, and local authorities to intervene when conflicts arise between culture and economy. Whilst there is no easily identifiable 'right way', those in power certainly have no shortage of policy measures and legislative tools at their disposal. If authentic, responsible, and sustainable heritage tourism is the desired outcome, then innovative actions and robust guidelines are needed.

The list is endless, but measures such as the following immediately spring to mind: national legislation and local bye-laws, codes of practice and licenses for tour operators, caps on the numbers of visitors to heritage attractions, bans on metal detecting, special zoning (for example, for archaeological protection and architectural conservation), making certain buildings protected structures, planning restrictions on the likes of holiday homes and Airbnb operations, bans on certain types of transport options (for example, cruise ships), and so on.

Where heritage and memorial policies are concerned, governments often play a key role in legitimating certain narratives and dis-membering other ways of recounting the past. How do you consider the tradeoff between the therapeutic potential of 'letting go to move forward' and possibly suppressing an important aspect of a cultural identity in the process? Is the will to hold on to an alternative narrative of the past simply a form of escapism in the face of contemporary social challenges? What is at stake when we hold fast to unpopular, uncomfortable, or contentious ways of remembering the past?

ADRIANA ARISTA-ZERGA: As I have pointed out, cultural heritage is a space where various aspects interact, such as the exercise of power, the management, the ownership and/or use, but also where coexists different meanings of what it is or not within a society and a community. I would like to focus again on post-conflict societies where the dichotomy between remembering and to stop looking back and seeing the future are simmering. There are certain memories and remembrances that put at risk those legitimate narratives that favour the power/governments, the remembrance places (memorials, squares, etc.) of events linked for example to the violation of human rights by state forces are seen as an affront and not as part of a necessary reconciliation of the present with that painful past.

In these processes of post-conflict societies, economic and symbolic reparations are recommended to apply for victims. I consider that the symbolic reparations, such as the building and development of commemorative spaces,

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MARK MCCARTHY holds a PhD in geography and is Lecturer and Programme Chair in Heritage Studies and founder of the Heritage Research

Group at Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology, Ireland. His book, *Ireland's 1916 Rising: Explorations of History-Making, Commemoration & Heritage in*

Modern Times (Ashgate, 2012; Repr. Routledge, 2016), was shortlisted for the Geographical Society of Ireland's Book of the Year Award.



the possibility of publicizing its part of history, perhaps removed from the “official” one, are as or even more important than those linked to the economic. Therefore, what is at stake is the recognition of cultural heritage or commemorative cultural areas as spaces where various ideas of the past, present and future are combined that can coexist in a conflictive or harmonious way. The important thing is to recognize them and observe the problem as a whole as soon as you decide to intervene within these spaces.

MARK MCCARTHY: When peace and the lives of the living are at stake, I think that there is much to be said in favour of the healing and reconciliatory capacity of notions like ‘letting go to move forward’. And yes, alternative narratives about the past can certainly be influenced by societal challenges in the present day. Anybody who partakes in or conducts research on commemorations will know that are just as much about the present and future as they are about engaging with the past itself.

Having said that, I do think that there is also an obligation on society to objectively look at the past through the eyes of the people who lived in it and to try to understand the alternative futures that they once saw ahead of them. That way, it may be possible to avoid the pitfalls of naive narratives of the past that fail to illuminate the complexity of processes impinging upon cultural heritage, memory and identity. In situations when people hold fast to contentious ways of remembering the past, memory can be a source of huge dissonance and animosity.

The passage of time, however, can sometimes assist with efforts to confront awkward legacies and heal old wounds. By searching for common ground in entwined pasts, sources of enlightenment may be discovered from time to time in memorialisation policies that utilise heritage as a catalyst for the forging of peace, reconciliation and friendly relationships in the present and future.

“Alternative narratives about the past are most certainly influenced by societal challenges in the present day.”

It is not uncommon to investigate the role of political actors and economic interests in their effects on heritage, memory, and traditional ways of life. But how might we reconcile or nuance this with the agency of individual citizens in rewriting the past and their relationships to it? How can we avoid the assumption that changes to heritage and historical narratives only come via changes implemented ‘from above’?

ADRIANA ARISTA-ZERGA: I think that this question has already been answered, in some ways, with everything mentioned above. In the same way that different elements are combined in the cultural heritage, different stakeholders intervene differently in their recognition (official or not), development or enhancement, dissemination, enjoyment, etc. The problem, I think, arises from not observing them detailed and from not identifying those signs that show it.

If, as I already pointed out, we observe the communities in a wider way; observe as well both the tangible and intangible aspects of a cultural objects and the cultural heritage of different historical stages that coexist in a same territory and the way that communities relate to them, then we could identify the diversity of historical narratives and the different changes in the heritage from one moment to another, but knowing at the same time from where, from who and why these interactions happen. Probably the main changes and mainstream narratives only are the “main” because there are other voices or other dynamics that are being invisible as part of that hegemonic stories, narratives and ideas.

MARK MCCARTHY: We can incorporate the agency of individual citizens into our explorations of heritage and memory in many ways. If they happen to be alive, we need to get out into the field and talk to people in one-to-one interviews. Focus groups or questionnaire surveys offer further research possibilities. The usage of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter may also yield significant dividends. If the individuals we want to know about are no longer with us, then researchers must check whether sources like archives or methods like oral history can give us the answers to what we are looking for.

So as to circumvent the supposition that alterations to heritage and historical stories only come ‘from above’, we need to incorporate a multiplicity of perspectives ‘from below’ and try to unravel the role of various ‘sub-cultures’. As I have already mentioned, seeing the past through the eyes of people who lived in it and trying to comprehend the alternative futures that they once contemplated can open our minds to other ways of thinking. ✖

Note: This interview is a result of e-mail conversations during the autumn 2019.