3. Cultural heritage conflicts

The purpose of this approach is to shed new light on the heritage debate and research in a globalised and postcolonial world from a conflict perspective. When ever claims on a certain cultural heritage are presented publicly this will generate conflicts regarding representation: whose heritage is presented and what are the underlying interests? Cultural heritage may also generate conflicts regarding identity construction, nationalism, historiography, and cultural belonging in a present shaped by a conflict-ridden past.

We wish to open up for the growing interest in undesirable heritage (heritage of atrocity, difficult heritage etc.). Here we can see an intersection between different perspectives, both the deconstructive questioning of selection and canonizing construction of cultural heritage, as well as the need of a re-constructed link to hidden and oppressed narratives and knowledge in postcolonial and post-dictatorial times.

The role of the museum and the concept of cultural heritage in the creation of the nation

The museum has been the site of national representation and selection. Together with the map and the census the museum has been one of the most important institutions in the creation of the nation state. The museum has made it possible to choose what to preserve and remember, and what to leave to oblivion. How ever, through the criticism of the modern project the role of the museum in a globalizing world has been questioned. Whose heritage and whose world is it that is being presented? What is presented as a deviant or exotic background to a (putative) representative normativity?

At once questions regarding identity construction arise. How shall we approach the tension between (the postcolonial) need to form nation states and the contemporary critique of such projects. What role does cultural heritage play as a meaning maker in such projects? How shall we tackle the fact that our time seems to invoke different logics and different approaches in different parts of the world, and how shall we avoid reproducing a Eurocentric developmentalist view that enables a certain logic for the West and another (or several) for the rest of the world?

The growing nationalism in Europe and other parts of the world points to what is seen as one’s own culture and its essence, and emphasizes the need to elevate domestic cultural heritage. Here, cultural heritage is understood as a common ground for understanding, through which we understand and reconstruct national identity, where undesired elements are sifted out.

Criticism of such nationalist heritage discourses sometimes takes a universalistic stance, as when you from a Western, pos-Westphalian perspective claim that the need of nation state formations is an antiquated expression of strategic essentialism. Such a critique underestimates and disregards the demand of an “imagined community” in a Balkanized world. A community that not necessarily needs to be built upon ethnic commonality, but other forms of affinity as well as difference per se. Such a criticism also fails to recognize globalization in itself as such an expression of an imagined community.

Conflicts of repatriation

Another field of heritage conflicts concerns questions of repatriation. At the moment there is a process regarding the Paracas textile collections owned by the City of Gothenburg and Museum of World Culture in Gothenburg, where the state of Peru has reclaimed the textiles. In the discussion the conservation of the textiles has been put forward: Sweden has the resources and the know-how to preserve and protect the textile. Is it then just to send back these artefacts to an uncertain destiny, some have argued. Is there an international “hierarchy of conservation” where Sweden is consider to be better suited for conservation, but less so...
than Great Britain that keeps the lion part of the Linnaean natural collections?

Amidst the discussion, little research has been done on the Paracas collections held in Gothenburg, which raises the question on what the purpose is of possessing these collections. (To own them?) This, and other repatriation processes also raises questions regarding “ownership” of stolen artefacts. Do they, in the name of justice, belong to the descendents of the people who once made them, or do they belong to “mankind” as world heritage?

Right now there is another ongoing repatriation process in Sweden, where the Sami parliament has reclaimed human remains and artefacts from museums and rural community centres throughout the country. Since the 17th century the Swedish state has been collecting Sami artefacts and objects, which can be seen as yet another example of how a presentation of difference and cultural characteristics has been used to create national identity. Not the least does it reveal how Sweden also struggles with a colonial past that we have yet to come to terms with. On the one hand, Sami “culture” has historically been an excluded part of Swedish cultural heritage and seen as deviant, on the other hand Sami culture has been presented to the outside world as part of Swedish heritage in the name of multiculturalism.

Undesirable heritage
Heritage not only entails a process of canonization and history making where chosen parts get to make part of cultural heritage as a narrative from above. Cultural heritage can also be seen as a “link in a chain of public memory”. Just as Nazi Germany often gets to represent the exception of modern Europe, similar histories of “undesirable heritage” has been brought out lately as important parts of history that effects the way we look upon ourselves – but often precisely as exceptions. By turning concentration camps and prisons of former dictatorships into memorial sites and museums, one also emphasizes that this is part of a past we have already reconciled with. The performative aspect of memory – to remember – is placed outside heritage, instead of being part of it. Here post-dictatorial testimonies (testimonios) in Latin America demonstrates how memories of atrocity can be part of cultural heritage, as well as how body memory can be used to recreate and reconstruct what happened a long time ago. This is something that the choreographer and curator Ong Ken Seng, among others, has used when he made a performance with Cambodian women, performing the folklore dances that where forbidden during the dictatorship, which they still remembered from their childhood. Through the very performance of these dances, decades later, a reconstructed pre-dictatorial past is intertwined with the dictatorial times and the present.

Another example of undesirable heritage is the slave trade. How shall we handle the fact that slave castles in Africa, built by Swedes (among others) are now being turned into world heritage sites? In whose interest is this? In the interest of the descendents to former slaves? Or is it for the (white) Europeans, who now can visit these castles as tourists, thus looking back at a cruel, but long gone, past? Are these castles turned into museums of a past that no longer has a link to the present and the world order and discourses of today? Or are they living monuments over the involvement of all of us in colonialism and neocolonialism?

Yet another example of heritage conflicts has to do with natural resources and natural heritage. One of them is the Brasilian rainforest Mata Atlantica, which is claimed to be a both cultural and natural heritage now threatened by forestry devastation. Descendents of former slaves, quilombolas, who once created refuges in the forest, now claim that they have the right to this land. Another natural heritage conflicts has to do with intellectual property rights, where medical plants and crops that for thousands of years have been used by indigenous people now can be patented by transnational corporations.

These are just a few examples of conflict approaches to heritage studies, where the disciplines anthropology, international relations, conflict studies, archaeology and museum studies converge.