



Introduction

Increasingly, heritage management is becoming more and more complex. It is entangled in power dynamics and tug of war between stakeholders with a stake and those without it, in a heavily biased top down approach.¹ Across the African continent, it seems that the benefits from managing and even protecting World Heritage Sites do not significantly improve the lives of host communities because the tune played internationally at UNESCO and at various national levels is skewed in favour of those with power. As non-experts, local communities simply do not have the muscle to negotiate favourable terms essential for carving out more gains for themselves. This is regardless of the fact that the discourse of heritage has increasingly included choruses to involve communities to ensure that they benefit from this resource.² The message that runs across the breath and width of Joy’s well-written and well-argued book is that stakeholders at the bottom of the power pyramid do not have a stake at all. Unfortunately, it is the local communities – those who live with the heritage every day that constitute this group. The heritage elites comprising of UNSECO and government officials are generally perceived to be major beneficiaries who religiously enforce ideals of authenticity that ‘fossilises’ the populations at Djenne. This makes heritage

Power Imbalance and Unequal Benefit at UNESCO World Heritage Sites?

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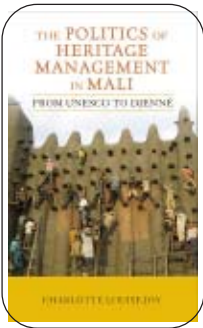
The Politics of Heritage Management in Mali:
From UNESCO to Djenne

by Charlotte Joy

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management a politically charged enterprise, one with a strong alacrity to explode as contestations and manoeuvring to access part of the heritage benefit pie escalate exponentially.

However, had the author looked beyond the national borders of their case study, they would have realised that at most World Heritage Sites in sub-Saharan Africa, just as in Mali, local communities are increasingly becoming activist and agitated.³ As experts and scientists, heritage managers take centre stage. Managers of World Heritage Sites comparatively earn a decent salary, continuously obtain training from international organisations



such as International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM) and International Council for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and in the process are rewarded financially and in terms of personal development. No detailed study has yet been done but it is possible that of the funds availed for managing World Heritage, little percolates down to either the heritage itself or the local communities.⁴ Most of the funds seem to cover operational expenses, workshops and other related activities aimed at building capacity. The tourism money too is controlled by powerful forces that dominate the international tourism

market leaving little for local communities. It must however be pointed out that, like all other uses, tourism must also contribute to the conservation and uplifting of communities.

The main contradiction in this state of affairs is that, although local communities are non-scientists, their traditions are important in preserving the authenticity of the heritage places. To the experts, authenticity (never mind the difficulty of achieving it) is essential because consumers of the past must have the quintessential experience of the heritage and communities as they were ‘back then’. While this fossilisation may be demeaning and is immoral, as Joy points out, the situation is unlikely to change anytime soon. This is because, with the ever escalating commodification of heritage, as economic resources, archaeological sites are gradually becoming entangled in the profit mantra. In the business world, Adam Smith’s reminded us that ‘it is not from the benevolence of the baker that we get our bread, but through self-interest’.⁵ Therefore, the heritage elites and other powerful stakeholders such as UNESCO are in it for the benefit too! Yes, it is important to protect heritage and UNSESCO has contributed immensely to heritage protection, but the same heritage does employ the elites who are unlikely to relinquish their position of privilege. In this game of high

stakes, locals only exist to validate and authenticate a heritage consumed by those from afar and benefitting those at the top of the pyramid.

Approaches to the study: methodology and sources

Joy has done an incredible amount of work, consulting and living with various stakeholders. The sources used include archival texts that have provided a very useful historical context to Djenné and its transformation over the last century. The author also spent some time at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. There, she had numerous conversations with the top order heritage elites and gained an insight into how UNESCO operates. In addition to doing fieldwork at UNESCO, the author, like a very thorough and dedicated anthropologist, also lived with the Djenné communities and participated in their lives. She observed firsthand how they conduct their daily lives in relation to the World Heritage status of Djenné. This participant observation enabled her to witness firsthand the dire poverty on the ground which was in stark contrast to the comfort and atmosphere-controlled offices at UNESCO in Paris, the Antiquities Department in Bamako and the heritage officials managing the site. Furthermore, she also integrated within the community to the point of obtaining training as an artisan. This empowered her to detect some undercurrents that remain forever hidden to fly-by-night researchers. To these approaches, Joy added the relevant heritage theory creating a book that is very beneficial to students of critical heritage studies. The net result of this rigorous approach is that we are presented with a compelling picture of how unequal the power and benefit relations in managing World Heritage Sites are. From a moral point of view, this requires a change of action to ensure that, if we have frozen other people's lives and culture, then surely they must derive significant benefits beyond the mere status of having a World Heritage Site next door. But sadly, heritage management is now commoditized and as with all businesses, the profit motive lingers everywhere. As such, the powerful will continuously maintain their position while the powerless have no option but to endure.

World Heritage exploits local communities? The arguments

The main argument of the book, spread over seven chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion), is that heritage management in Mali as elsewhere is contested not just in terms of who is in control but also who must be rewarded by it. Heritage thrives on the romantic idea of an authentic past, one that is equated with timelessness. According to Joy, this authentic Djenné is espoused by UNESCO, heritage officials, politicians and others who appropriate the past for contemporary consumption. Djenné's authentic past exists side by side with the wretched poverty, housing problems and general challenges facing the near 16,000 residents of the town. This is largely

because the benefits from heritage, whether in the form of restoration projects or profit from visitor receipts, do not percolate down to the local people.

Increasingly, the desire to have an authentic Djenné that mirrors everything original about the site inadvertently perpetuates some of the excesses which other international organisations such as the International Labour Organisation have campaigned against. This relates to the employment of child labour in various tasks associated with maintaining the architecture of the place in its authentic state. Should this tradition of employing children, clearly against commonly agreed values in the 21st century, still be practised? Why should UNESCO allow it? This is yet another contradiction that remarkably departs from the picture of harmony broadcasted by the heritage elites. Furthermore, the commoditization of heritage has introduced controlled entry at the site such that host communities cannot readily access their past with minority voices being swept under the carpet. It seems from reading Joy that one of the problems is the lack of communication from the top, with interventions being made in a clandestine manner and without informing local people. This situation precipitated the 2006 riot provoked by unhappiness associated with well-meaning efforts of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. As it turned out, communication and transparency can help to avoid some of the problems.

Because UNESCO generally devolves day to day management to the Malian government, it assumes an indirect role. The budget of the Cultural Mission of Mali is however very small. This means that the income-generating capacity of Djenné becomes a resource that is worth exploiting. As such, Djenné's future is increasingly becoming anchored on the pivotal economic role that heritage plays by attracting both outside sponsors and tourists. Local people such as artisans are supposed to make a living by selling authentic Djenné arts and crafts. Having spent time with artisans, Joy demonstrates that survival, not authenticity, underpins their efforts. Although architecture, embroidery and the production of jewellery in Djenné is Djennénke because it is made by local people trained in local traditions, heritage elites insist on authentic traditional forms. Rightly, Joy suggests that local communities must be given degrees of freedom to enable them and their traditions to evolve with time. Traditions are intangible heritage and they must change with time and in the process create more heritage. The production of authorised narratives by the heritage elites and the uniform story told by tour guides silences other equally important narratives, particularly those of the minorities. Ironically, giving a one-sided view of the past can be hardly regarded as authentic. Joy ends by arguing that UNESCO's work has become developmental in nature such that the organisation must also create lasting

benefits to communities that host World Heritage Sites. The African World Heritage Fund, a body affiliated to UNESCO and established in 2009, strives to ensure that World Heritage benefit local communities, but the jury is still out on whether the promised benefits will be realised or not.

Final thoughts: Heritage management as a sanctuary of the privileged

Inherently, the top down approach to heritage management – from Paris to Djenné via local heritage elites – may work given the nature of UNESCO but local communities do not feel that way. Joy (p. 205) makes the telling statement that 'it is hard to come to a definitive conclusion about the feeling of the majority of Djennénkes toward their World Heritage status, because many of them have very limited information on the subject and are therefore not in a position to judge the long term economic benefits of the classification'.⁶ This point rather dilutes the impression that was given earlier, of people not struggling to earn a living around a World Heritage Site but forced to adhere to tradition to preserve authenticity. Also, after presenting a case where UNESCO is seen to be passing on little benefits to local communities, Joy in her conclusion argues that the organisation's World Heritage programme in Africa has successfully moved attention away from a discourse that defines Africa as a continent beset by poverty and corruption. I find this ironical because everything presented in the preceding chapters unequivocally demonstrates that World Heritage status oppresses local people by fossilising them and ploughing back little benefit. Of course UNESCO has made immense contributions to heritage management in Africa but the organisation must also improve certain aspects of its conduct. For example, it must recognise that societies move with time, and so too, must heritage. Different generations have different relationships with the landscape and heritage around them so that a religious adherence to authenticity is not that helpful.

I also wondered after reading Joy whether UNESCO too should not be liable to corporate social responsibility programmes around World Heritage Sites. In the business sector, companies are required to invest in the communities in which they extract resources through initiatives such as provision of scholarships, building capacity in local schools and upgrading local infrastructure such as local road networks. For example, communities whose land hosts mineral resources are beginning to clamour for royalties from mining houses. Successful examples include the Royal Bafokeng Nation in South Africa's North West Province. This nation managed to successfully sue platinum mining giant Impala Platinum for a share of profits. The Bafokeng use the proceeds to develop infrastructure such as roads, and provide basic services such as electricity, tapped water and even scholarships. As the Comaroffs

have argued, the commoditization of heritage is tantamount to Heritage Inc., a new form of business that thrives on exploiting heritage.⁷ One can easily contrast this cultural heritage situation to that prevailing in wildlife conservation. In the latter case, the need to conserve and benefit local communities has long been realised through activities such as campfire.⁸ There is nothing stopping UNESCO from developing a system to conserve and at the same time empower local communities around World Heritage Sites. It can also encourage those who make profit from World Heritage to invest it back to develop host communities. This failure to impart visible benefits makes heritage management politically charged. Of course there is increasing talk at international levels of the need to involve local communities but powerful stakeholders must walk the talk. Otherwise the grim reality is that communities are yet to benefit from their heritage, be it in Mali, South Africa, Ethiopia, or Zimbabwe. It seems that UNESCO ducks responsibility by putting forward the argument that it works indirectly with sites via individual governments. UNESCO takes stock of management practices at regular intervals; it must also demand to see progress in the empowerment of local communities.

Finally, would the result of Joy's work have been different had the emphasis been on 'from Djenné to UNESCO'? I do believe so. This bottom up approach would have seen the author gathering data in Mali and, with the grim reality on the ground, take the observations to UNESCO. That would have empowered her to advise UNESCO that, although it works indirectly via state parties, there are some practices that have no place in modern society, such as child labour, which are sadly committed by the trinity of UWA-UNESCO, World Heritage and authenticity. Furthermore, she would have also impressed upon them the need for World heritage to benefit communities not just verbally but also meaningfully. A failure to adopt this bottom up approach placed the author in the same boat as UNESCO – 'ducking responsibility' when it matters. This is puzzling given that the case studies presented do indicate that major changes are required at Djenné and, by extension, at many of Africa's World Heritage sites because communities are suffering. A one-blanket-fit-all approach to World Heritage does not work given the varying contours of individual cases. That way, those who fight for heritage justice⁹ would have applauded Joy's intervention and congratulated her for taking the fight of Djennénkes to UNSECO. The worst case scenario is that UNESCO will continuously assume indirect responsibility and may not review this approach to see if it is best for all involved. All said, however, Joy's book is a wonderful and valuable addition to the literature and the heritage studies library. The book may not have taken the Djennénkes to the promised land of heritage justice, but it certainly pointed in that direction.

Notes

1. Chirikure, S., M. Manyanga, W. Ndoro, and G. Pwiti, 2010, ‘Unfulfilled promises? Heritage-management and community participation at some of Africa’s cultural heritage sites,’ *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16 (1-2), 30-44.

2. Chirikure, S., and G. Pwiti, 2008, ‘Community involvement in archaeology and cultural heritage management’, *Current Anthropology*, 49 (3), 467-485; Marshall, Y., 2002, ‘What is community archaeology?’ *World Archaeology*, 34 (2), 211-219.

3. Damm, C., 2005, ‘Archaeology, Ethno history and Oral Traditions: Approaches to the Indigenous Past’, *Norwegian Archaeological Review*, 38 (2), 73-87.

4. Chirikure, S., 2013, ‘Heritage conservation in Africa: The good, the bad, and the challenges’, *South African Journal of Science*, 109 (1-2), 1-3.

5. Smith, A., 1863, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: A. and C. Black.

6. Joy, C. L., 2012, *The politics of heritage management in Mali: from UNESCO to Djenné* (Vol. 7), Left Coast Press.

7. Comaroff, J. L., & Comaroff, J., 2009, *Ethnicity, Inc*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

8. Chirikure, S., Manyanga, M., Ndoro, W. and Pwiti, G. (2010). Unfulfilled promises? Heritage management and community participation at some of Africa’s cultural heritage sites. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 16(1-2), 30-44.

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