

Heritage in the Political World: Communities and Comparative Aspects (HPHE7001)

Olu Benson

2219610

Assignment 1: ‘Reflective Piece: Why does Heritage Matter?’(Gryta, 2023)

This work is divided into two sections; section one offers an overview of what heritage means and how heritage has been variously defined. The second section looks at my reflection on the relevance of heritage with a contextual focus on examples drawn from my own cultural background.

Section One

Background

Heritage refers to the legacy that we have received from previous generations. It is a collection of sites objects and traditions that bring together the art and history and all the values of different cultures around the world. Heritage is also so much more than objects and traditions, it also encompasses the lessons that we can learn from all of them – for example, lessons from who our ancestors were, where they lived and how they lived.

Heritage consists of tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage includes physical objects such as museums, buildings, monuments, artworks and archaeological sites.

Tangible heritage consists of physical buildings and archeological sites such as the famous Pyramids of Giza in Egypt and the Great Wall of China, to mention a few. Tangible heritage can also include the historical pieces that can be found in museums and private collections – these can be paintings, old books, to mention a few.

Tangible heritage also includes natural environments such as the Great Barrier Reef off the coast of Queensland in Australia, the Galapagos Island in the Pacific ocean, amongst several others.

Intangible heritage on the other hand, includes beliefs, traditions, knowledge and skills that have been transmitted from one generation to another. For example, the Chinese traditional medicine practice called Acupuncture. Intangible heritage includes cultural expressions such as dance, storytelling, festivals, rituals, music, dance, and storytelling.

The Olokun Festival in Benin City, Southwestern Nigeria, Irepa Festival amongst the Igarra people of midwestern Nigeria, and several belief and worship practices in shrines and the role these practices and beliefs play in the life of the people in terms of community engagement and sustainable development are explored in the second section of this work.

Heritage can therefore refer to various aspects of the past that are passed down or inherited from previous generations. These can include cultural practices, traditions, beliefs, customs, languages, arts, architecture, natural sites, artifacts, and other forms of human expression that have historical, social, or symbolic value.

Heritage can also be seen as a way of celebrating and preserving the collective identity, diversity, and memory a nation or community. Heritage can provide a sense of continuity and connection to the past, as well as serve as a source of inspiration, creativity and learning for the present and future.

Heritage can be tangible or intangible. Tangible heritage includes physical objects, such as monuments, buildings, museums, archaeological sites, and artworks. Intangible heritage includes cultural expressions, such as music, dance, storytelling, rituals, and festivals.

Defnitional Plurality

One of the more interesting things about heritage is the multiplicity of definitions about what heritage means. These various definitions of heritage further reflect the diversity of approaches and perspectives which exists within the field of heritage studies.

For example, The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS, 2016) defines heritage as ‘an inheritance from the past, a legacy for the present, and a bequest for the future.’ While Laurajane Smith defines heritage as ‘a broad term that encompasses the material, natural and cultural aspects of the past that society values and wishes to pass on to future generations’ (Smith, 2006:16). Smith’s definition of heritage underscores the inherent diversity of views about heritage. Heritage, according to Smith, has to do with a society of community values and wishes to preserve and pass on to succeeding generations.

Michael Herzfeld on his part, views heritage as the ‘selective appropriation of the past for present purposes, informed by contemporary values and social relations’ (Herzfeld, 2011:114).

In her fascinating investigation of heritage and memory, Sharon Macdonald defines heritage as ‘a form of cultural production through which certain things, places, and practices are selected, named, and invested with significance, often in ways that reflect their identity’ (Macdonald, 2013:76). For Sharon Macdonald, heritage can be used to construct and contest identities.

The scholars mentioned above are just a few examples of the significant contributions to our understanding of what heritage is – particularly its definitional diversity, as well as many important heritage scholars who have contributed to our understanding of heritage and how we think about the role of heritage in contemporary society.

In my cultural background, heritage is seen as a way of preserving and celebrating the collective memory, diversity and identity of a community or a nation. Heritage can provide a sense of continuity and connection to the past, while also serving as a source of learning, creativity and inspiration for the present and future.

Section Two

Reflection on Why Heritage Matters

The definitions of heritage presented in the previous section of this work, underscore the relevance of heritage. Heritage may mean various things to different people, however, essentially, heritage has to do with what a people, community or nations value as important to them and therefore worthy of preservation across generations.

Heritage is relevant because of its usefulness for community engagement, community cohesion, and for sustainable development – particularly in the developing world which is where most of the examples mentioned in this work are drawn from. particularly in the developing world

In the Nigerian context, for example, heritage can be extremely relevant for community cohesion, engagement, and for sustainable development. Community engagement entails inclusive practices and approaches that can stimulate participation by the local communities through the recognition of and involvement of their heritage sites, for example shrines and groves.

Community engagement is about connecting with the community in ways where their cultural beliefs, practices, and what matters to them, are given credence, acknowledged, enhanced and protected. This is an area in which heritage is relevant and plays a crucially important part.

Sustainability, as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation states, has to do with development which ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (UNESCO, 2015:17).

According to UNESCO, *The World Heritage Sustainable Development Policy* clearly underscores the role of World Heritage properties as a guarantor of sustainable development, with a direct call for the harnessing of their full potential for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2019:16).

The above statement by UNESCO reflects the relevance of heritage and enunciates the inextricable link between heritage and sustainable development.

Cultural heritage can help portray a people's identity. As Jan Assman puts it 'a celebration of selfhood' (Assman and Czaplicka, 1995: 126). For Assman and Czaplicka, heritage provides markers for the culture and identity of a people and communities, making them stand out, and promotes understanding of our abilities, our differences and similarities as human communities.

Writing on the relevance of heritage, Agbaje-Williams and Ogundiran aver that heritage is fundamentally important for the sustainable development of Nigeria - given the nation's vast cultural heritage assets. Both writers further posit that these heritage assets require proper documentation, preservation, conservation, and engagement with communities where they are located/hosted (Agbaje-Williams and Ogundiran, 2000:72).

Heritage is relevant as it provides information about people and can help establish important connection to the present, and between the present and the future. Heritage documents the human experience and diverse cultural identities.

Heritage is about what communities, people, and nations value. They therefore tell a compelling story of our earlier states, nations, and communities, and help us to comprehend how we got to where we are today, the direction in which we are headed, and where we could go in the future.

Heritage provides evidence about important historical events and trends and reflects people's everyday lives as well as significant achievements and when purposefully identified, evaluated, documented and preserved, can be relevant for conveying a people's history while also providing the added value of looking into the future.

Through heritage, we can see and learn more about who we are as members of the human community.

Another example of the relevance of heritage may be evident in its capacity for the sustainable development particularly in the Nigerian context where most of my examples are drawn.

According to the World Bank, the world's developing nations will need to devise their own approaches because economic development will ultimately issue from homegrown strategies (World Bank, 2000).

The sustainable socio-economic development of society invariably refers to the development of people; that is, the people who make up that society. Development is about human beings and their environment. People are the means and the fund of development. Sustainable development is therefore an 'investment in people' (Ogundran, 2013:789) as a strategy for further progress and development. Investing in people would invariably recognise who these people are, as well as their past – this is where heritage can be immensely relevant.

For Ogundiran, local practices, skills, and culture need must be recognised as they can play a vital role in the sustainable development of communities, particularly because they can foster community engagement.

Conclusion

Heritage refers to the artefacts, cultural expressions, and practices that are inherited from the past and passed on to succeeding generations because they are deemed to be important and valuable for the community, people or society. Heritage therefore reflects the traditions, beliefs, and values of a society, people or community.

Overall, heritage is a multifaced and complex concept with a variety of definitions and meanings – in turn reflecting the diversty of forms of heritage and what it means to different people.

In Nigeria for example, shrines are a cultural asset and they can play a vital role in the lives of the members of the community. In Nigeria, shrines are places of worship and pilgrimage, where people can visit for spiritual guidance, healing, success, blessings, and divine protection from supernatural forces.

Heritage can therefore be relevant for different purposes and for different people.

In terms of the cultural relevance of heritage, for example, in Nigeria, shrines can be important sites of cultural identity and social cohesion, where people come together to celebrate their customs, values and shared heritage.

Heritage is relevant for cultural identity: it engenders links to our cultural identity and helps us understand where we come from as members of the human community. In Nigeria for example, shrines are believed to be sites where connection with ancestors is enhanced and made possible.

Heritage can help foster feelings of community and belongingness, thus serving as a source of pride, identity, and inspiration. a sense of belonging and provide a source of pride and inspiration. For example, cultural tourism can be a veritable source of revenue for local communities in Nigeria – where done properly. Such cultural tourim can include visiting historical sites, attending cultural events, visiting museums, and visiting museums, can help provide significant revenue, as well as employment opportunities for the people in the local communities, as well cities.

Heritage is relevant for the preservation of of history because it can help preserve society's history.

The tourism potential of heritage and the contribution that it can make for the sustainable development of society, people and communities cannot be overemphasised. Heritage can be a significant driver for the sustainable development of Nigerian communities, for example, and help to diversify an economy that is already looking for ways to reduce dependence on the sale of crude oil.

Perhaps, the relevance of heritage may be best appreciated if we imagine a world where we have no trace, history or evidence of the past.

References

Agbaje Williams, B. and Ogundiran, A. (1992) *Cultural Resources in Ijesa land, Western Nigeria*. Ibadan: African Book Builders.

Assman, J. and Czaplicka, J. (1995) 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique*, 65. Pp. 125-135.

International Council on Monuments and Sites (2016) 'ICOMOS rallies its network of experts to serve UNESCO's World Heritage Convention'. Available at: <https://www.icomos.org/en/icomos-and-world-heritage>. Accessed 28 February 2023.

Macdonald, S. (2013) *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today*. London: Routledge.

Michael Herzfeld, M. (2011) 'Archaeological Heritage and Cultural Intimacy', *Journal of Social Archaeology*, 11(2), pp. 144–157.

Ogundiran, Akinwunmi. (2013) 'The End of Prehistory: An Africanist Comment', *The American Historical Review*, 118(3). pp. 788-801.

Smith, L. (2006) *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.

UNESCO (2019) World Heritage. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/archive/2019/whc19-43com-5D-en.pdf>. Accessed 02 March 2023.

UNESCO (2015) *Policy Document for the Integration of Sustainable Development Perspective into the Process of the World Heritage Convention*. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/document/139747>. Accessed: 02 March 2023.

World Bank (2000) World Development Report 1991. Available at: [World Development Report 1991 | World Development Report \(worldbank.org\)](#). Accessed 02 December 2022.