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REDUCING INEQUALITIES AND DECOLONISING HERITAGE PRACTICES: PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACHES

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Brief Report from the UK National Commission for UNESCO and PRAXIS at the University of Leeds. Session held on Thursday 25th February, 2021.

These sessions focused on the role of cultural heritage in reducing inequalities and decolonising heritage practices through the implementation of people-centred approaches. Conference participants were challenged to reflect on personal bias, assumptions and comfort boundaries through presentations and artistic performances from scholars, artists and storytellers from the United Kingdom, Ghana, Eritrea, and Zimbabwe, and a First Nation representative from Canada. Foregrounding creative approaches and examples from history, archives and traditions, alongside multiple languages and environments, the sessions used dialogue to highlight shared connections and experiences between participants.

KEY INSIGHTS

ONE. The SDGs framework and current approaches in heritage research, policy, and practice do not fully embrace the challenges related to past and present colonial systems of power and global inequalities.

Heritage narratives and processes have often been defined and implemented in ways that are exclusionary, colonising and sometimes contested. It is fundamental to acknowledge that there is no universal or 'right' model, and people-centred approaches are required to reduce inequalities and embrace diversity.

TWO. Cultural heritage constitutes a powerful tool to foster dialogue, inclusion, and implementation of people-centred approaches.

Heritage, including shared values and memories, can support human connection, solidarity, and resilience. If not adequately recognised and managed, it can perpetuate injustice, conflict, and colonialism.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

ONE. The SDGs framework and current approaches in heritage research, policy, and practice do not fully embrace the challenges related to past and present colonial systems of power and global inequalities.

- **Encourage the recognition and dissemination of multiple and inclusive heritage narratives**, particularly those defined by communities that have been marginalised, and the implementation of more participatory heritage management and development frameworks.
- **Use creative and arts-based practices and people-centred approaches** to disrupt existing narratives and processes.
- **Increase public awareness** of the diverse meanings and values which heritage conveys according to different individuals, groups, and communities.
- **Work with international, national, and local authorities and policymakers, NGOs, civil society organisations, museums, and other cultural institutions worldwide** to ensure equal access to heritage artefacts and archives.
- **Understand and deconstruct past and present power relations and promote equal partnerships** to reduce existing inequalities and the too frequent unilateral directionality between North and South in heritage research, policy, and practice.
- **Challenge the use of dominant languages, protocols, and practices**, and promote a fairer distribution of research funding and more ethical approaches based on North-South, South-North and South-South collaboration to foster and strengthen inclusive heritage research and practice.

TWO. Cultural heritage constitutes a powerful tool to foster dialogue, inclusion, and implementation of people-centred approaches.

- **Use multiple forms of heritage, tangible and intangible, to reconceptualise and communicate our past, traditions and difficult memories**, particularly those of colonised countries and communities, in equitable and meaningful ways, and transmit them to younger generations.
- **Harness the potential of heritage to foster deep human connection and a sense of warmth and belonging**, particularly in difficult contexts (e.g. conflict and displacement, violence, food and water insecurity, or health problems).
- **Promote more inclusive and decolonised heritage-based educational curricula and learning environments** to open conversations on the importance of local, Indigenous, and minorities' cultures and to disrupt colonial narratives.
- **Create channels to support Indigenous Peoples and other communities** to voice their concerns and encourage the development of creative networks.
- **Support access to and use of digital technology**, to empower disadvantaged people and promote equal and reciprocal exchange.
- **Use heritage to awaken the individual and collective consciousness and reflect on our own viewpoint**, and to foster a responsible shift from abstract positions about decolonialisation and inclusion to practical actions to think and act differently.



KEY ISSUES

1. For centuries, approaches to heritage recognition, protection, celebration and interpretation, have been very much influenced by a dominant methodology, a prevailing class and particular political perspectives.
2. The inscription of properties on the World Heritage List is sometimes linked to colonialism, an issue that must be adequately acknowledged and addressed.
3. In comparison to other communities, Indigenous Peoples and other minorities have been forced to sacrifice their beliefs, heritage, and ways of life more often.
4. Indigenous Peoples represent up to 5% of the world's population, but they account for about 15% of the extreme poor. They speak more than 4,000 languages, around 20 of which are lost each year. They continue to suffer widespread racial discrimination, marginalisation, erosion of distinctive heritage and other human rights violations.
5. The way academic research is funded and conducted reflects a persistent colonial approach, which supports the perpetuation of prevailing narratives and processes created in the global North.

KEY CHALLENGES

1. PERSISTENCE OF COLONIAL APPROACHES
2. EXCLUSIONARY PRACTICES
3. CULTURAL LOSS AND ERASURE
4. HERITAGE DISPLACEMENT AND DIASPORA
5. POWER IMBALANCES AND SOCIAL INEQUALITIES
6. UNEQUAL ACCESS TO HERITAGE

CASE STUDIES

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF PICTUREBOOKS IN CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DECOLONISATION

In her contribution, Dr. Carly Bagelman explored the use of picturebooks to act as vital record keeper of both colonial violence endured by Canada's Indigenous Peoples, and often dismissed or diminished Indigenous knowledges. She presented a project that aimed to embody this approach, and explored the ways in which archives were used and repurposed to convey stories of Namgis First Nations peoples and their relationship with oolichan oil (grease) in the picturebook. While a state's museum archives are widely considered keys to understanding and preserving cultural heritage, the problems with accessing or sharing these records (which are regulated by museums and copyrighted), and the highly problematic ways in which the records were collected or represented in the first place, means this form of cultural heritage itself reflects colonial power imbalances and requires creative interventions. In Bagelman's work, this took the form of collaging visual records of Namgis peoples for the book's illustrations, which falls under 'fair use' and avoids copyright infringement, and therefore allows for the records to become both public and reimagined. As demonstrated by the use of Kwak'wala words peppered through the work along with phonetic pronunciations, picturebooks can also play a small role in Indigenous language revitalisation. Picturebooks, with their marriage of words and images, are noted for their ability to support multi-lingual learning. Such texts can offer opportunities for new record making and keeping in Indigenous communities, and can also invite deeper understanding from settler communities.



ASMARA: UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITE AND THE COLONIALITY OF ITS 'ART DECO'

Eritrea is endowed with many historical, archaeological, religious as well as monastic sites, which, despite being the repertoires of history, knowledge, Indigenous wisdom, education, rich traditions, cultures and norms, are not recognized by UNESCO. Spanning thousands of years, the sites are great source of Indigenous and endogenous knowledges. Eritrea is also home to the 'Mosque of the Companions', the first ever Mosque built in Africa by the Sahaba (Companions of the Prophet Muhammad) when they fled persecution and crossed the Red Sea into Massawa in the early 7th C. AD. The case of the Sahaba Mosque offers evidence that the noble values of inhabitation, empathy, conviviality, sanctuary and welcoming were the guiding principles in the region. In the light of this, it is worth asking what humanity can learn from the gesture of genuine empathy from this part of the world. For us Eritreans, it is also worth reflecting that, in celebrating colonial urbanism and art deco, we may be magnanimizing imperial residues. Is Asmara's art deco a signifier of Eritrean colonial subjectivities or our collective agency?

In 2017 UNESCO designated Asmara as a World Heritage Site. Viewed merely in decorative terms, the designation of Asmara and its imperial architecture is certainly a welcome recognition. But one also has to critically reflect on the philosophical and epistemological aspects of such designation. Such unreflective celebration of Asmara, I must argue, forces an 'existential deviation' of the Eritrean mind, to borrow Frantz Fanon's description. In the colonial imaginative projection, Asmara was seen as an 'empty space', the antithesis to 'modernity' a frontier inhabited by 'backward population' with no episteme of their own and so, an ideal ground of experiment for what Sean Anderson (2017) describes as 'imperial projects, modernist aesthetics and fascist motives'. As an Eritrean, I ask myself, 'on what basis do I celebrate this'?





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