

Cultural Heritage (Patrimony): An Introduction.

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Abstract

Cultural heritage is important because it strongly influences our sense of identity, our loyalties, and our behavior. Memory institutions (archives, libraries, museums, schools, and historic sites) have a responsibility for preserving and interpreting the cultural record, so there are practical reasons to study cultural heritage. Attention to cultural heritage leads to wider awareness of the complexity and cultural bases of archives, libraries, and museums. Specialized terms are explained. The role of time is discussed and the past, history, and heritage are distinguished. Cultural heritage has some specialized legal and economic consequences and is deeply associated with much of the conflict and destruction in the world.

Keywords Cultural heritage, Cultural policies, identity, Memory institutions, Collective memory

Those who work in memory institutions (notably archives, libraries, museums, and historic sites) concern themselves with three distinct fields of study within the general theme of cultural heritage:

1. *Culture*: Examination of cultures and cultural heritages;
2. *Techniques*: The preservation, management, organization and interpretation of cultural heritage resources; and
3. *Institutions*: Study of those institutions that preserve, manage, organize, and interpret cultural heritage resources (and, indeed, to some extent define them) and their evolution over time.

These three areas are both important and interesting. They are quite different from each other and have their own substantial literatures. Here, however, we focus on nature of cultural heritage itself and selected terms and concepts.

Why Study Cultural Heritage?

There are important reasons to examine cultural heritage:

1. Cultural heritage affects individuals' self-identity, self-esteem, and relationships with others.
2. Cultural heritage is formative in the development of social groups.
3. Perceptions of self and of others are influenced by similarities and differences in cultural heritage.
Romeo and Juliet is based on the consequences of two groups seeing themselves as importantly different.
4. Invoking cultural heritage and the associated sense of identity is used to influence individuals and social groups, especially to instill loyalty.

5. There are powerful economic and political consequences of loyalty and rivalry. As a result, governments, institutions, and individuals are strongly motivated to influence your attitudes, values, and behavior. This is done, in part, through appeal to selected aspects of cultural heritage.
6. It is the mission of archives, libraries, museums, and other “memory institutions” to support the shaping of the understanding of the history and heritage of the populations served. Therefore, the leaders and staff of these institutions have a professional obligation to understand what this mission requires and how best to achieve it.

Most obviously a sense of cultural heritage is influenced by selectively praising what is shared by a group in order to indicate commonality, thereby promoting a sense of community, then appealing for loyalty within the group. Indirectly, this sense of a shared and desirable affinity can be advanced by influencing the selective creation, preservation, (re)interpretation, and suppression (through concealment, discrediting, or destruction) of cultural objects and narratives. Individuals involved in transmitting knowledge include parents, teachers, librarians, museum curators, archivists, historians, and researchers. Their direction and priorities are influenced by the setting of policies, by making laws, and priorities in the allocation of resources (funding, space, collections, staff). These agendas are necessarily selective both because of political influences and because resources are always limited.

Large vested commercial, political, and economic interests can be seen by browsing any newspaper and noting news and advertisements that have an ethnic or sectarian aspect. When I first taught a course about cultural heritage I feared that the students would assume that cultural heritage was a combination of innocent nostalgia and a warm sense of togetherness. So I took my newspaper to class and we identified articles that had a cultural identity or cultural heritage aspect. The *San Francisco Chronicle* of 30 August 1997 included reports on: Ethnic cleansing in Kenya; restrictions on alcohol sales in protestant counties in Texas; political activism among Chinese Americans in San Francisco; criticism of scholarships to encourage white students to attend predominantly black colleges; the Japanese Ministry of Education’s illegal exclusion of wartime atrocities from textbooks; sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland; an arrest in Vietnam for killing endangered squirrels for traditional Chinese medicine; and a massacre of three hundred Algerian villagers blamed on Islamic extremists. (There have been suspicions that military officers were acquiring valuable farm land very cheaply after such massacres and that accusing religious extremists was an easy way to discourage investigation.) All that in one day’s newspaper. Then, as now, much of the misery and destruction in the world derives from issues involving cultural identity and cultural heritage.

8. There is, in addition, an academic incentive to study cultural heritage. It opens the archive, library, and museum fields to wider awareness of both conceptual and practical issues.

Adding deliberate attention to cultural heritage leads naturally to an awareness of a broader perspective. Librarians specialize in published materials, archivists focus on their series of records, and museum staff curate and interpret their collected objects. But attention to cultural heritage issues encourages in each a wider awareness of the range of cultural influences including historic sites, school curricula, and socio-economic data sets. Since a cultural heritage perspective cuts across genres, a wider sense of “bibliographic” description, extending across multiple media and genres, is encouraged.

Cultural heritage and cultural identity are especially subjective and emotional (“affective”) areas of understanding and so attention to them requires an awareness and sensitivity to how meaning is constructed. That awareness is liable to be lacking when information services are seen as technical fact-finding or document delivery services suitable for delegation to algorithmic systems. With emotional issues, *what* is said may be less significant than *how* it is said. Linguists distinguish between the literal meaning (denotation) of a word and associated and contextual aspects that may influence how a word is understood (connotation). When statements are made about peoples’ sense of identity and personal

values, the connotation commonly reflects attitudes and value judgments in significant ways that resist algorithmic treatment. Attention to cultural heritage issues moves information system design beyond the practical manipulation of well-defined objects in operational contexts (such as accounting systems, spare parts inventories, and most database systems) into socially sensitive, politicized areas, notably sex, race, death, and patriotism. (There is a saying that the first casualty of war is truth.) Finally, because culture pervades society, attention to cultural issues requires an integrative approach across areas that might otherwise be considered in isolation: archives, museum studies, bibliography, cultural policy, anthropology, rhetoric, education, and so on.

Culture

The word “culture” has a long and complex history that has been conveniently summarized by Raymond Williams in his useful guide to words used in the social sciences.¹ Today “culture” is used with two primary meanings. In everyday speech, it usually refers to “high culture”, such as grand opera, orchestral concerts, fine art, and other exotic and expensive activities. In academic discourse, however, “culture” is used as a general term for how we behave. Edward B. Tylor’s classic definition of 1871 is: “Culture or civilization taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”² There are two important points here: First, “culture” includes all aspects of belief and behavior; and, second, it is learned through social interaction, often unconsciously. It is not genetically inherited.

Several other words and phrases are important when discussing cultural heritage, including:

Ethnic group is commonly used to refer to a social minority, such as the Roma, or an immigrant population. Hence the phrase “ethnic cuisine” is used to refer to restaurants serving unusual food. But “ethnic” really means *any* group that is in some way set apart, including the dominant social group and occupational groups, including the police, the military, or religious communities, all bodies that develop their own “corporate culture.” Consequently, on this definition anyone is likely to have membership in more than one kind of ethnic group.

Identity in this context means the psychological self-perception of an individual or of a group. Inevitably, what is special about us is the way in which we differ from others.

“*The other*” refers to those who are perceived as different from us, those in other ethnic groups. This *us* versus *other* dichotomy is a very deep, fundamental, emotional, and influential aspect of human behavior because our identity is, by definition, how our group differs from others. It is revealed in many ways: loyalty, pride, rivalry, hostility, aggression, patriotism, chauvinism, and more. Danger arises because while loyalty and pride, for example, can have beneficial effects, the temptation is to extend ones sense of difference into rivalry and selfish or destructive outcomes. Nationalism is the obvious manifestation, but it arises in relation to all of the many group and institutional affiliations in which we participate, including sports, religion, clubs, and family. As society becomes more complex with networked communications and the relative decline in the power of the nation state, we participate in more and more different groups and so the *us* versus *other* effects also become more complex.

Voice is the self-expression from within an ethnic group asserting assent or dissent.

Archetype is the term applied to typical or characteristic examples. In cultural studies, definitions and boundaries are often unclear or do not exist. There may well be a continuum of transitional forms between recognizably different examples. In the absence of clear definitions, explanations have to be qualitative and discursive. In this situation, speaking in terms of typical examples (archetypes) of different groups makes discussion much easier. The danger is in forgetting that one is dealing

¹ Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. Pp. 87-93.

² Tylor, Edward B. *Primitive culture*. London: J. Murray, 1871. P. 1.

in generalities based on a simplified, symbolic form that may not be closely related to individual cases in the real world.

Authenticity refers to the origin and form of objects and behaviors. When examined closely, determining what is and what is not “authentic” becomes problematic. An object may have the proper origin but be uncharacteristic or it may be of the expected form but of some alien origin. In any case, it is easy to overlook the actual variety and hard to know the true origin of objects and behavior.

Time: The past, history, and cultural heritage

It is important to distinguish between the past, history, and cultural heritage. The past has passed. You cannot go there! And because life and behavior, i.e. culture, changes over time, if you could travel back in time, you would find the past to be culturally different from the present. Lowenthal stated it nicely: The past is a foreign country.³ The difference is that you cannot visit the past as you could a foreign country.

History is composed of narratives about the past, always multiple, always incomplete. The words “history” and “story” have the same origin. Life is so complex that all historical accounts must necessarily involve great selectivity and extreme simplification. Each account has some purpose and so some point of view.

Historians ordinarily describe events in which they were not involved and which took place in a context that was culturally different from their own. So they need for their interpretations to find and depend on evidence, which means documents in a broad sense. “No documents, no history,” declared the French historian, N. D. Fustel de Coulanges. We can add: No history, no identity. This situation has several important consequences. In particular, historians need evidence and they depend heavily on the collections of memory institutions (archives, libraries, and museums), so what gets collected, preserved, and made accessible will heavily influence what historical narratives will be written and what can be included in them. So the successful destruction or suppression of evidence through the bombing of libraries and the destruction of records will also be influential.

There are large and interesting literatures on the politics of museums and of textbooks. Leaders want loyalty and community pride. For this reason historical narratives, which include historic site interpretation and the presentation of museum exhibits, are inevitably politically sensitive. Hence the tendency in textbooks and museums to avoid attention to unpleasant actions by one’s own group. Many questions arise: Whose history is being told? How selective is it? Whose history is not being told? How has the voice of every group been included?

Some are attracted to what is old because it is old (antiquarianism). Others want a romantic account, wishing to remember the pleasant and to forget the bad (nostalgia).

Because culture, the way we live, is dynamic, not static, attitudes, language, and values change over time. This can be seen in the role of war memorials, which are viewed with great emotion when the memories of loved ones who died remain fresh. But as time passes, the “affect” (the emotional impact) diminishes. As generations pass, the memorial has less and less significance. A similar effect can be seen in the obsolescence of subject indexing in catalogs and bibliographies. Language is used for naming documents (subject headings, classifications, ontologies, thesauri, etc.), either by marking documents with descriptive names or assigning documents to named categories. Even with differences of notation, with words (“Economics”) or codes (“330”) and vocabulary control (“Fiddles” see “Violins”; broader term “Bowed stringed instruments”), description is a language activity. The terms used were current when the indexing was done, but as time passes language, readers, and attitudes change and past indexing terms relating to socially sensitive topics (death, race, sex, patriotism, war) tend to become offensive and

³ Lowenthal, David. *The past is a foreign country.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

unacceptable.⁴ Sanford Berman's classic critique of Library of Congress Subject Headings provides a good starting point.⁵

Tradition and social memory

Culture, hence cultural heritage, is essentially active. It is performed through living, as is implied by Tylor's definition. One *lives* culture. Hence, if particular ethnic traditions are to be maintained, there has to be continuing active engagement. The word *tradition* is commonly used for this more or less conscious "handing on" of customs. But the role of performance has a corollary that is often forgotten: Traditions can also be created by introducing performance of new or imagined "traditional" customs. Some of the English and Scottish tradition that appears so historic was created in the nineteenth century, along with the Gothic revival in architecture.⁶ Church rituals, such as a royal funeral, are carefully designed and powerfully affective.

Memory is what the individual remembers. *Social memory* or *collective memory* refers to the memories that are shared within a group, such as tales of ancestors told at a family reunion or the commemoration of some past military event. These commemorative activities are a way to affirm the shared identity of a group through a celebration of what they select to remember. Understandably the commemorations and their meaning evolve as the needs of those celebrating change. (Fentress & Wickham provide an excellent introduction.⁷).

Likewise, it is because culture is how we live that cultures change as our lives do. This is especially the case with the tendency for ethnic minorities to influence, and more markedly, be influenced by the dominant culture. There may be a desire to retain a minority language, but economic and social success tend to depend on being fluent in the language of the ambient dominant culture, so local terminology, dialects, and minority languages tend to fade over time. National language policies are a sensitive and controversial topic because they promote standard forms at the expense of local and minority variety. Similarly, the language of emigrants and those in isolated locations, such as remote islands, tend to become progressively different from the form of that language in the country of origin, retaining, for example, word usage and pronunciation that are increasingly archaic as usage elsewhere evolves.

Objects: Material culture

Material culture refers to cultural phenomena embodied in physical objects such as those collected in ethnographic museums. Such objects consciously or unconsciously constitute an expression of a group. In many cases, the collected artifacts in ethnographic museums may be a large part of the evidence surviving for some past culture. The combination of the material culture, heritage sites, and literature by and about the group of interest is sometimes referred to as the *cultural record*. Preserving, managing, organizing, making accessible, and interpreting these resources is the major challenge for memory institutions.

Cultural property. One thinks of property as something that one owns and can control, but that is a simplification. In practice, owning property is not absolute, but a bundle of more or less restrictive legal rights. Owning an automobile does not authorize one to drive on the wrong side of the road or on other people's land. Owning a house may entitle one to prevent other people from entering, but not police who

⁴ Buckland, Michael. Obsolescence in subject description. // *Journal of Documentation* 68, 2 (2011), 154-161.

⁵ Berman, Sanford. *Prejudices and antipathies: A tract on the LC heads concerning people*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1971. Reprinted, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993.

⁶ *The Invention of tradition* / edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

⁷ Fentress, James, Chris Wickham. *Social memory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.

have a search warrant. “Cultural property” is property where rights are limited because of the cultural characteristics of the property. It may be acceptable to demolish a building that is of no special architectural interest. But if a building is an exceptional example of a traditional form of architecture, then it is likely to be subject to legislated restraints requiring not only that it be preserved but also that any changes to it must be approved by inspectors as conforming to its style and materials. The reason is the desire to preserve irreplaceable cultural heritage. Similarly, there are commonly restrictions on selling to other countries objects that are considered to have significance as cultural heritage. This applies especially to works of art. In the United Kingdom, legislation, known as the Waverly Rules, require that British institutions must have an opportunity to buy cultural treasures intended to be sold abroad.

Cultural values and policies

Cultural heritage policies are purposive. They reflect social, political and economic agendas and, therefore, values. They are, therefore, likely to be more or less controversial because of disagreements over values, factual interpretations, and priorities

*Example: The Enola Gay controversy.*⁸ The Smithsonian Institution is the national museum in the USA and its National Air and Space Museum planned an exhibit to marking the 50th anniversary in 1995 of the end of World War II featuring a restoration of the *Enola Gay*, the bomber that helped to end the war by dropping the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. A fierce controversy developed over how this event should be presented. For military veterans it had been a justified act that had achieved decisive victory and finally ending an appalling war in which so many of their comrades had been killed or injured. But others questioned the necessity for using that terrible bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a nearly defeated Japan. Historians had questioned whether the public justification for bombing at the time had been entirely honest. Anger over the exhibit eventually threatened the funding of the Smithsonian budget. The exhibit was withdrawn and later replaced by a less controversial one.

Cultural relativism. A liberal view supporting equality among peoples indicates that their cultural preferences should be respected and a policy of respect and equal treatment is known as *multiculturalism*. Yet, when examined closely, one soon finds conflict when underlying values differ. For example, most people would agree that sticking knives deep into live animals for amusement is wrong, but it is defended as cultural heritage when it is called bull-fighting. Slavery and the exploitation of women have been long-established cultural traditions. Activists seeking equality for women are engaged in cultural engineering and deliberately trying to change long-established cultural heritage. Critical analysis of cultural practices is likely to raise ethical conflicts. Holding personal values can conflict with accepting the equality of different cultures.

Cultural policies

Given the political importance of identity and loyalty, governments, corporations, and other organizations have a wide variety of policies intended to influence cultural outcomes. For example, modern times have been associated with increased standardization. The rise of the nation state, printing, increased literacy, and the rise of nationalism was associated in the nineteenth century with school textbooks designed to guide teachers as well as pupils and university departments to establish and teach canonical accounts of the national history and the national language.

The Romantic Movement in the arts aligned with political interests and led to policies to protect and to preserve ancient buildings that were considered to reflect attractive national traditions. One of the pioneers was the novelist Prosper Mérimée (1803 – 1870), author of *Carmen*, who became France’s first

⁸ Gallagher, Edward J. The Enola Gay controversy. [Cited 2013-11-5].
<http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/enola/>

inspector-general of historical monuments and rescued the walls of Carcassonne from being demolished to provide space for new houses. Another was architect Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc (1814 – 1879) whose “restorations” were more gothic than the originals.

In the twentieth century immigration and citizenship policies in most countries strongly favored the dominant “race.” Race has no biological meaning in this context because homo sapiens is a single species, but, of course, that has not prevented the widespread use of “race” for designating ethnic groups, widespread “racism” and “racist” policies.

Cultural foreign policy (or *cultural diplomacy*) refers to diplomatic and other initiatives taken by all but the poorest countries to promote a sympathetic knowledge of their country in other countries. The programs include cultural attaches in embassies, subsidized cultural centers, cultural exchanges, tours by musicians and intellectuals, financial support for foreign scholars, endowed chairs in foreign universities, carefully designed news services, and the promotion of the national tourist industry. These activities peaked during Cold War rivalries and reflected commercial and political agendas as well as a sustained effort to induce favorable attitudes. It is a form of propaganda, which depends on credibility if it is to be effective.⁹

The British Council, for example, promotes the active use of the English language and has provided excellent library services in many cities around the world for journalists, politicians, academics and others expected to be influential. The British Broadcasting Corporation “has offices around the world, with staff who have local language skills who can better understand what local audiences and clients are looking for, and who act as global ambassadors for the BBC and the UK.”¹⁰ Large cities commonly have or had a “Goethe Haus”, a “Maison française”, and/or a United States Information Service library.

Economics of cultural heritage

Tourism is a leading industry in most countries and heritage sites (national parks, museums, old towns, stately homes, picturesque villages, and traditional landscapes) form a central part of the attraction and require a major investment of public funding for conservation and restoration. Strict controls on land use and building practices are necessary. Many countries try, with difficulty, to protect their publishing and film industries from free trade competition.

The high prices paid by collectors have generated a very large underground trade in forged and stolen works of art, robbery of archaeological sites, and the smuggling of protected material culture.

Memory institutions. Memory infrastructure

Archives, libraries, museums, and schools are deeply engaged in cultural policies. This is an active, not a passive role. Public and national libraries, in particular, are not simply collections or information services. Their purpose is to develop their communities: economically, socially, politically, and culturally. Large public libraries in the USA used to teach English to immigrants and hold classes on how to prepare for citizenship before other institutions were available to provide this kind of help. Cultural policies are so embedded in the world around us that they are easily overlooked unless one stops to examine them.

⁹ One good introduction is Oren Stephens: *Facts to a candid world: America’s overseas information program.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1955.

¹⁰ British Broadcasting Corporation. *Inside the BBC. What we do. Around the world.* [Cited 2013-11-5] Available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/aboutthebbc/insidethebbc/whatwedo/aroundtheworld/>

Museums are expected to celebrate their region and to have explicitly educational programs. It is not surprising that they focus on the positive achievements of the past rather than the disgraceful. Museum exhibits are necessarily interpretive and an interpretation that visitors find offensive can create difficulties for the museum even if it is historically correct. Museums and historic site interpretations tend to tell the history of the struggles, suffering, and achievements of good people.

Example. The Atatürk Mausoleum commemorating Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding figure of modern Turkey, is a major attraction in Ankara, the capital. It is huge, covering the top of a hill and set within a large Peace Park. It is approached along an imposing avenue (Road of the Lions), flanked by statues evocative of the ancient civilizations of Anatolia. The main building (the Hall of Honor, the location of Atatürk's tomb) is somewhat reminiscent of the Parthenon and faces on to a Ceremonial Plaza designed for 15,000 people and surrounded by low buildings containing memorabilia of Atatürk. It is guarded by imposing soldiers in impeccable uniforms.

Close to Atatürk's tomb are brass plaques containing inscriptions. One reads:

INSCRIPTION OF ATATÜRK'S LAST MESSAGE TO THE TURKISH ARMY.
I ADDRESS THE TURKISH ARMY WHOSE RECORD OF VICTORY STARTED AT THE
DAWN OF THE HISTORY OF MANKIND AND WHICH HAS CARRIED THE LIGHT OF
CIVILIZATION IN ITS VICTORIOUS PROGRESS. IF YOU SAVED YOUR COUNTRY
FROM OPPRESSION, TRAGEDY AND ENEMY INVASION IN THE MOST CRITICAL AND
DIFFICULT TIMES, I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT THE FRUITFULL ERA OF THE REPUBLIC
EQUIPPED WITH ALL THE MODERN WEAPONS AND MEANS OF MILITARY SCIENCE,
YOU WILL CONDUCT YOUR DUTY WITH THE SAME LOYALTY. OUR GREAT NATION
AND I ARE SURE THAT YOU ARE ALWAYS PREPARED TO CARRY OUT YOUR DUTY
OF DEFENDING THE HONOUR OF OUR COUNTRY AND OUR CIVILIZATION AGAINST
ANY DANGER, FROM INSIDE OR OUTSIDE.
OCTOBER 29, 1938. PRESIDENT MUSTAFA KEMAL ATATÜRK.

THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN INSCRIBED ON THE WALL OF THE MAUSOLEUM ON THE
OCCASION OF THE CENTENNIAL OF ATATÜRK'S BIRTH.

Completed in 1953, the Mausoleum was designed to impress and to reinforce loyalty to Atatürk's vision of a modernized Turkey. It is a fine example of an investment in creation of a cultural heritage.

In conclusion: About cultural heritage

Cultural heritage includes resources from which our cultural identity is formed. Culture is present, so cultural heritage is historical. Cultural heritage is active not passive, even though choices may have been made for us by our parents, teachers, and other influential individuals. Culture and cultural heritage are both an individual and a group phenomenon. Cultural heritage influences our knowledge, beliefs, and emotions. We are all in multiple social groups (family, workplace, friends) so we share in multiple cultures. Cultural heritage is partly a matter of choice. We can accept and reject traditions, though often only with difficulty, and we can move to new environments. Cultural heritage meets individual and group needs and it helps explain how we think and how we live. The specific fields of study within cultural heritage – the examination of individual cultures and cultural heritages; the preservation, management, organization and interpretation of cultural heritage resources; and the study the institutions that manage cultural heritage resources – are easier to address than cultural heritage in the abstract.

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Appendix: Three cultural heritage assignments.

1. Find a newspaper with international coverage and examine what is reported in it. Note which of the news events (and the rhetoric about those events) has a cultural or cultural heritage component, including differences in ethnic, religious, and political values. Make a list with very brief explanations. What proportion of the newspaper is included?
2. Look at a selection of the examples and comments in Sanford Berman's *Prejudices and antipathies: A tract on the LC heads concerning people*. (1971, reprinted 1993). Has the Library of Congress made the changes that Berman wanted? (Use <http://authorities.loc.gov/>). Very briefly report on what you found. Do you agree with Berman. Add an example of your own.
3. What is changing *your* cultural heritage? What policies influence that change?