

Undertaking a heritage ethnography in Kosovo

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Introduction

Bordering Montenegro, Albania and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo (Serbian) or Kosova (Albanian) is the subject of ongoing territorial dispute. Although technically part of Serbia, the province has been an international protectorate of the United Nations (UN Security Council Resolution 1244) since June 1999. The systematic targeting of the heritage of the ‘other’ in former Yugoslavia has been described by scholars as the suppression of a “culturally diverse and hybrid past, in favour of a mythical golden age of ethnic uniformity” (Hall 1998, cited in Bevan 2006:6). The Director-General of the United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), Koichiro Maatsura, having already stated that the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas was a “crime against culture” (Reuters 12th March 2001) further emphasised the link between built heritage and identity in his statement on the 2004 wave

of destruction in the province; “beyond monuments and heritage, it is memory and cultural identity that are being destroyed” (Maatsura 2004). The NGOs working on heritage rehabilitation (Figures 1 and 2) claim that their work promotes dialogue and reconciliation within and between communities and institutions. The basis of these claims consists in their ability to build relationships and create trust between the NGOs,



Figure 1. Restored interior of a mosque gutted in the 1998-99 conflict.

communities, institutions, and government bodies through the act of restoring a ‘common heritage’ using a ‘balanced approach’. They see themselves as a channel for dialogue and in certain cases as trusted providers of a neutral space in which communities can interact and discuss not only their experiences of heritage but also broader social issues.

Aims and Objectives

This report focuses on fieldwork undertaken on the interface between heritage and development in post-conflict contexts. In order to understand how and if heritage can achieve reconciliation, the research had two broad aims: firstly, to understand local and international perceptions of heritage reconstruction and restoration strategies, and secondly to



assess the impact of destruction and restoration on memory and therefore the renegotiation of identities in a changing political landscape. A further aim of this report is to analyse the ethical and psychoanalytical dimensions of undertaking heritage ethnography in a post-conflict setting to highlight the choices and roles made and played by the heritage ethnographer.

Figure 2. The NGO Intersos’ restoration of a Mosque in Peje/Pec, 2006.

Fieldwork took place during consecutive summers (July 2005, June 2006) and centred on Kosovo due to the centrality of heritage in status talks on the future of the province. International agencies claim that heritage has a central role in bringing about ‘reconciliation’ and ‘democracy’. This has led to my choice of anthropologising Western organisations (Harrison 1991; Chakrabaty 2000; MacDonald 2001; Labadi 2006), mirroring a shift away from traditional ethnographies of small-scale communities. Personal experience of working within similar organisations operating in Kosovo provided motivation for understanding the power and status of international voices in post-conflict situations where a culture of expertise dominates official decision-making.

Methods: an Ethnography of Heritage

The 2005 fieldwork season was an intense introduction to heritage restoration in post-conflict contexts. In 2006, the local staff of a Swedish NGO, Culture Heritage without Borders and an Italian humanitarian NGO Intersos, accompanied me on field visits and helped arrange interviews as well as facilitating by acting as translators where necessary. Characterised by in-depth, face-to-face research with people as a means to understanding their culture, ethnographic research includes a wide range of methods employed in the field of anthropology, the main one being participant observation into which other methods are embedded (Jones 2005). It is a mixture of unstructured and semi-structured interviews, combined with ethnographies of space and organisational values. The use of unstructured interviews draws on the hermeneutic tradition in sociology, namely the belief that events should be analysed in relation to the meanings given by participants in that culture. These meanings then inform a more structured guide for subsequent interviews (Bernard 2002: 206).

The progress of my fieldwork changed the expected outcome of my research and has led to a shift in the overall focus of the project: instead of attempting to discuss all of the communities' perspectives, the study specifically explores the narratives of both internationals and Albanians from Kosovo. This occurred in part because initial analysis of organisational documentation proved to be of a highly technical nature. Furthermore, it became apparent that it would be difficult to reach areas where minority communities live including Serbians, Turks, Roma, Ashkaelia and Egyptians, who collectively making up c.12% (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2002: 46) of the population.

Participant Observation

Undertaking an ethnography of Western organisations as a 'Western' individual challenges traditional notions of insider/outsider roles of social research (Losi 2001). As an intern at the Swedish heritage NGO, Cultural Heritage without Borders I was aware of the 'ghosts' of my own role (ibid 2001: 8). The staff were both informants and facilitators of further interviews. I tried to involve them as much as possible in establishing the goals of the fieldwork by using an open interview technique and informing them of my progress with other interviews. My presence in the office allowed me to take part in the daily life of architectural conservationists, humanitarian workers, administrators, logisticians and secretaries, staff of the NGO who were mainly Albanian. By accompanying them in their daily tasks I was able to take part in several strategic meetings and project activities, including an inter-ethnic dialogue session run by Intersos, and three governmental policy meetings at the Ministry of Culture and a debate on urban development. Due to the dominance of the UN-led administration in the province these were either conducted in English directly or using simultaneous interpretation. Notes were taken in my field diary and in public meetings, recordings were made on a voice recorder.

Interviews

It was not possible to set up interviews in advance, so a snowballing technique was used, with each subject producing a short list of their own contacts resulting in chains

of meetings were set up. I interviewed representatives of all of the organisations working on heritage. UNMIK's province is not a big place, everyone knows everyone, and a month is plenty of time to speak to the key actors. Interviews were undertaken in two of the provinces larger towns, Pejë/Pec and Prizren, and its main city, Prishtinë/Priština as well as in the village of Velika Hoca, a Kosova/Kosovo Serbian settlement.

A total of 48 interviews were held with a range of actors and beneficiaries involved with internationally funded projects in the heritage field. Subjects included government officials from UNMIK and elected members of its parallel body (the Permanent Institution of Self-Government), local and international NGO employees and consultants, members of the state body legally responsible for monuments and archaeology (the Institute for the Protection of Monuments), local professionals and academics, project beneficiaries, local community groups and members of the Orthodox monasteries in the province. Due to the reality on the ground, it was difficult to speak to minority communities, so most interviews were undertaken with Kosovo's Albanians, who presently make up c.90% of the population. In the semi-structured interviews, questions were grouped into four main areas: processes, relationships, acts and activities and the meanings of cultural heritage restoration. The interview technique consisted of formal recorded and unrecorded semi-structured interviews, with and without note taking, and informal recorded and unrecorded conversation with and without note taking.

The use of interpreters, when needed, was part of the process and I deliberately attempted to include them both during and after, asking for their thoughts and views of the interview. Over the month, previous interviews began to inform later ones as I increasingly asked interviewees to comment on information I had gathered. I also de-



Figure 3. Cultural Heritage without Border's restoration of an Ottoman Town House in a Serbian Village 2006.

liberately made incorrect statements about restorations in the province (Bernard 2002) in order to prompt clarifications as well as remind interviewees of my lack of cultural or specialist knowledge.

Field Visits

Field visits were determined by the daily routines of the NGO staff. I accompanied them on several of their site visits in a busy period during which both organisations were preparing for the inauguration of important restoration projects. These visits took place in Prishtinë/Priština, Prizren, Pejë/Pec, Decan/Decani and Rahovec/Orahovac municipalities and included museums, ongoing and completed restoration projects, as well as two sites damaged in the March 2004 riots. Restoration projects included: a watermill, a restored Ottoman town house (Figure 3), a Turkish bath complex, two mosques, several defensive town houses or *Kulla*, the Orthodox Church's Patriarchy in Pejë/Pec and the Decan/Decani Orthodox Monastery. The latter was, until July 2006, the only World Heritage Site in the province, although it has recently been joined by the Patriarchate and two sites under a joint listing on the World Heritage in Danger List with the apparently controversial title of 'Mediaeval Monuments in Kosovo'.

Preliminary Analysis of the Ethnography's Themes: Balkan Metaphors

I transcribed all the interviews and field notes and drew out the main themes by codifying and analysing interview summaries. Discourse analysis of organisational literature together with interviews conducted with 'international' staff emphasise a core concept of 'universal heritage value' as a precondition for minority rights, part of the path to a democratic and secure Kosovo. This 'universal value' is being employed by international agencies to protect and promote heritage regardless of its association with an ethnic group. Universal value is used by one NGO as a tool for improving dialogue at a community level by taking mixed groups on cultural heritage tours. The dialogue project's long-term aim is to encourage co-existence as a precondition for reconciliation.

During interviews with staff from the dialogue project, it emerged that Kosovo Albanians were using memories of the pre-conflict past as a channel for nostalgia, embodying the hope of peaceful co-existence with their neighbours in an inclusive Europe. A civilizing discourse pervades many of their narratives.

“I believe physical restoration, or support to other aspects of cultural heritage, gives one society the possibility to respect the values of each other and also theirs, and through that value try to make people more human.”

NGO employee (local)

Thus restoring minority heritage has become a way to 'recreate' a past, one that is able to promote a future of peaceful co-existence. It also symbolises atonement for

the 2004 acts of destruction. However, behind the rosy view of ‘universal heritage value’ are tales of exclusion and a myriad of subversive accounts of heritage. Despite the emphasis on universal values, a cultural-historical emphasis on traditional, authenticity-based values and thus an evolutionary perspective, favours narratives of cultural



Figure 4. Unveiling a statue of one of the leaders of the pacific resistance movement in front of Pristina University.

continuity of a building, site, landscape or tradition. These are prerequisites for mythical origins of nations and legitimise the most recent occupation (Scham and Yayha 2003).

“Cultural heritage does not belong the 13th century. All monuments are multicultural; they were first Illyrian, then Roman, then Byzantine”

NGO employee (local) D

Ethnographies of space highlighted certain silences in official heritage discourse. The existence of commemorative sites including statues (Figure 4), monumental graves, a museum exhibition dedicated to KLA soldiers, posters of fleeing refugees marking seven years since the flight of Kosovo’s Albanians, anti-UNMIK material culture and acts of resistance all betrayed the international community’s inability to bring the less savoury aspects of memory and its materiality out into the open for public debate.

Discussion

As Jones (2005) has recommended that such methods be integrated into routine heritage management in order to avoid the reproduction of top-down power structures and a monopolisation of stewardship that risks alienating and pacifying the public, it is all the more important to analyse the power and status of international voice in post-conflict

situations, where a culture of expertise dominates official decision-making. Psycho-analytical critique of the role of the so-called international community has highlighted the ambiguity of such a title, “ambiguous because it is in its name that the former Yugoslavia has been subjected first to indifferent, then to the NATO war and finally to a campaign of assistance which has often been confused and incompetent” (Passerini 2001: 225).

Losi (2001) describes the international humanitarian actors in the Kosovo in 1999 as “co-producers and co-narrators” of the “constellation of violence” (Losi 2001: 6). They give meaning to the stories people exchange in situations of conflict, part of “a narrative scheme contained in the trilogy: aggressors / victims / authorities” (ibid 2001: 6). Heritage ethnographers should be aware of the roles they may unconsciously adopt; described as their “ghosts” (ibid 2001: 8). Aware of my position as a potential contributor to the reproduction of this negative constellation of roles, I attempted to design the project and its methodology in recognition of it, using this identity to position myself throughout the fieldwork. I wanted to engage with my ‘ghost’, make it visible to all during the ethnography, constantly asking informants to describe how they related to international players, and their views of heritage. Opening each interview with a short description of my background, aims and an ethical statement, was a harrowing experience on a personal level in terms of their initial perception of my research techniques, not to mention project planning. However, it allowed the informers to take control of the situation and openly collaborate in the outcomes of the research.

Conclusions

Seven years on from the initial humanitarian movement in the province, the narrative of aggressor / victim / rescuer is still dominant although the players may have assumed different roles depending on the various parameters. Using an ethnographic approach helped me to break away from the role of expert or rescuer and offer the space in which interviewees could discuss these same dynamics, those which were intertwined with acts of violence, including those against heritage.

An ethnographic approach is especially relevant to international NGOs that undertake heritage restorations, as their role of facilitators of dialogue and reconciliation needs to avoid the reproduction of this trilogy. By acknowledging my ‘ghosts’ and choosing to focus on the dynamics represented by such a trilogy, I hope to offer a fresh critique of heritage and its attempts to achieve reconciliation in areas of post-conflict.

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