If we draw a line around a shadow, does this mean that the shadow will not move from where it is initially cast? If we include a place on the World Heritage List for its intangible cultural heritage values, will this prevent those values from diminishing or changing? Intangible cultural heritage value is not an ‘intrinsic quality’ or an ‘inherent meaning’ of a place; it is an ascribed value (Tainter et al. 1983). If the physical fabric of a place is preserved, it will not necessarily preserve the intangible values ascribed to it. Conversely, if a place is destroyed, the intangible heritage values associated with that place may still remain.

This paper, first presented at a symposium in Burma in 2004, reviews the history of how intangible cultural heritage value has been included on UNESCO’s World Heritage List. In order to do this, and to illustrate the nature of intangible heritage value, and how it can be interpreted and managed, it will look particularly at places in Europe and South Africa that have been included on the World Heritage List for their intangible cultural heritage values. Unlike places such as Uluru-Kata Tjuta in Australia, these are not places with sacred spiritual value but places where the associated, intangible heritage value is linked to memories of what happened at these places, places such as the German concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland.

Introduction

As we move through the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is noticeable that intangible cultural heritage values are very much in vogue today’s discourse on cultural heritage, its preservation and management. In 1977 the World Heritage Committee adopted criteria, six cultural and four natural, to provide a measure for identifying ‘outstanding universal value’, as identified in the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, commonly known as the World Heritage Convention, and thus identify those properties suitable for inclusion on the World Heritage List. One of these criteria, cultural criterion (vi) was developed to facilitate the inscription of intangible heritage values:

Be most importantly associated with ideas or beliefs, with events or with persons of outstanding historical importance or significance (UNESCO 1977:CC-77/CONF.001/8 Rev.).

As the western-centric ideas of the 1970s, and what constituted cultural heritage values, moved away from the tangible, towards more plural interpretations and the intangible, the World Heritage List has begun to reflect these changes. There are some places, however, that were inscribed purely for their intangible cultural heritage values very early on in the history of the Convention. These include the slave forts of the Island of Goree, Senegal, and Auschwitz-Birkenau, Poland, both of which were included in the first two years of inscriptions on the List in 1978 and 1979. This paper will examine how ideas about intangible heritage values have been applied and are manifested through the application of the Convention to various World Heritage sites from 1978 to the present day.

This paper then discusses the problems of trying to retain and protect the intangible cultural heritage values for which places were inscribed on the World Heritage List. Such values are mutable, ascribed values and often an emotional response to a place. They are subject to social preference and memory and, in spite of the ‘compulsion to locate’ such values in place, there are problems of attempting to include them on heritage registers as static and immutable. Including intangible cultural heritage on the World Heritage List, or any other heritage register, can be likened to drawing a line around a shadow in order to preserve that shadow, to freeze that shadow, where it is initially cast.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

The rows of concrete pillars swathed in thick, opaque, plastic sheeting tell more about the eternal conservation of the fabric of Auschwitz-Birkenau than about the eternal memory of the millions of people killed there at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. It is, however, the preservation of the material remains, the mnemonic, which today helps ensure continued commemoration at the largest graveyard in the world; Auschwitz is the locus of lost people and recovered memories. It is for its intangible cultural values, for its association with a dark, significant event in history, that it is inscribed on the World Heritage List.

It is a hot spring day, the sky is a cloudless blue, the trees are in leaf and the grass is thick and lush, the birds sing; I pass through the entrance corridor of the ‘museum’, past the information window and the café and out into the bright sunlight. As I enter the courtyard, I look at a strangely familiar scene, seemingly innocuous two-storey red brick buildings and a gateway with ARBEIT MACHT FREI curving above it in large black iron letters. The involuntary response that passes across my body and causes every hair to stand on end, chillingly reminds me that I am at Auschwitz. I am at a place where the Nazis exploited and murdered 1.5 million people, among them: Jews, Polish prisoners, Soviet prisoners of war, Roma, homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses and criminals – but mostly European Jews.

Our guide, a man in his late thirties, is softly spoken. He leads the group slowly and respectfully through the barracks at Auschwitz I, explaining the displays and the terror and inhumanity that occurred at this place. He takes us to the ‘wall of death’ where dissidents and criminals were shot before ‘industrial’ execution at the camp got fully underway. Wreaths lie at the foot of the wall proclaiming the sorrow, personal or collective, of those left behind. As we walk on the streets that divide the barrack blocks we are told the trees, that today house the voices of the spring birds, were planted in honour of a visit from Himmler – to make this place of death look more appealing.
We travel the three kilometres by bus to Auschwitz II – Birkenau. We pass through the gateway that marked the end of a journey and the end of life for so many men, women and children. We visit a surviving timber barrack hut with its packed earth floor and flimsy walls. This is the end of our journey, of our experience of Auschwitz. Here our guide apologises that there is no time to visit and pay our respects at the large memorial erected in 1967 to those killed here. There is no time to walk up the railway ramp where people were selected for instant death, to visit the site of their extermination, the gas chambers, the crematorium. There is no time to visit the ponds where the ashes of thousands were dumped. There is no time to visit the exhibition of family photographs, collected from those that were murdered day after day by the Nazi killing machine. He says our package tour has no time. Our guide is knowledgeable. He speaks excellent English. He is reverent. He is one of the museum archivists. He is a well-educated Pole. His family were murdered at Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was one of the first two cultural sites to be included on the World Heritage List for its intangible cultural heritage values. Auschwitz-Birkenau was included on the List solely for its intangible cultural heritage values as a place, which Pierre Nora (1989) calls a lieu de mémoire 'a place of memory', or what Crang and Travoulou (2001) describe as a place 'mediated via memories'. It was not included on the List because of its exceptional architecture but because of what happened there during WWII, an event of 'outstanding universal value'.

In the wider heritage profession, the term 'intangible heritage value' has been used recently to refer to this non-material, 'associative' value, which includes 'social' value and 'spiritual' value. It has been used to describe the special association of people with a place and the meanings that they attribute to that place; this is how it is used in this paper. Articles 1.15 and 1.16 of the Australian ICOMOS Burra Charter explain that:

Associations mean the special connections that exist between people and a place. Associations may include social or spiritual values and cultural responsibilities for a place.

Meanings denote what a place signifies, indicates, evokes or expresses. Meanings generally relate to intangible aspects such as symbolic qualities and memories.

(Australia ICOMOS 1999)

Until the recent inclusion of cultural landscapes on the World Heritage List (1992), the introduction of the Global Strategy for a representative, balanced and credible list (1994), and the adoption of the Nara Document on Authenticity, also in 1994 – the World Heritage Convention had been largely identified by the World Heritage Committee as operating within a Western-centric paradigm. Indeed, the World Heritage Convention was drafted in exactly that mode (WCCD 1995). In spite of this, intangible cultural heritage values have been identified for inclusion on the List, albeit within that presupposed western-centric paradigm.

History of intangible heritage value on the List

The World Heritage Convention (Convention) is an international treaty that was conceived and developed by countries of the Western world that were primarily concerned about the destruction and disappearance of the built, monumental, heritage of mankind. It is a treaty that, in its conception and early execution, did not consider as a primary function the protection of the non-monumental heritage of societies. In spite of this, however, there was always the facility to include non-material heritage values on the List through a place's association with an event in history or with ideas or beliefs of 'outstanding historical importance or significance' (UNESCO 1977:CC-77/CONF.001/8 Rev.).

After several alterations to the wording of criterion (vi) of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, and following final revisions adopted in 2004, a place will now be listed on the basis that it:

(vi) be directly or tangibly associated with events or living traditions, with ideas, or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance. (The Committee considers that this criterion should preferably be used in conjunction with other criteria). (UNESCO 2005)

Only nine places have ever been inscribed on the List solely for their intangible cultural heritage values and these nine are quite diverse. In 1978, when the black slave forts of the Island of Gorée were nominated for inscription to the World Heritage List, it was the first of its kind. It was among the first seven cultural places to be inscribed on the World Heritage List. It was one of the first two places in 1978 to be inscribed solely on the basis of cultural criterion (vi) and one of just nine that have ever been inscribed solely on the basis of their non-material, intangible heritage values. Gorée was the first slave fort, the first place of what Michel Parent (1979) would call a place of 'negative historical value', the first place of Nora's lieux de mémoire or 'place of memory' and what has transpired to be the first place of atonement to be included on the List. The justification by the Republic of Senegal for the inscription of the Island of Gorée was 'prompted by humanistic considerations', that it should serve as a symbol for the "black man's suffering throughout the ages' and act as a 'sanctuary of reconciliation between men' for the 'exchange of noble ideas and forgiveness' (Republic of Senegal 1981).

At the same time as the Slave Forts of Gorée, a second place was inscribed. This was the archaeological site of L'Anse-aux-Meadows National Historic Site, in Newfoundland, Canada. Its significance relates to the very early European settlement of North America: the eleventh-century Viking settlement on the site is an example of early human migration and discovery of the world. It is also a tribute to the western-centric leanings of the World Heritage Committee!

In 1979, inscription on the World Heritage List under criterion (vi) was extended to The Forts and Castles [Volta, Greater Accra and Central and Western Regions] of Ghana; Independence Hall, USA and Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp, Poland.

The Nazi concentration and death camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland, inscribed in 1979, commemorated and recognised the terrible human atrocity of an event in history. As a nomination from the Polish Communist Government, however, it was primarily nominated to commemorate Polish loss and Polish martyrdom – not Jewish. The Committee deliberated over this nomination when it was first presented in 1978 stating that the World Heritage Convention was conceived in such a way as to reflect the 'heights of human achievement' and not such places as Auschwitz-Birkenau (Interview, 5 July 2002, Prof R Slatyer). The controversial inscription of Auschwitz-Birkenau was delayed for one year.
The last four places to be inscribed on the World Heritage List solely for their intangible heritage values were a site that represented the cultural tradition of buffalo hunting in North America, Head-Smashed-in-Buffalo Jump; Rila Monastery in Bulgaria and La Fortaleza and San Juan Historic Site in Puerto Rico.

The final incidence of the inclusion of a place, solely meeting criterion (vi), occurred in 1996. The World Heritage Committee added The Hiroshima Peace Memorial/Genbaku Dome in Japan, the site where the first atomic bomb was dropped on a ‘live’ target on the 6 August 1945, also a ‘place of memory’. Following the consideration of Hiroshima for World Heritage inscription and as a result of strong political pressure from the US, criterion (vi) has been reworded so that it can now only be used in conjunction with other criteria. It was intended that this amendment would prevent further war-associated sites and places of memory, being nominated to the List.

Cultural landscapes and intangible cultural heritage values

In 1992, the World Heritage Committee made a radical change in its policy. This change allowed for the recognition of landscapes, ‘natural’ places with no visible, man-made, material evidence, to be inscribed on the World Heritage List as ‘associative’ cultural landscapes. The category of ‘associative’ cultural landscapes helped the Committee to recognise the diverse and pluralist heritages of the world, and was the first time the Committee had clearly acknowledged the connection of people with a place that was not manifestly monumental or of architectural significance.

The changed policy prescribed inscription:

by virtue of the powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent (UNESCO 1994b).

The first such place to be recognised through the Convention was the cultural landscape of Tongariro, New Zealand. Originally inscribed in 1990 for its natural values, its spiritual, intangible cultural heritage values were also recognised in 1993 on that grounds that ‘the mountains that lie at the heart of the Tongariro National Park are of great cultural and religious significance to the Maori people and are potent symbols of the fundamental spiritual connections between this human community and its natural environment’ (ICOMOS 1993:5).

Similarly, in 1994, the intangible cultural heritage values of Uluru-Kata Tjuta in Australia were recognised and it too was inscribed on the World Heritage List for its ‘associative’, spiritual, intangible cultural heritage values, in addition to its natural values: ‘the dramatic monoliths of Uluru and Kata Tjuta form an integral part of the traditional belief system of one of the oldest human societies in the world’ (ICOMOS 1994:8).

So far, not one ‘associative’ cultural landscape has been inscribed on the World Heritage List primarily because of its association with ‘artistic and literary works’. These landscapes are often referred to as ‘inspirational landscapes’.

The Global Strategy

In 1994, the World Heritage Committee adopted a Global Strategy to modernise its philosophies and objectives. Accordingly, attempts were made to accommodate types of heritage of ‘outstanding universal value’ within the List, including material, tangible and non-material, intangible heritage. The Strategy aimed to ‘move away from a purely architectural view of the cultural heritage of humanity towards one which was much more anthropological, multi-functional and universal’ (UNESCO 1994a:WHC-94/CONF.001/INF.4:7). The World Heritage Committee’s Global Strategy followed on from the highly successful development of the World Heritage cultural landscape categories in 1992.

Another place that was included on the World Heritage List primarily because of its intangible cultural heritage values was Robben Island in South Africa. This place, however, had to be inscribed using additional criteria because of the changes to the wording of criterion (vi) after the successful inscription of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial in 1996.

Robben Island

I board the tourist ferry from Cape Town to Robben Island on a warm winter afternoon in May 2003, just one of the some 310,000 people who visit the island annually. Robben Island is, of course, the site of Nelson Mandela’s incarceration in South Africa. One cannot begin to imagine the fear and sense of loss that future inmates of that island must have felt as they travelled the same stretch of sea to reach their point of imprisonment, a place from which they did not know if they would ever return. Many were incarcerated at Robben Island for more than two decades, all were black males and many were opponents of the white South African government; black citizens fighting for basic human rights.

We arrive at the Island and are bundled onto a battered bus, quite unaware of what is to follow. Our tour guide, a distinguished-looking man in his mid-60s, talks comically about the nationality of the tourists on board the bus, and the role their respective countries may have played in the history of Robben Island. As we are transported around the island in this ageing bus, our guide gives a concise but moving story of the black struggle against Apartheid. It is only when we reach a bungalow, the site of Robert Sobukwe’s solitary incarceration for nearly two decades, that someone asks our guide if he was a former prisoner of Robben Island. ‘No’, he says, ‘they never caught me, I was the Secretary General of the Pan-Africanist Congress’.7

With these words the enormity of what our guide has suffered under white rule, the friends that he lost, like Sobukwe, become starkly clear. Being on Robben Island in that dilapidated bus, with our black South African guide, was a profoundly enlightening and moving experience and one I shall never forget. It was not the fact that it was a World Heritage Site, with material remains of the prison and surrounds that had such a profound effect on me. It was experiencing first hand, through my interaction with our guide, the intangible heritage values of that powerful place: a place that is the mnemonic for those who took part in the struggle. Robben Island quickly becomes a place of intangible heritage value to all of us on that bus.

Challenges for World Heritage: identification of intangible heritage values

If one understands that all values associated with place are ascribed values, conferred upon a place, it becomes easier to understand that intangible heritage value is also just another of those values, conferred at a given point in time by a society.
What this also means, is that a place can be ascribed more than one set of values by more than one social group, and that these values can be ‘dissonant’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996).

An excellent example of this is Auschwitz-Birkenau, which is remembered and venerated by Polish Catholics as a site of Polish martyrdom during World War Two, while the world’s Jewry, and much of the world, remembers it as the location of the Jewish Holocaust. This dissonance has implications for the management of the World Heritage site, where one particular value may be privileged over another. Auschwitz-Birkenau was nominated by the Polish government as a site of Polish martyrdom against the aggression from the West. Today, many think its inclusion on the World Heritage List is because of the Holocaust. Thus, this ascribed value, this intangible heritage value, is mutable, it changes – and dies – with the generations, with the values and experiences of a society.

In some cases, values and memories can fade as time passes. Accordingly, the fabric of a place can only be explained if it is mediated by the intangible, by experience, by beliefs, by memories. Where there is no personal memory or experience of a place, then the mediation of that experience through a third person can be all-important. Intangible cultural heritage is, by necessity, ‘experiential’.

Deacon has discussed the importance of preserving the fabric of such places in her paper on Protecting Robben Island’s Intangible Heritage (2002). She suggests that the preservation of intangible heritage value is only possible if it is located in physical, tangible objects. Miles in his paper ‘Auschwitz: museum interpretation and darker tourism’ (2002) sees the fabric of Auschwitz’s buildings as providing ‘locational authenticity’. The preservation of these remains, in order for them to act as mnemonics, illustrate what Schein (1997) has described as ‘materialized discourses’; places formed and, in this case, preserved as a result of social values, influences and preferences.

There are, however, cases where, even if the material remains associated with an event in history have been obliterated, as in the case of the death camp of Treblinka, destroyed by the Nazis, the memories associated with this place still survive. In some cases the act of destruction actually makes the memories stronger and reveals the sacredness of a place. As Taussig (1999) explains, the defacement or destruction of a place often animates its meanings and values to a society.

Is it possible for the experiential quality of intangible cultural heritage value to be reliably captured within a World Heritage designation? Byrne et al (2001) posit what they call ‘reification’ of a place, where places have primacy over associations, so it is the place that is inscribed on the list with associated memories and meanings, rather than the memories inscribed with the associated place. They also point out that heritage inventories and lists are ‘commodified’. For instance, once a place is added to the List, it is assumed that its value continues to resonate from that particular status; this, however, is not the case.

Unless a society can declare its special associations with a particular place, its intangible heritage values will become, as Winter (1995) calls it, ‘inert’. The place will exist as do Stonehenge or the Pyramids of Giza, but the original value of those places, the ascribed spiritual value and beliefs given to those places, will have disappeared and we are left guessing as to what they were. Being on a list will not ensure the retention of intangible heritage values.

The ruins of Auschwitz, Robben Island and others, will only retain their direct social significance if the stories and memories about them are kept alive. Both are recognised by the World Heritage Committee for their association with significant events in history, and as places of commemoration and memory. It is their social value, their memory value, which makes such places so valuable and powerful.

Interpretation

While the intangible heritage value of a place is current, what can be done to transmit those intangible qualities to the visitors of those places? My guide made it possible for me to experience the intangible cultural heritage values at Robben Island. Some elements of the significance of temples and churches can only be explained through an understanding of their spiritual associations, through the mediation of the devoted. Often clergy, who explain the liturgical purpose of elements of the structure, guide us around churches and cathedrals. Similarly, monks take us around Buddhist monasteries.

In order to retain the experiential quality of a place, the beliefs and memories about it need to be transmitted to the visitor. If the people who hold that memory – like our guide at Robben Island – are no longer alive, and their stories are not recorded, they cannot be transmitted through the generations. My experience of the intangible heritage values at Auschwitz-Birkenau was magnified by the fact that the person who guided me had, himself, a personal association with that place. At the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum in London, and at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum in Japan, memories of the survivors of these two appalling events in history are recorded on video footage. Thus, the memories are transmitted to the visitor and the place mediated by the survivors. At Robben Island, an oral history project has recorded the memories and experiences of the former inmates of the prison so their stories can be passed down through the generations, a process that Ashplant (2000) calls ‘generational transmission’; a passage from direct memory to cultural memory. While the memories associated with a place are still alive, the intangible qualities of that place remain ‘active’ and through this activity are not permitted to enter the ‘half life’ and, ultimately, become ‘inert’ (Winter 1995).

Management

Given that intangible heritage value is ascribed, and eminently mutable, how does including a place on the World Heritage List help or detract from its preservation? The question of the mutability of intangible heritage values is one that confronts heritage managers. This is particularly so where the values of such places are ascribed by a particular society and time, and have no material manifestation. The currency of a heritage listing for such values will always be questionable. Quantifiable, verifiable, indicators need to be identified through which to monitor the existence of the intangible values. If there is no worship at a church or temple the beliefs associated with that particular place are no more. If memories do not exist of an event, then there is no association with a place. If a landscape is no longer painted or written about, it is no longer inspirational. I would suggest, therefore, that it is simply not possible to protect the intangible heritage values of a place but only to record their currency.

It is also a challenge for the management of places with
intangible heritage values to identify ways to develop cultural indicators for ascertaining whether the values for which they were inscribed are under threat or no longer extant. This posits a wider question as to whether the World Heritage List should be reviewed on a cyclical basis to ensure the authenticity of its inscriptions, and the currency of their intangible values, and to revisit the commodification of these values.

Conclusion

In conclusion, intangible cultural heritage value is an ascribed value, mutable and subject to social preference and memory. Often the value is identified through an association of an event with a place; it is located in place. It is not, however, the material structure that necessarily holds the value. It is its ability to provide locational authenticity which makes place, rather than space, of paramount importance, and why the heritage industry’s ‘compulsion to locate’ and to commodify the past is difficult to resist. A number of places have been included on the World Heritage List for their intangible cultural heritage values. We must remember, however, that including a place on a list does not ensure the protection of the intangible heritage value of that place; it only records its currency at a given point in time.

In including intangible heritage values on a list, all we are really doing is drawing a line around a shadow – and as a shadow will move with the movement of the sun – intangible heritage value changes with the passing of time.

References

- Australia ICOMOS 1999 The Australian ICOMOS Burra Charter.

Endnotes

1 The paper was presented at an ASEAN-COCI Myanmar and Aust-Heritage Joint Symposium on the Preservation of Cultural Heritage 23-24 August 2004.
2 For a critical analysis of the current ecological landscape management of Auschwitz see Charlesworth and Addis 2002.
3 ARBEIT MACHT FREI = work brings freedom.
4 The other places that could be so categorised are Auschwitz-Birkenau, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and Robben Island.
5 Even in 1983, ICOMOS did not consider that Ria Monastery, nearly totally reconstructed in the nineteenth century, met the test of authenticity required for World Heritage inscription; it did however get voted onto the list by the Committee.
6 Robert Sobukwe was the first President of the Pan Africanist Congress political party that split from the African National Congress political party in 1959. He was held without charge in solitary confinement for many years. Many people consider that the dog kennel, a later feature of the island which housed guard dogs, should be removed as they compromise the authenticity of the setting of the bungalow where Sobukwe was held.
7 For details on the PAC political party history see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan-Africanist_Congress.
8 In the United Kingdom, churches are deconsecrated – decommissioned – and are no longer deemed to have spiritual values.