Heritage and the meaning of ‘development’ in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper examines the intersection between social justice, sustainability and heritage by exploring existing recent ethnographic and heritage research from Myanmar. This research illustrates the unique cultural and symbolic processes through which power has operated in the country. These processes could be said to inhabit a locally-distinct Theravada Buddhist world that is simultaneously affected by a long-term, localised engagement with and ownership of modernity. Within this, heritage is drawn on to imagine an alternate future, articulating competing versions of a sustainable and socially just Myanmar. The intent of this paper is to show how contests over heritage between Myanmar’s military regime and the country’s citizens have articulated competing versions of an imagined Myanmar.

Introduction

The papers for this special issue, emerging out of the ‘Heritage, Sustainability and Social Justice Postgraduate Symposium’ at Deakin University in late 2016, undertake an exploration of the overarching idea that it is important to engage with heritage globally through sustainable and socially just means. This paper responds to this thesis by examining the interaction of heritage, sustainability and social justice in Myanmar, a country emerging from a 60-plus year military dictatorship. The intent of this paper is to focus on a specific intersection between heritage, social justice and sustainability embedded within the international development concept, ‘Sustainable Development’. In particular, the paper explores how the discourse of ‘culture in development’—an important recent shift in development thinking—represents a means through which forms of intangible cultural heritage have become central to social justice and sustainability at a global scale.

‘Culture in development’ can be several things: it can refer to consultation and participation; the role of creative and cultural economies in developing economies; or the effectiveness of localised forms of decision-making, natural resource management or conflict resolution (Sen 2003; UNESCO 1995). More fundamentally however, ‘culture in development’ references the fact that ‘development’ as a term and process is loaded with hegemonic relationships between the developed and underdeveloped worlds. This derives partially from an underlying ideology of ‘development’ as a single-pointed path towards Modernisation, conceptualised predominantly in Western material, political and cultural terms (Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990).

Beyond the more material and practical examples provided above, ‘culture in development’ recognises that there is a multiplicity of ways in which ‘progress’, the future, modernity and ‘development’ can be conceptualised. But how these terms are conceptualised may obviously be drastically different from the perspectives of competing actors within a specific nation-state.
This paper shows how cultural heritage has been used by Myanmar’s military regime and segments of the country’s citizenry as a tool to articulate competing ideologies of a localised political and cultural modernity. Each operates within an ontologically-distinct Buddhist world that is simultaneously affected by a long-term, localised engagement with modernity and ownership of modernity. Both use heritage to imagine an alternate future, articulating competing versions of a sustainable and socially just Myanmar.

Below, this paper establishes the theoretical background and interrelationships between ‘heritage, social justice and sustainability’, particularly their intersection within the discourse of ‘culture in development’. It then explores Myanmar’s contemporary political history and the operation of heritage to articulate contested visions of Myanmar’s future.

Theoretical context

Defining concepts: social justice, sustainability and heritage

Heritage, social justice and sustainability each have long and diverse intellectual traditions. I would argue that the predominant tie-in between the three is that they are all inherently political fields of knowledge. There are three inter-related ways in which this is meant: first, knowledge produced in these fields, in most cases, implicitly leads to a position of advocacy for real-world changes to or interventions into social space and the physical world. Secondly, knowledge and practice within these fields has commonly been auspiced through intergovernmental organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or United Nations Development Program (UNDP).1 This leads to the third way in which ‘heritage, social justice and sustainability’ are political terms, and that is that they have often justified interventions into the underdeveloped by the developed world.

The intellectual history of social justice is concerned with the relationship between the individual, society and dominant forms of government and economy. Precursors to what we understand as social justice theory exist in premodern times, but the concept gains coherency with the political, economic and cultural changes that drive the emergence into modernity from the 18th century, particularly the establishment of first generation human rights (Miller, 1979).2 Sustainability is a more recent concept within international thinking, tracing a genealogy from the Club of Rome’s Limits to Growth report to contemporary efforts to address climate change. While sustainability has become one of the most powerful tropes through which a progressive politics expresses itself on a global scale, and is inherent in contemporary thinking around development (for example, in the UNDP’s Sustainable Development Goals), sustainability is not discussed in the foreground of the heritage case-studies from Myanmar discussed within this paper.

Heritage itself is a slippery concept, far from the straightforward and scientific tradition of cataloguing, display, interpretation and preservation of historical objects. Heritage may have premodern precursors, but as consciousness (of cultural heritage) and practice (of conserving, displaying and encountering) its explosion since the 19th century is clearly an aspect of modernity (Harvey 2010). Thus, museums and cultural heritage have played a role alongside the other disciplinary machinery of the nation-state in the production of subjects and establishment of certain relationships of hegemony (Bennett 2004; Hooper-Greenhill 1992). For emerging nation-states, heritage and museums also help to cement the imagined community within the collective consciousness and sub-consciousness (Coombes 1988; Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Urry 1996).

In the contemporary period, production of and encounters with heritage spaces have proliferated towards an over-accumulation of heritage, including World Heritage sites, and perhaps contributed to an evolving incapacity amongst humans to forget (Harrison 2013). The over-accumulation may reflect the commodification of the cultural sphere, as developed nation-states transition to post-industrial societies within which cultural and symbolic products and ideas rather than physical things are manufactured (Hewison 1987; Sherman 1994). Or, conversely, what may appear as a ‘proliferation’ of heritage actually reflects a shift beyond
the previously hegemonic role of museums and heritage practice: the devolution of control over heritage production from the powerful and their Authorised Heritage Discourses (Smith 2006); the deployment of heritage (as a cultural and counter-cultural process) and spaces by the marginal whose histories were previously excluded (e.g. Waterton & Watson 2013).

As stated above, the intent of this paper is to focus on a specific intersection between heritage, social justice and sustainability embedded in the international development concept, ‘Sustainable Development’. In the following section, this paper explores the ways in which the ‘culture in development’ discourse represents an important means through which forms of intangible cultural heritage have become central to social justice and sustainability at a global scale.

**Culture in development**

Heritage discourse and practice has arguably not recognised the interlinking of concepts such as human rights, social justice, sustainability and cultural diversity until recent years: but these linkages in fact co-emerged and were enshrined in the agenda and discourse of the UN at its establishment after the Second World War (Logan 2012). In particular, since its founding in 1946, UNESCO has advanced an agenda of respect for cultural diversity as a central component of human development. I argue that the work of UNESCO has been fundamental to the emergence of a contemporary ‘culture in development’ discourse which recognises the importance of cultural diversity and heritage to development. I argue that the work of UNESCO has been fundamental to the emergence of a contemporary ‘culture in development’ discourse which recognises the importance of cultural diversity and heritage to development.

UNESCO’s work on culture is most popularly known through mechanisms such as the Man and the Biosphere Program (1971) and the World Heritage Convention (1972). These programs, focusing on monumental and tangible expressions of culture, do have the potential in themselves to contribute to better sustainability and social justice, partly through the protection of cultural sites that might not otherwise be protected, partly through heritage tourism associated with these places. In addition, UNESCO has also played a pivotal role in broadening international understandings of culture - its intersection with development, social justice and sustainability at a global scale – at the same time as a series of serious critiques of aid and international development began to emerge (see Escobar 1995; Ferguson 1990; Ul Haq 1976). These critiques tried to show that development, conceptualised through ideologies such as Modernisation Theory, had overwhelmingly failed to achieve its goals. Within this schema, culture was considered to be an inhibitor to development; however, this approach had led to a failure to understand local conditions and the wants and needs of the supposed beneficiaries of development interventions. The flipside of this critique took the form of an argument that culture was, in fact, fundamentally important to development: understanding ‘culture’ could help define exactly what ‘development’ might mean to people in the underdeveloped world; whether it is wanted; who it should benefit; how it should be implemented; and how to measure its effectiveness.

In 1982, the World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico (MONDIACULT), culminating a decade of research, advocacy and consultation by UNESCO in the cultural policy space, publicised a now famous definition of culture as:

> The whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO 1982).

UNESCO’s World Decade for Cultural Development (1988-1993) contributed to a reframing of international aid as human development. This re-configured ‘development’ to focus on human well-being and use people’s capabilities, their economic and cultural assets, rather than their deprivations, as a starting point (Ul Haq 1976). The report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, entitled ‘Our Creative Diversity’ effective development was a
phenomenon that reduced poverty, defined as “a lack of opportunities to choose a fuller, more satisfying, more valuable and valued existence...one of the most basic freedoms is to be able to define our own basic needs” (ibid, p. 14-15). I would argue that UNESCO’s most recent instruments relating to culture and heritage - the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage (2003), and Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expression (2005)—formalises the importance of culture as a key mechanism and driver of human development.

This brief genealogy of ‘culture in development’ is not intended to suggest that the ideology and practice of aid and development can be said to have entered a golden age, where the ignorant, chauvinistic or simply self-interested interventions by the powerful into the developing world no longer occurs. Rather, it is intended to simply outline the change in development discourse—or the re-emergence of a development discourse – that acknowledges that there are alternative visions of development, modernity and the future sprouted from humanity’s cultural diversity.

In the remainder of this paper, I will explore several heritage and ethnographic case-studies from Myanmar, a post-authoritarian and extremely poor country, to examine how differing visions of development and modernity emerge and interact in a specific empirical context.

**Myanmar: sociopolitical and historical context**

Melford Spiro (1982, p. 18), a prominent anthropologist working in the immediate post-WWII period, described Myanmar (at the time, Burma) as a place in which “farming and sex, gossip and intrigue, worship and celebration, Buddhist holydays and spirit festivals—these have been and continue to be the major axes along which the sociocultural matrix of life…can be ordered.”

Spiro’s vignette still captures a defining element of the country: however, Myanmar as it emerges from a long period of authoritarian isolation is also far more complex, a mixture of contemporary neoliberal processes, long-term indigenous engagements with modernity, local struggles (both physical and symbolic) against the military regime, and seemingly intractable conflict (both physical and symbolic) among ethnic groups. A dialectic exists between a localised iteration of a Theravada Buddhist world, and the country’s thorough participation and embeddedness in modernity, the global capitalist system and contemporary neoliberalism.

Spiro wrote in the period immediately following the end of British colonisation, which occurred in Burma in three stages from 1826 until independence in 1948. Following independence, Burma was governed through a democratic, multi-ethnic federation; however, following the overthrow of the democratic government by an authoritarian, military regime under General Ne Win in 1962, the country was predominantly closed to foreign interests until the 1980s (Steinberg 2013).

Ethnographic and sociological research conducted in Burma, predominantly written in the period between WWII and 1962, accentuated the pivotal role of a unique form of Buddhism in Burmese society. This research highlighted the constant enactment of Buddhist meanings in all domains of daily life (Nash 1966; Spiro 1982); the importance of the daily merit-making ritual of providing food for monks as the primary bond between the polity and the sangha (Buddhist monastic community) (Pfanner 1966); and the distinct ontological world in which economic action took place, particularly with respect to merit-making donations (Spiro 1966) and to Buddhist conceptions of ‘Right Livelihood’ (Schumacher 1973).

Prior to and throughout its period of colonisation, however, Burma is interesting in the extent to which it was actively engaged in global processes, including through a conscious interaction by some of the country’s elites with modernity. Burma’s encounter with the colonising powers from the West occurred under the same parallel winds of modernity that brought the British Empire to its shores: from the 17th century, as invading conquerors, Burma defeated the Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya, Laos and China on its east and annexed Arakan, Manipur and Assam on the west, leading them into confrontation with the British (who they were confident of defeating) (Lieberman 2003; Scott 2010).
Under the subsequent period of British colonisation, Burma sent a mission to Europe, part of its impetus being to understand and bring back useful parts of European Enlightenment and technological progress. Attempts were made to reform and modernise the Buddhist sangha and Buddhist theology in response to encounters with outside influences (Schober 1997). A ‘modern’ Burmese literature was born, including the novel, literary associations, and a proliferation of magazines and newspapers. Foreign models of social and political organisation were imported and tailored to local conditions, including the Young Men’s Buddhist Association (YMBA), union groups, and political parties (Ikeya 2013). In this period, a conscious reconsideration of Burmese heritage played a key role in the Burmese movement towards independence and its post-independence politics, an imagining of what role Burmese culture played in its emergence into a postcolonial modernity.

Between 1962 and the 1980s, Myanmar was effectively closed to foreign interests after the democratically-elected government was overthrown by a military regime. This regime became known internationally as one of the most strange, repressive and economically incompetent governments in the world. Since 2012, however, Myanmar has against many expectations begun to shift towards a post-authoritarian society under the guidance of a former senior general, Thein Sein. In 2015, albeit under extremely tense conditions, Aung San Suu Kyi’s pro-democracy party won a landslide victory, bringing 60 years of military rule to an end (Steinberg 2012).

The post-military government, however, so far appears unable to bring development (economic or otherwise) to the country. It has also been unable to end the multiple ethnic conflicts on its borders, and seems unable or unwilling to respond to the possible genocide of the minority Rohingya (Lee 2014). The end to isolationism has also introduced a rush of foreign states, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and multinational corporations (MNCs) into the country, each of which individually and collectively alter Myanmar’s urban and symbolic landscapes and re-embed the country into a global neoliberalism (Fong 2014; Jones 2014).

Against this historical and political background, the following section of this paper will delve into some of the cultural and symbolic processes through which power has operated in Myanmar. I want to show how heritage has been used by the military regime to articulate a specific version of ‘culture in development’, as framed above, as the imagining of an alternate modernity. I intend to also show how pro-democracy or anti-regime members of the citizenry simultaneously drew on the country’s heritage to imagine an alternate future, articulating a competing version of a sustainable and socially just Myanmar.

Heritage contests

Authorised heritage under the military regime

Myanmar’s Pyu Cities were inscribed onto the World Heritage List in 2015. The inscription of this complex of sites reflects a long-term striving for international recognition of Myanmar’s rich Buddhist and royal heritage. It is partly significant in that it occurred in the period of transition and partial democratisation starting in 2012 (Liljeblad 2017). In contrast, multiple unsuccessful nominations were made to the World Heritage List in the 1990s under the worst years of the military regime, including Bagan (10th – 14th century royal-religious complex spanning 3 x 8 kilometres), and the Inle Lake cultural landscape.

The establishment of and investment into ‘authorised’ heritage sites and practices has been a tactic of the military regime to build its legitimacy, particularly following its refusal to acknowledge the National League for Democracy’s (NLD) victory at the 1990 elections. This in turn was held in response to the 1988 student-led uprisings, General Ne Win’s resignation, and the formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) as ruling body. The investment into heritage is in a sense part of a standard imagining of the nation-state common throughout the world (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983; Anderson 2006). The specific ways in which Myanmar’s military regime intensified their manipulation and co-option of Myanmar’s cultural heritage from the late 1980s, however, reveals that other strategies, meaningful in a local Buddhist, ontological context, have also been at play.
The use of heritage by the military regime has explicitly drawn on the symbolism of a traditional cosmology and political-economic relationships common to Theravada Buddhist countries in the region. The key feature of this is a symbiotic relationship between the ‘world conquering’ ruler, as protector of Buddhism, and the sangha who would legitimise the ruler’s authority in the laity’s eyes and benefit from royal patronage (Aung-Thwin 1979). Recent heritage research has focused on this theme of the co-option by the regime of the Buddhist/Royal tradition as a key driver of investment into heritage since the late 1980s. This research illustrates how the military regime attempted to symbolically substitute itself into the centre of an imagined nation with roots in the pre-colonial, royal dynasties extending back to the prehistoric foundation of the country. Juliane Schober (1997, p. 218), for example, describes this process at work in the military’s staging of a 45-day procession for a “Chinese Tooth Relic” of the Buddha in 1994, “one of the most far-reaching efforts in modern Buddhism to create a national cult of relic veneration”. Schober shows this to be explicitly modelled on “Burmese traditional proscriptions for the procession of royalty and celestial beings” (ibid, p. 226), within which the role of elite military figures, their patronage of Buddhism, and the regime’s vision of modernity and development were intertwined. Here, heritage is used to articulate one, state-specific version of ‘culture in development’, in which the future takes on an imagined, pre-colonial cultural tone of order, unity, obedience.

Janette Philp & David Mercer (1999, 2002) also analysed the increased patronage of Myanmar’s cultural heritage by the military regime from the late 1980s. This patronage included programs of archaeological excavations, reconstruction of the Mandalay Palace at Bagan, and construction of monuments to kings famous for conquest and unification such as Kings Anawratha and Bayinnaung. Like Schober (1997), they argue that the motivation for this concentrated investment stemmed from a need to symbolically link the military to an imagined Burmese royal genesis as a means of legitimising their rule.

Again, these uses of heritage are reflected in the regime’s investment into intangible cultural heritage (ICH) practices including into traditional Thine (martial arts) (Martin 2001) and Chinlone (cane-ball) (Aung-Thwin 2012). In this vein, Douglas (2003) analyses the annual Sokayeti competition, established in 1993 to promote a Burmese tradition of singing, dancing, composition and performance. The competition was launched at the time of the establishment of a new University of Culture and subsequent increased patronage of and attempts to canonise royal traditions of music, theatre, sculpture, dance and puppetry. Within the competition, representatives from each of Myanmar’s states and governmental divisions compete: great attention is placed on ensuring that ethnic minorities participate - and are seen to participate— and execute pieces from the classical royal repertoire: local or minority musical traditions are explicitly excluded. Here, Douglas argues, the symbolic purpose has been to display both the role of the military leadership as patron of Myanmar’s fine arts—a role once taken by Royalty—but also to publicly perform an ideal, subservient relationship of Myanmar’s many ethnic minorities to the state, dominated by the majority Bamar ethnic group.5

Heritage processes have similarly been drawn on to write women out of histories of Myanmar’s anti-colonial resistance movement and post-independence government, despite their historically active role (Ikeya 2013). Skidmore (2007) argues that within the Burmese nationalist movement, as throughout similar movements in Southeast Asia, gender played an important function in constructing the imagined Burmese nation. They argue that this pattern has continued into the contemporary neoliberal era, with women’s bodies utilised and commoditised within authorised heritage discourse and in the broader public sphere to construct a racially-pure, Burmese/Buddhist consumer citizen. Skidmore (2007), for example, shows that, prior to the recent period of liberalisation, two ideal types of female roles were possible in news and commercial media: the ‘Buddha’s mother’ and ‘billboard queen’. More recently, Walton et al (2015) analyse the controversial ‘Religious Protection Laws’ supported by both the previous military regime and the current, democratically-elected, NLD government. They show that the laws gained public support by playing on a fear of rape among Buddhist woman by the Muslim ‘other’.

What is most interesting about the heritage-making strategies of the military regime, I would argue, is that Myanmar’s population has not passively accepted the regime’s attempt to co-opt...
the country’s royal and Buddhist history. Partly, this has been since the military’s strategies in this space have not been merely symbolic, purely a means of imagining an authoritarian nation into existence: they have occurred as much with the intent to affect a semi-physical plane within an alternate, Buddhist metaphysical world. The regime’s actions on this plane, people’s resistance to this and alternate imagined futures are discussed in the next section.

**Heritage struggles on an ontological plane**

One of the most fascinating instances of Spiro’s (1982) take on the life-world of Burma/Myanmar, as referred to above, is the questionable behaviours and beliefs of some of the country’s military rulers. General Ne Win, leader of the coup d’état in 1962 and dominant in the regime until at least 1988, was known to be obsessed with Burmese astrology, spells and magical rituals, and was rumoured to bathe in dolphins’ blood to retain his youth (Zahler 2009). General Saw Maung (head of state from 1988 – 1992), considered himself to be the reincarnation of a Bagan warrior king; and General Than Shwe (1992 to 2011) is believed to have moved Myanmar’s capital from Yangon to Naypyidaw on the basis of astrological advice (Tosa 2005).

Rather than treat this simply as an instance of exotic irrationality, recent ethnographic research (e.g. Skidmore 2005, Chang & Tagliacozzo 2014) suggests that something far more interesting is at play. Recalling Spiro, this research illustrates ways in which the unique iteration of Buddhism in Myanmar facilitates a distinctive cultural life-world throughout all levels of Myanmar’s society, in addition to the religion’s institutional or transactional function. This body of research provides insights into heritage and its relationship to ‘culture in development’ as it exposes the ontological planes on which political action and resistance can occur. I argue that this form of resistance has partially taken shape as the imagining of an alternate future articulated by Myanmar’s oppressed population.

These forms of resistance and imagining have occurred in particular through intangible cultural practices relating to Buddhist merit-making, which often centre around monumental or tangible heritage sites and draw on a distinct Theravada Buddhist understanding of relics of the Buddha (see Byrne 1995). Within the schema of earning merit, or positive karma, by the great majority through the daily ritual donation of food to local monks (Pfanner 1966). ‘Great merit’, however, can be earned through much more ostentatious acts such as building stupas, or pilgrimages to and encounters with holy objects of the Buddha. Significant acts of merit-making can also be a means to political prestige and power. In Schober’s (1997) case-study of the Chinese Tooth Relic, she argues that the procession of the tooth throughout the country operated not only within a symbolic sphere, but that it also constituted an attempt to regulate control over the mechanisms and the public forums through which merit could be produced and earned. In this case, the regime could be said to be attempting to dominate the ‘merit mode of production’.

The operation of heritage activities partially on this separate ontological plane has meant that civilian resistance to the regime has also occurred here. For example, the public has simply boycotted regime-sponsored ceremonies, or has engaged in a popular discourse through which the legitimacy, intention or taste of the merit-making donations of regime figures are disparaged (see Schober 1997). The public has also boycotted regime-favoured monks or spirit mediums, instead patronising those perceived to be critical or outside of the domain of state power (ibid). Skidmore (2005) notes that, as the military has tried to co-opt major heritage sites, people have tended to abandon monumental and authorised heritage spaces associated with the regime and withdrawn political dissent into non-heritage public spaces such as the marketplace, smaller everyday religious sites, tea shops and the home.

An example of this phenomenon—the attempted co-option of Buddhist heritage and public resistance to this—can be seen at work in 1988 with the attempted removal of the five iconic Phaung Daw U Buddhas from Inle Lake. The lake, nominated in 1997 to the World Heritage list as a cultural landscape, is located in a diverse ethnic minority region in Shan State. Here, it was proposed, the golden Buddha statues would form the heart of a new processional ceremony that the junta had created on Kandawkyi Lake, the ‘Great Royal Lake’ adjacent to
the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon (Robinne 2009). In this scenario, despite the great coercive force available to the regime, the attempted removal and its eventual failure took place within a totally distinct Buddhist ontological platform. As recounted by Robinne (ibid), a local fisherman discovered a ball of mercury in the lake said to possess magical powers. The fisherman gave this into the protection of a local monk, a favourite of the local military authorities. Together, they argued for the removal of the five Buddha statues to Yangon given an ostensible, magical link between the mercury ball and the Buddhas. Only through the collective efforts of competing members of the local sangha who publicly undermined the mercury-wielding monk on theological grounds, was the removal prevented.

In the context of the pervasiveness of Myanmar’s military security apparatus, and at a time where the end of the regime did not seem possible, Ingrid Jordt (2007, p. 191) addressed what forms of escape were possible in this totalitarian landscape. Jordt argues that resistance to totalitarianism has necessarily occurred in “nodes of possibility, from the places where Burmese people find it possible to nourish forms of popular imagination that circulate, like the material accoutrements of modernity, along newly established transportation routes and information conduits”. These spaces and forms of resistance have revolved around a cultural heritage conceptualised within the terms of a unique and localised iteration of Theravada Buddhism, but reinterpreted in modern terms. A critical manifestation of this is the mass lay meditation movement, its origins lying in a rural millenarian movement that arose in reaction to British colonisation. The original goal of the movement was to transfer advanced meditation practices to the laity given the perceived end of the Buddhist world; however, in the contemporary period, the movement has become a means through which people in Myanmar under the totalitarian regime have been able to articulate an “alternative moral social order based on right intentions and the assertion of a right society in Buddhist terms” (Jordt 2007, p. 191). This creation of a new, imagined public through internally-focused meditation has been one of a very limited number of possible means of non-violent resistance to the junta.

This section has attempted to describe some of the unique planes on which heritage has operated in Myanmar. I have suggested that ‘tangible’ heritage has been used for ‘intangible’ purposes, meaningful in localised terms and within a Theravada Buddhist framework. In the concluding section below, I will attempt to summarise the argument and explore some of the possible implications for heritage practice.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have attempted to respond to the problem of how heritage, sustainability and social justice might intersect. I have taken a very specific angle on this, which is to examine ‘culture in development’ in the empirical context of contemporary Myanmar. Culture in development’, I have argued, is a discourse that ties together ideas of heritage, sustainability and social justice: it is inherent in recent UNESCO mechanisms relating to cultural diversity and ICH, and in the recently released Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Heritage case-studies in Myanmar demonstrate the co-option of the country’s heritage by the authoritarian military regime as a means of establishing the legitimacy of its rule. The use of heritage, however, does not operate simply in symbolic terms, but partially works to dominate on a separate, Theravada Buddhist ontological sphere. Resistance to this, in turn, has occurred on this plane.

This paper can provide an additional perspective on heritage research on Buddhism since the 1990s, which has explored the status of ‘heritage’ in a Buddhist sense and what treatment heritage sites should be given. Research by Byrne (1995), Karlström (2005) and Peleggi (2012) has shown how Buddhist heritage should be treated, particularly monumental and tangible heritage, given that much of their social value lies in the intangible practices surrounding them. For example, the historical spread of Buddhism is argued to have depended on the circulation of bodily relics of the Buddha and iconic objects, which is in turn dependent upon impermanence, forgetting, seeding and re-imagining (Sharf 1999). In this context, the most appropriate treatment of some of these sites may not be in situ conservation, but may be their
destruction, distribution and re-sprouting. Karlström (2005), makes the point that heritage is inherently a socially-constructed phenomenon. Material objects are transmuted into ‘history’ through academic or political apparatuses such as archaeology or inscription onto heritage lists. A constructivist position would assert that alternate Buddhist schema, in line with Buddhist political and cultural apparatuses, are as appropriate a treatment of heritage objects or practices as Western schemas.

If it is accepted that heritage in Myanmar is used in the highly political ways and on the distinct ontological planes described here, the implication for heritage practice may be to force us to further question the social and political effects of our interventions into heritage. This is particularly relevant to an emerging democracy like Myanmar, where the transition from an explicitly authoritarian regime has revealed that the country faces far more complex development issues than simply the need to boot out the military. As many observers of the country had worried prior to the watershed 2015 elections, conflict and underdevelopment continue to plague Myanmar, underwritten by underlying issues of social cohesion, competing cultural identities and ethnonationalisms, and unrestrained neoliberalism. Although these issues were exacerbated by the 60-year military regime, the partial removal of the regime from power does not in itself resolve these problems. I would argue that an examination of the unique cultural and symbolic processes through which power has operated in Myanmar – well illustrated by heritage case-studies from the pre-transition era – provides an important insight into the deeper issues faced by the country in the new, ‘democratic’ era.

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Endnotes

1 Among many other intergovernmental bodies; and acknowledging the fundamental role that nation-states have in implementing the programs auspiced by such bodies.

2 See the United Nation’s (2006) Social Justice in an Open World as a example of the expanded concern from the relationship between the individual and their own government and society, to the operation of social justice at a global scale.


4 Both terms are used interchangeably in this paper; however, ‘Burma’ is used when referring to case-studies prior to the official name change in 1988.

5 A similar analysis is made by Logan (2016) with respect to the National Museum in Yangon.