World Heritage and WikiLeaks: Territory, Trade, and Temples on the Thai-Cambodian Border
by Lynn Meskell

Globalization and world-making projects, like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage program, have changed the stakes for particular heritage sites. Through processes of greater interdependence and connectivity, specific sites are transformed into transactional commodities with exchange values that transcend their historical or material characteristics and thus can be wrested from those contexts to serve other international interests. To illustrate, I employ evidence from the US diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks to offer an unprecedented vantage onto one contested archaeological site, Preah Vihear temple in Cambodia. Thrust into the international spotlight with UNESCO World Heritage inscription in 2008, followed by the International Court of Justice rulings, we can trace the site’s connectivity across national political intrigues, international border wars, bilateral negotiations surrounding gas and steel contracts, and military alignments. The very fact that so much politicking occurred around one site, and one that was largely invisible in international heritage circles until its controversial UNESCO listing and the resultant border war, is instructive. In essence, what the leaked cables reveal are the linkages between seemingly unrelated spheres and events, thus underscoring the intricate hyperconnectivity of heritage.

It is typically said that heritage is always political. Such a statement might refer to the everyday politics of local stakeholder interests on one end of the spectrum or the volatile politics of destruction and erasure of heritage during conflict on the other. If heritage is always political, then one might expect that the workings of World Heritage might be especially fraught, given the international dimension. In particular, the intergovernmental system of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage program must navigate the inherent tension between state sovereignty and nationalist interests and the wider concerns of a universal regime (Francioni 2008; Pavone 2007). The 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage and its list of over 1,000 properties has many such contentious examples, including sites in Israel, Mali, Syria, Crimea, Congo, and Cambodia. As an organization, UNESCO was born of war, with an explicit purpose to end global conflict and help the world rebuild materially and morally (Guitton 2006), but it has found its own history increasingly entwined with that of international politics and violence.

If heritage is, and always has been, political, then I would argue that the scale and complexity of those politics is intensifying (Meskell 2013; Meskell et al. 2015). Globalization and world-making projects, like the UNESCO World Heritage program, have changed the stakes for particular heritage sites through processes of greater interdependence and connectivity, transforming them into transactional commodities with exchange values that transcend their historical or material characteristics and that can be wrested from those contexts to serve other international interests. Of course, heritage is also always political, too, in domestic arrangements, particularly when governments intervene in the material lives of their citizens, local peoples, and other connected communities. But how do archaeologists assess the political when so much remains largely anecdotal, imagined, protected, and typically occluded from view in complex international circuits? How might we see realpolitik at work? In this article, I show how the diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks in 2010 allow us an unprecedented vantage onto one contested archaeological site, Preah Vihear Temple in Cambodia (fig. 1). Launched in 2006, and with a continued web presence today, WikiLeaks is a global nonprofit organization dedicated to transparency through the publication of classified, secret, and private information (Saunders 2011). There are, of course, other high-profile sites, such as Jerusalem,
that are contained in the disclosures but which lie beyond the scope of this paper.

In the case of Preah Vihear Temple, thrust into the international spotlight with its inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2008, followed by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rulings in 2011 and 2013 (Barnett 2012; Chesterman 2015; Vrdoljak 2014),1 we can trace the site’s connectivity across national political intrigues, international border wars, bilateral negotiations surrounding gas and steel contracts, and military alignments. The very fact that so much politicking occurred around this one site, which was largely invisible in international heritage circles until its controversial UNESCO listing and the resultant border war, is telling. Each of the strands can be traced and documented separately, substantiated by a host of different scholars, disciplines, and lines of evidence. What the cables essentially reveal are the linkages between seemingly unrelated spheres and events. In this instance, it may not reveal new information, but it underscores the intricate hyperconnectivity of heritage. The politics underwriting that connectivity are having new repercussions, particularly in spheres of conflict, such as the recent ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) destruction of sites in Syria and Iraq. No longer collateral damage, heritage properties now reside at the heart of struggles for international recognition, self-determination, and defiance.

Perhaps the conflation of heritage with other international interests, whether cultural or economic, may be the very connectivity that compounds violence in particular contexts. World Heritage sites that draw greater international intervention, coverage, and concern might be the very ones where we will see escalating violence, as we have in Afghanistan, Mali, Syria, and Iraq (Joy, forthcoming; Meskell 2015a). Their internationalism may be at the heart of their destruction, something that UNESCO is now attempting to grapple with,2 the demolitions by ISIS in Iraq being just the most recent example.

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In the Corridors of Power

Since 2011, my research has focused on the politics of UNESCO World Heritage, specifically the workings of its 21-member World Heritage Committee and the implications of site listing and conservation. Some of this work has focused on political pacting within the committee, as by the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and lobbying by states parties to ensure successful outcomes for their properties (Meskell 2012; see also Claudi 2011). For example, members of BRICS on the committee ardently supported South Africa, enabling them to keep World Heritage status for the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape while controversially retaining mining licenses and initiating coal extraction in the buffer zone of the property (Meskell 2011). South Africa returned the favor when the same World Heritage Committee discussed illegal mining in Russia’s Virgin Komi Forests. In other research, I examine high-profile World Heritage properties, like the Historic District of Panama, and show how lobbying and international support are not geared primarily to promote conservation, as the 1972 Convention intended, but rather to protect government business interests, international corporations, and ultimately Panama Canal contracts (Meskell 2014). In all of this work, heritage properties are wrested from their particular context and mobilized instead as transactional devices that both mask and enable a multifarious network of political and economic values. Transaction here not only refers to the process of “doing business” and the exchange of commodities and services in the World Heritage arena, but also encompasses the reciprocal influences and communicative activities between parties (Meskell 2015b). Indeed, I argue that World Heritage Committee debates over specific cultural and natural properties, their inscription on the World Heritage List, and their protection or even destruction are becoming largely irrelevant in substance yet remain highly valuable in state-to-state negotiations and exchanges of social capital.

My ethnographic study includes participation in the annual World Heritage Committee meetings as well as sustained interviews with members of the UNESCO secretariat, officials from the Advisory Bodies (International Council on Monuments and Sites [ICOMOS], International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN], and International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property [ICCROM]), ambassadors and members of national delegations, archaeologists and conservators involved in site nominations, as well as evaluators, consultants, and academics involved in all aspects of World Heritage. This work has also taken me to Peru, India, Turkey, France, Cambodia, and Myanmar to follow UNESCO’s mission in-country, asking how and why specific nations seek and later utilize inscription. To avoid any conflict of interest, I have not accepted any official role in missions that evaluate World Heritage properties, nor do I have a formal affiliation with UNESCO. My research focuses on the 1972 World Heritage Convention, and although UNESCO has produced additional conventions dedicated to intangible heritage or the return of cultural property, these lie beyond the scope of the current research. Alongside in-depth interviews and long-term participation, I have analyzed documents archived in Paris as well as extensive UNESCO web-based materials. In collaborative work with cultural economists from the University of Turin, I have also incorporated statistical and network analyses to trace the international political pacting, economic interests, and voting blocs that shape today’s World Heritage agenda (Meskell et al. 2015). With my training as an archaeologist, I am concerned with discerning documentary materials, historical accounts, statistical records, interviews with a wide cross section of players, observation, and participation.

Anthropologists have written extensively about the difficulty of studying the bureaucratic elite (Bendix 2013; Shore 2007), where official documentation is required for access and “deep hanging out” is typically curtailed by elaborate security measures. Ambassadors and members of national delegations, as well as officials in the UNESCO secretariat, require letters, e-mails, and follow-up telephone calls before an appointment is granted. Many interviewees are happy to discuss issues, even sensitive ones like those outlined in this article, but do not want to be identified. As Shore (2007) suggests, the most valuable method is simply making the most of the desire of informants to talk and to be heard. As a result of my being sympathetic and eager to learn about the difficulties, inherent tensions, and pressures of their position, officials tend to reveal much about their experiences within the World Heritage arena. As one delegate opined, he had previously been a diplomat in Geneva working on human rights issues and had found that experience far less contentious than his experience in the World Heritage Committee.

As an academic and an archaeologist researching World Heritage politics, this affords an understanding of specific heritage sites and their issues, as well as the overall system, but I am set apart from the institutional politics that individuals encountered and typically find burdensome, whether from their government or from UNESCO itself. Researchers like myself are also connected to the issues, such that navigating both closeness and distance entails a certain degree of loyalty and discretion (Müller 2013:6). Yet some individuals expect a level of allegiance from me that it is not possible to maintain if multiple viewpoints are to be represented, sometimes leading to antipathy (see also Mosse 2011). My interlocutors are neither face-
Asian nations and their particular penchant for World Heritage with differing expertise, perceptions, politics, and agendas. As well as ambassadors and diplomats who have to work consultants (architects, archaeologists, and anthropologists), “acknowledging a host of institutional actors who, in a sense, “make” heritage: officials based in Paris, regional experts and consultants (architects, archaeologists, and anthropologists), as well as ambassadors and diplomats who have to work within their own national bureaucracies. In seeking to protect global patrimony, there is an ever-expanding number of actors with differing expertise, perceptions, politics, and agendas.

Recently, this research has led me to focus on emerging Asian nations and their particular penchant for World Heritage listing. For example, in 2014, Myanmar had its first World Heritage site, Pyu Ancient Cities, inscribed, and it did so with strong regional support from Malaysia, the Philippines, India, Japan, and Vietnam. The ICOMOS expert decision to defer the site was overturned. That same year, Myanmar was appointed chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in a controversial decision that was widely viewed as a reward for Myanmar’s national reform. Most World Heritage Committee delegates spoke about the Pyu Cities being important because it was Myanmar’s first World Heritage nomination, rather than addressing the archaeological merits of the site. The decision to inscribe had little to do with the archaeological components and more to do with Myanmar’s participation in world government, its nascent democracy and development, and the timing of this international recognition. Moreover, as chair of ASEAN, Myanmar would be overseeing issues that involved many Asian nations, such as maritime disputes in the South China Sea, not to mention balancing pro- and anti-China forces in the association. This is a prime example of how World Heritage decision-making processes have transformed the inscription of sites into exchange values that mobilize ancillary effects in other domains, driven by economic and political imperatives.

At present, almost a third of the World Heritage Committee is composed of Asian nations, which poses a direct challenge to the established North American and European hegemony that has long dominated World Heritage (Cleere 2011; De Cesari 2014; Labadi 2005, 2007). I wanted to understand the stakes involved, specifically for Southeast Asian nations that have more recently ratified the 1972 Convention, and the reasons why this was happening now. This entailed interviews with Asian ambassadors to UNESCO stationed in Paris, members of their national delegations, and officials posted in regional offices in Asia. In various meetings in Paris, Phnom Penh, and Bangkok, some of my informants speculated about the political machinations leading up to the controversial inscription of Cambodia’s Preah Vihear Temple. They prompted me to investigate the many seemingly unrelated international connections around the inscription and resultant conflict on the ground. One high-ranking diplomat advised me to follow the money, the oil, and, indeed, the leaks. “It’s all there,” I was told in hushed tones against the backdrop of besuited international diplomats having their coffee and going about their business. High-ranking officials were clearly concerned about their identities being leaked, too, but I took these confidences more as conspiratorial gestures and doubted that they could be fully corroborated given the layers of secrecy and diplomacy that surround United Nations agencies.

In the case of Preah Vihear, one diplomat told me to look closely at the American role in the ultimate inscription and to then trace the chain of events online. It seemed unlikely that I would be able to do this; from my experience of nomination dossiers, such negotiations would not be made public, and so I ventured further for the source. The diplomat indicated that American support was instrumental to Cambodia’s successful UNESCO listing; evidence was available on WikiLeaks, he whispered. Previously, in Bangkok, I had heard murmurs about exchanges for oil between Thailand and Cambodia due to Thailand’s unsuccessful bid to claim the territory around Preah Vihear. And yet this intensely regional dispute appeared disconnected from the United States, which shared neither a border with the countries involved nor any immediate interest in the dispute, although the United States had served on the World Heritage Committee from 2005 to 2009. What asset value could an eleventh-century temple dedicated to Shiva, in such a remote location, possibly have? The official World Heritage process would involve negotiations between the sovereign states of Cambodia and Thailand, brokered to some degree by UNESCO’s own brand of intergovernmental diplomacy, such as an International Coordinating Committee (ICC). WikiLeaks seemed a conspiracy too far, yet I felt obliged to follow the lead, and the diplomat was indeed correct. Preah Vihear features in some 150 diplomatic cables containing almost 100,000 words from May 19, 2005, to February 12, 2010. Significantly, these dates cover the lead-up to the temple’s


5. The United States suspended financial support to UNESCO in 2011 after the recognition of Palestine and has done so twice before: once in 1977, when Israel’s petition to be considered part of Europe was denied, and again in 1984, over national interest and cold war conspiracy.

nomination in 2007, its inscription in 2008, the fallout with Thailand, and much of the continued violence. They can be found on Cablegate,7 the United States diplomatic cables leak released by WikiLeaks on November 28, 2010. In total, there are over 250,000 cables containing diplomatic analysis from world leaders and the diplomats’ assessment of their host countries, their foreign counterparts, and the issues of the day. This article focuses on some 40 cables from embassies in Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Jakarta, and the US Mission to UNESCO in Paris. Some 40% of those cables were designated unclassified, whereas the remaining 60% are confidential: significantly, none were flagged as secret or top secret. All the diplomatic cables were marked “Sipdis,” denoting “secret internet protocol distribution,” which means they had been distributed via the closed US SIPRNet, the US Department of Defense’s classified version of the civilian internet. More than three million US government personnel and soldiers have access to this network.8 Documents marked top secret are not included in Sipdis.

Every cable includes the date, author, addressee, classification level, and report text itself. Much of what was written and transmitted was done so in the belief that the dispatches would remain classified for the next 25 years. This presumably explains why American ambassadors and envoys include much gossip and hearsay in their reports back to the State Department in Washington.9 As such, we must remain critical with respect to their veracity and intent. The US government’s first official response to the leaks was to admit that they constituted a major breach of security and classified information. Yet once the material had circulated widely and appeared in numerous international newspapers, the response switched to minimizing the disclosures as minor and unimportant (Pieterse 2012:1912).

Cablegate seems largely an international embarrassment surrounding diplomatic, and sometimes undiplomatic, practices involving 274 embassies dating from December 28, 1966, to February 28, 2010. Many of the documents that I examined were unclassified, and certainly most of the events described or concerns alluded to can be now be effectively traced in other literature from the fields of Asian studies, international relations, political science, defense studies, law, and government (Barnett 2012; Chachavalpongpun 2012; Chesterman 2015; Croissant and Chambers 2010; Hauser-Schäublin and Missling 2014; Pawakapan et al. 2013). Originally nominated on the basis of selection criteria I, III, and IV, the site was inscribed only on the basis of the first, namely “a masterpiece of human creative genius.”10 Importantly, the inscribed property was also re-dedicated in 2015 after the temple was restored. The temple is composed of a series of sanctuaries linked by a system of pavements and staircases over an 800-m-long axis and dates back to the first half of the eleventh century AD. However, its complex history extends further, to the ninth century, when the hermitage was founded. UNESCO inscription was conferred on the basis of the outstanding Khmer architecture and in terms of the temple’s plan, decoration, and relationship to the spectacular landscape setting (http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1224). Indeed, so much has been published that it might be a case of double dealing” (Pieterse 2012:1917).

The notion that the cables contain “no surprises” is beside the point; the point is that they confirm and document hegemonic operations, political complicity and war crimes, so their status changes from allegation and hearsay to actionable offences or, at a minimum, information that carries political consequences. It stands to reason that the political ripple effects are greater and weightier in the target zones of hegemony than on the home front where institutions act as buffers and a jaded public has been inured to impunity (Pieterse 2012:1913).

As the cables that feature Preah Vihear demonstrate, the ever-widening circuits around heritage include both national and international economic, legal, military, and political negotiations. This paper is not about the specific history of the Hindu temple or the ensuing legal battles, since these topics have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere (see Hauser-Schäublin 2011; Hauser-Schäublin and Missling 2014; Pawakapan et al. 2013). Thus, it is not about the temple per se but, rather, its global positioning as a proxy for territory, sovereignty, and security as well as international corporate agreements. Those connections are laid bare in the diplomatic disclosures and remain accessible online from Cablegate.

be thought that the issue of the Hindu temple was rather exhausted. However, before we examine the hyperconnectivity of this one heritage site, a brief history of the international conflict over the temple is necessary.

Tensions between Cambodia and Thailand have a long history, and their respective nationalisms are today framed by accounts of the past, by colonial and foreign relations, and by the recurrent nationalist narrative of “lost territories.” Taking the longer view, the bloodshed over Preah Vihear is intimately tied to understandings of the past and symbolic evolutions of past grandeur and territory embodied in contentious heritage sites. Some authors have argued that the whole notion of this specific border in its regional context, not to mention the temple itself, has been fundamentally misunderstood by Western commentators (Lee 2014; Von Feigenblatt 2011; Wicht 1994). Although a full recounting lies beyond the scope of this paper, there are many excellent and recent studies that provide rich historical detail (Chachavalpongpun 2012; Croissant and Chambers 2010; Cuasay 1998; Kasetsiri, Sothirak, and Chachavalpongpun 2013; Lee 2014; Sothirak 2013; Strate 2013; Yoosuk 2013).

Thai scholar Pavin Chachavalpongpun (2012) argues that the deep animosity between these nations harks back to the advent of colonialism, when King Norodom of Cambodia signed an agreement with France in 1863 to institute a protectorate over his kingdom against his rival neighbors (Siam and Vietnam). Then, in 1904, the Siamese-Cambodian border was demarcated on the basis of the watershed, as indicated in a map sketched by the supposed “joint committee” of Siamese and French surveyors (Chachavalpongpun 2012:84). Not surprisingly, today only Cambodia recognizes this map as indicating a clear boundary line between the two countries, while Thailand relies on a different, unilaterally produced map that was unveiled at the World Heritage Session in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2007. This second map shows the disputed area of land as claimed by Thailand (Sothirak 2013:88).

Chachavalpongpun (2012:84) sets out how Siam’s loss of the Cambodian provinces to the French continues to ignite Thai nationalism by mobilizing the trope of loss of former “Thai territories” in its dealings with foreign powers and opportunistic neighbors. Preah Vihear is situated in just one such territory. This discourse of injury and loss remains resilient today and has infused Thailand’s foreign policy and bilateral arrangements. Cambodia broke off its diplomatic relations with Thailand in 1958 and 1961, allegedly as a protest against the Thai claim for the Preah Vihear, almost escalating to outright war (Chachavalpongpun 2012:85). In 1962, Cambodia took the dispute to the ICJ (Barnett 2012; Shulman 2011). When the ICJ ruled in favor of Cambodia, the authoritarian regime of Sarit Thanarat rewrote the story for nationalist purposes, urging the Thais to remember that the temple had been stolen from them. Yet successive Thai governments never made a request for interpretation of the ICJ ruling (Chachavalpongpun 2012:88), and that decision has ongoing legal repercussions (see Hauser-Schäublin and Missling 2014).

Then, in June 2007, UNESCO announced decision 31 COM 8B.24 at the World Heritage Committee meetings in New Zealand. The World Heritage Committee chairperson released a statement that had been agreed to by the Delegation of Cambodia and the Delegation of Thailand:

The State Party of Cambodia and the State Party of Thailand are in full agreement that the Sacred Site of the Temple of Preah Vihear has Outstanding Universal Value and must be inscribed on the World Heritage List as soon as possible. Accordingly, Cambodia and Thailand agree that Cambodia will propose the site for formal inscription on the World Heritage List at the 32nd session of the World Heritage Committee in 2008 with the active support of Thailand.

Another key moment in the fate of Preah Vihear, covered in detail in Cablegate as well as in official documents, came in May 2008, when the Thai foreign minister, Noppadon Pattama, signed a joint communiqué with Cambodia’s Deputy Prime Minister, Sok An, in Paris. It confirmed Thai support for Cambodia’s request to propose the temple to the UNESCO World Heritage List. Upon returning to Bangkok, Noppadon was faced with hostile nationalists from the People’s Democratic Alliance (PAD), shouting “Noppadon is a traitor” (Chachavalpongpun 2012:90). Once again, Preah Vihear was linked to waning sovereignty and the loss of national territory, especially over the 4.6 km² that surround the temple. Some even argue that Preah Vihear stands in for Thailand itself, particularly its national humiliation over territorial loss, which leads back to the 1930s (Schofield and Tan-Mullins 2008). Reigniting the hostility between neighboring nations, PAD leader Sondhi Limthongkul resolved to take the temple and its surrounding territory by force.

On July 7, 2008, the temple was formally inscribed on the World Heritage List, and border clashes between the two nations erupted almost immediately. Not restricted to just one temple, Thai soldiers occupied the Ta Moan complex in the following month, about 150 km to the west. Cambodia responded by occupying the Ta Krabei Temple, some 13 km east of Ta Moan, sending 70 soldiers to the previously nonmilitarized site. By late October 2008, the Thai military believed that Cambodia had an estimated 2,800 troops around the Preah Vihear Temple. In December 2008, Abhisit Vejjajiva was elected Prime Minister of Thailand and relations with Cambodia initially improved. However, soon after, additional clashes further escalated bilateral tensions. This was followed by joint efforts to reduce the military presence along the border. UNESCO responded to the crisis by sending a reinforced monitoring mission from March 28 to April 6, 2009: it recorded the ongoing violence and casualties, destruction of property, relocation of civilians, and evidence of damage to the temple. Given UNESCO’s intergovernmental standing, the objective...
of the mission was to assess "the state of conservation of the World Heritage property... without attempting to determine the dynamics of events or the responsibilities of the parties involved."

By September 2009, PAD demonstrators again stormed Preah Vihear but were pushed back (Croissant and Chambers 2010:151). On November 6, 2009, the Thai Foreign Ministry recalled its ambassador to Phnom Penh to protest against the official appointment of deposed former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin as Hun Sen’s economic advisor. This prompted a review of all bilateral agreements with Cambodia, and Thailand withdrew from the maritime talks over the potentially rich supplies of oil and gas in a disputed area of the eastern Gulf of Thailand. In response, Cambodia recalled its ambassador to Bangkok (Chachavalpongpun 2012:92–93).

Military standoffs continued to flare up almost to the brink of full-scale war, not only damaging bilateral talks (Sothirak 2013:87), but also threatening the unity of ASEAN. In February and April 2011 tense fighting resumed, with many casualties, property damage, and the displacement of thousands of civilians. Then, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) requested that Thailand and Cambodia withdraw their troops, while the IJC invoked its original decision for military withdrawal. They advised the two nations to resolve the dispute peacefully through dialogue facilitated by the ASEAN group (Sothirak 2013:90). In 2011, ASEAN was chaired by Indonesia, which took a leading role in attempting to mediate the dispute. Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa was sent to Thailand and Cambodia, but all attempts to broker peace failed. ASEAN foreign ministers then agreed to deploy military and civilian observers to the troubled border. Both nations originally agreed to admit Indonesian observers, but Thailand soon withdrew support, claiming that to do so undermined their national sovereignty. Both Cambodia and Thailand had previously addressed their concerns to the UNSC in early February, recounting grievances of military aggression, damage to the temple, and the death toll and invoking the UN Charter and 1954 Hague Convention. Yet such appeals to the UN held little promise of resolution.

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The Thai delegation publicly stepped down from the World Heritage Convention during the World Heritage Committee meetings in Paris on June 27, 2011. I witnessed the dramatic event and remember that, at those same meetings, Cambodia distributed glossy pamphlets showing military stationed around Preah Vihear and artillery damage, calling for a cessation of violence in view of Cambodian sovereignty. Many delegates dismissed the Thai position as a performative exercise in support of the ruling government that would have little political impact. Indeed, such a resignation would not take effect immediately; they would also have several years to consider their position, and Thailand was heading for national elections, the result of which would likely change everything. Leading up to the meetings, UNESCO Director-General Bokova convened a dialogue between both States Parties, hoping to “foster common understanding of the issues affecting the World Heritage site, and to reach agreement on enhancing its state of conservation following recent threats to the property.” An example of failed diplomacy, the latent struggle was revived through UNESCO inscription and subsequent deliberations (Hauser-Schäublin and Missling 2014:89). Afterward, UNESCO could only issue public statements of regret and urge Thailand to reconsider their withdrawal. Over the ensuing months and years, UNESCO launched its own media campaign, with diplomatic attempts to garner an agreement and, ultimately, peace. Given that the UNESCO listing sparked the recent spate of violence and that other measures perhaps should have been taken beforehand (Williams 2011), the organization was in a weaker position than usual to forge a peaceful outcome.

On July 18, 2011, the IJC called for the installation of a demilitarized zone and urged cooperation through ASEAN, reminding both nations that the UN Charter obliged them to settle disputes peacefully. Hauser-Schäublin and Missling (2014:80) argue that this provisional measure transformed the UNESCO World Heritage site, which had been temporarily ruled by a military border regime, into an area exclusively restricted to civilians. Cambodian troops finally withdrew from the zone surrounding the temple in July 2012. Then, in November 2013, the IJC reiterated its decision in the 1962 ruling and stated unanimously “that Cambodia had sovereignty over the whole territory of the promontory of Preah Vihear, as defined in paragraph 98 of the present judgment, and that, in consequence, Thailand was under an obligation to withdraw from that territory the Thai military or police forces, or other guards or keepers, that were stationed
there.” 20 At the time of writing, diplomatic negotiations between Thailand and Cambodia continue, and the ICC is only now starting its work. 21

In this very brief historical account, I hope to have underscored the intersections between international legal bodies, global heritage regimes, territorial conflicts, domestic politics, and understandings of history and sovereignty. In the next section, I focus specifically on the leveraging of this specific World Heritage site within broader politico-economic negotiations.

Heritage and Hyperconnectivity

World Heritage properties, and the very process of inscribing and subsequently managing and conserving them, produce a dynamic market place for international trade and exchange. Sites are emblems or tokens that leverage ancillary goods and exchanges in ever-widening circuits of economic and political power (Meskell 2014). Although historically the World Heritage Committee was singularly dominated by European nations, Asian States Parties currently dominate, leading to distinct styles of politics and diplomacy (see Winter 2014a, 2014b). Moreover, in terms of regional representation, no East Asian nation possessed a property inscribed on the World Heritage List before 1987. In that one year, China successfully put forward six properties, and all were inscribed. It was only in 1991 that additional sites from other East Asian nations were inscribed, and there has been a steady increase in the regional listings ever since. While the historic dominance of European nations can be explained to some degree by the Convention’s early development, today, Asian states such as China, with 48 World Heritage properties, are increasingly active (for a full discussion, see Meskell, Luzzi, and Brown 2015).

During interviews with members of Asian delegations to UNESCO at their Rue Miollis, Paris, offices, I asked specifically about the changing nature of World Heritage in Asia. Over numerous cups of tea, individual diplomats described how they saw their role as supporting other Southeast Asian nations, a tendency also noted by members of the UNESCO Secretariat. Asian regionalism is often defined by a communitarian instinct to reinforce cooperation so as to overcome the fissures that might potentially divide societies (Beeson 2005). Some suggest that Asian regionalism tends to be more culturally articulated, as opposed to economic, as in North America, or political, as with Europe (Chin 2014). My informants uniformly talked about the importance of the “brand,” national pride, international recognition, and development opportunities. But many were also quick to identify the pitfalls of global tourism that accompany inscription and subsequently impinge upon site conservation.

When asked about the recent interest in Asian World Heritage, one diplomat in Paris told me that it was about getting known and “being visible” on the world stage. Inscription brings international funding, support, and training. “If you have that, other things follow,” he explained, “sometimes it’s the easy route, but not always.” He had witnessed this personally in the drawn-out negotiations over Preah Vihear. Other officials described participation in the World Heritage arena, from site inscription to World Heritage Committee membership, as being tied to ASEAN principles, the role of emerging nations, Asian identity, global branding, and economics. Speaking about the importance of a major archaeological site now being prepared for nomination, one ambassador said that it did not simply belong to his country, but “to the world.” If the site is inscribed, he said with thinly veiled longing, there will be development, recognition, and international support, and all of this is key to his nation in transition. But, on the other hand, some ambassadors were keen to point out that they already had expertise at home and saw World Heritage Committee membership as an opportunity to share their own technical expertise. Speaking with great pride, one official, trained as an economist, spoke of his delegation’s preparedness and training in natural and cultural heritage and recounted the numerous requests for regional assistance he had received. Being on the committee was a positive statement for his country, to learn further, to show their skills, to be visible, and to accrue benefits all round. This is the softer side of cultural diplomacy (Luke 2013; Luke and Kersel 2013; Winter 2014b) and very different from the conflict between States Parties that erupted around Preah Vihear.

Unlike the cordial discussions above, the leaked US diplomatic cables reveal the tense briefings leading up to a May 2008 meeting in Paris just before the annual World Heritage Committee session. Thailand clearly disapproved of Cambodia’s unilateral nomination of Preah Vihear. Cambodia independently solicited technical reports and management plans from French, Belgian, and US specialists.22 One American specialist from the US National Parks Service helped the Cambodians draft the 2008 progress report, and they were apparently so grateful that they considered naming part of the Preah Vihear landscape in his honor.23 Thai experts preferred a transboundary listing, but their views were not considered. By April 10, 2008, the American Ambassador suggested that the issue had become too polemical for public meetings and that “private negotiations” would be the only way to advance. The United States was to play a significant part, as we shall see, as members of national delegations and UNESCO staff had indicated during interviews. The leaks had effectively confirmed a great deal of what was previously just speculation.

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The cables make explicit the ways in which the temple dispute was intricately tied to broader issues of foreign policy and investment. Some of the cables that I examined were dispatched to the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Council, Secretary of State, and United Nations, as well as to the Commander in Chief US Pacific Command. Rather than simply making inferred connections, it is important to demonstrate how seemingly separate issues are conjoined. Let us take one pertinent example, a cable dated May 6, 2008, entitled Cambodia: Investment, Temple Controversy, Debt and Overlapping Claims Headline Business Delegation Meeting. In that single cable, Preah Vihear figures in six of 10 paragraphs. The first paragraph opens with "the pending inscription of the Preah Vihear Temple on the UNESCO World Heritage List and Cambodia’s bilateral debt with the US Delegation members and the embassy believe that successful resolution of the Preah Vihear issue could open the door to a resolution of the overlapping claims area in the Gulf of Thailand."

The second paragraph summarizes a meeting between Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen and the US-ASEAN Business Council President Matt Daley on the expansion of US companies, like Boeing and Ford. Daley reports "that the business delegation had just come from meetings in Thailand and relayed a message from Thai Foreign Minister Noppadoh Pat-tama that Thailand does not oppose the inscription of the Preah Vihear Temple on the UNESCO World Heritage List, but would like a joint Thai-Cambodian management plan for the temple."

The third paragraph focuses entirely on Preah Vihear and the issue of overlapping claims. Hun Sen states that "a joint management plan is not politically or legally feasible, since the proposed inscription covered the temple site (the area awarded to Cambodia by the International Court of Justice)." In the next paragraph, he is quoted as urging "a swift resolution of the issue, saying that further delay endangers the site, which is the ‘heritage of humankind.’"

Paragraphs five and six refer to Cambodia’s outstanding bilateral debt to the United States and issues of repayment. Paragraph seven deals with the Overlapping Claims Area and oil reserves in the Gulf of Thailand and in Thailand, Hun Sen preferring to consider this issue separate from that of Preah Vihear. The next paragraph covers the Cambodian economy, as does the ninth paragraph, stressing that "major US companies have already begun operations in the Cambodian market.

Finally, paragraph ten states that "the meetings also served as a reality check that intense political debates lie behind some key economic issues. On the Preah Vihear issue, it seems likely that—despite Thai and Cambodian statements to the contrary—the inscription of the temple is linked to resolving the maritime claims dispute, at least in the minds of senior Thai and Cambodian government leaders. Both sides are looking at the issues from political, cultural, and economic perspectives. It is in the interest of both countries to find a way to settle these differences; the challenge for the USG [United States Government] is to find a way to push both countries towards an acceptable solution...inscribing Preah Vihear on the UNESCO World Heritage List, if handled correctly, actually could open opportunities for the two countries to work more closely both on cultural issues and the more lucrative issue of the overlapping claims in the Gulf of Thailand."

During the period covered by the diplomatic leaks, and discussed within them, there was increased US investor interest in Cambodia from major corporations like Boeing, not to mention Nike, McDonalds, Pizza Hut, and Marlboro. The issue of Cambodia’s debt to the United States was also being considered. As the May 6, 2008, cable above suggests, if the Preah Vihear dispute could be resolved, it might open a door to resolving the overlapping maritime claims in the Gulf of Thailand (Shoefield and Tan-Mullins 2008). This would mean access to vast natural gas reserves to be exploited by US companies like Chevron, who have subsequently been granted extended concessions. Linking territorial disputes from the temple to the sea, one Cambodian representative explained that there was "no overlapping claim" with Preah Vihear as there was with the Gulf of Thailand. The two issues of commodities and flows were inextricably linked for the main players and their US brokers. An equation began to take shape: if Cambodia retained their temple, Thailand might enhance their underwater assets, and the United States might negotiate for extended contracts. Indeed, the cables underscore how governments privilege the economic interests of large corporations, not simply national interests, abroad. The political, the economic, and the cultural became inseparable, and this connection was made, not only in the leaks, but also in Thai media, which accused the government of exchanging Preah Vihear and its border territories for access to natural gas rights in Cambodia’s Koh Kong province (Strate 2013).

While the “national” is front and center in the Preah Vihear dispute, negotiations around the site have involved a broad range of entities, including the work of national legislatures and judiciaries, intergovernmental agencies, the international


operations of national firms and markets, political projects of nonstate actors, and changes in the relationship between citizens and the state (Sassen 2006). For example, the United States has had a significant military stake in the region since World War II, according to the cables, with bases in Thailand, such as Utapao, with air and sea capability. Utapao had previously supported US refueling missions en route to Afghanistan. In one cable, we read that “the relationship has evolved into a partnership that provides the United States with unique benefits. As one of five US treaty allies in Asia and straddling a major force projection air/sea corridor, Thailand remains crucial to US interests in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.”

Thus, supporting Thailand in an international dispute, whether over territory or temples, had implications. The cables reveal the eagerness of the United States to strengthen its presence in Southeast Asia, especially in light of the region’s increasing links with China. The State Party of China, like the United States, is a member of the ICC for Preah Vihear, so both will be instrumental in shaping its future management. In 2008, China also had substantial investment projects around Preah Vihear, including mining and industry, and has funded a bridge and a major road to the temple. In that same year, the Chinese government gave US$290 million to fund a road linking Preah Vihear to the World Heritage site of Angkor. Winter (2010:121) argues that intraregional tourism provides a valuable context for mobilizing new partnerships between the two nations. The China Railway Group was also constructing a north-south railway connecting the Chinese-owned Cambodia Iron and Steel Mining Industry Group’s factory in Preah Vihear province to a new port in Koh Kong province in the Gulf of Thailand. According to one informant in Paris, it was the broader issue of Chinese insertion into Cambodia that was the real stimulus behind American intervention in Preah Vihear.

With reference to Cambodian relations with the United States, the temple brokered a new era of fruitful cooperation. Further cementing their relationship with the United States, the Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Sok An is reported in one cable as saying, “gone are the days of mistrust and suspicion.” And given this new relationship, he was eager for the implementation of promised US Agency for International Development (USAID) programs for his country. In a single paragraph, the US assistance with the inscription of Preah Vihear and the possibility of excluding Thailand on the ICC is followed by discussion of Chevron concessions and potential compromises on oil revenue taxation. Sok An then repeats his gratitude for the US delegation’s support of the inscription of Preah Vihear. Not forgetting this link to the workings of World Heritage, Sok An served as the chairman for the 2013 World Heritage Committee meetings held in Phnom Penh. Moreover, in 2008 and again in 2013, the US State Department pushed to renew its Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Cambodia concerning cultural property, thus ignoring what was unfolding on the ground (see also Luke and Kersel 2013:63–73). Specifically, in Article II of this bilateral agreement, Cambodia agrees to “strengthen regional cooperation, especially with immediately neighboring states, for the protection of the cultural patrimony of the region, recognizing that often, present-day political boundaries and cultural boundaries do not coincide.”

Around the site of Preah Vihear is an assemblage of distinct elements that are denationalized through political, economic, and military interventions. The 1972 convention, within the framework of the United Nations, expects properties like Preah Vihear to be nominated by the sovereign state on whose territory they are located (Pressouyre 1996). World Heritage sites should thus embody some of the most inalienable of objects. The listing of Preah Vihear constitutes what Sassen would call a “tipping point”: one that moves us from an era marked by the ascendancy of the nation-state and its capture of all major components of social, economic, political, and subjective life to one marked by a proliferation of orders (Sassen 2006:9). What WikiLeaks does is essentially highlight that proliferation. The cables might not disclose new information, but they underscore the hyperconnectivity of World Heritage today. As one US ambassador noted with regard to the temple, “the US’s overarching interest in maintaining regional stability does not allow us the luxury of indefinitely standing on the sidelines of this dispute.”

The timing of the temple dispute was also crucial for larger security concerns and jockeying for power on high-profile UN committees. Cambodia was petitioning for support in its bid to join the UN Security Council in the 2012 elections with a campaign that

32. In several cables, the United States’s concern with China is evident, particularly regarding their bilateral investment in Cambodia; infrastructural projects, including roads and railways; and the increasing closeness of the two nations. On December 25, 2008, the US ambassador to Cambodia expressed her concern over China, fearing that the current “Year of China” looks to become its ‘Century of China.’” She describes royal banquets, the first-ever visit by a Chinese warship, a growing assistance package, further trade, and investment ties. Cambodia describes this as “blank cheque” diplomacy, and in 2009, China pledged $256 million in assistance. By contrast, the United States was likely to offer Cambodia only $50 million. The Chinese loans are often used to support projects benefiting Chinese companies, whether in oil and mineral exploration or infrastructural projects. See https://search.wikileaks.org/plussd/cables/08PHNOMPENH1027_a.html.
foregrounded their ancient heritage.\textsuperscript{35} Thailand had considered running in 2010 but ultimately withdrew. Cambodia was also eager to securing US backing to join the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and overturn the embargo on new members.

The foregoing suggests that resolving the temple and its border war was bound up in and inseparable from larger international bartering that the United States saw as advantageous. However, American diplomats seem genuinely concerned with the implementation of rule of law in Cambodia, good governance, and reducing corruption as much as they are with trade facilitation, economic growth, and security cooperation.\textsuperscript{36} The cables convey that the desired outcome for the United States is a peaceful resolution and one that incorporates a role for Thailand. American diplomats note that the “U.S. remains the country of first choice for arms procurement” for Thailand, with $2 billion currently in process.\textsuperscript{37} Speaking about US involvement in the conflict, one official based in Paris told me, “they think their business is the world.” His phrase is particularly apt, because so much American intervention was directly tethered to economic interests.

In Thailand, the ramifications of Cablegate were keenly felt, because they reveal reactions from outside observers, like US ambassadors, who themselves were not constrained by laws prohibiting Thailand’s “network monarchy” from being held publicly accountable. Moreover, they cover a time of unprecedented violence and upheaval from 2009 to 2011, including the clashes between the pro-monarchy “yellow shirts” and the opposing “red shirts.” Some government supporters saw the release just days before the 2011 election as a conspiracy to overthrow the monarchy and Thai establishment (Pieterse 2012:1915).

The cables describe the fate of Foreign Minister Noppadon, the legal fallout when he was accused of violating constitutional procedures, and his ultimate resignation on July 14, 2008. The next day, a monk and two other Thai crossed the border in protest, sparking further mobilization of troops.\textsuperscript{38} Fueled by turmoil in domestic Thai politics, popular media portrayed the loss of territory and the temple through UNESCO inscription as former Prime Minister Thaksin’s gain, alleging that he supported the Cambodian nomination in return for personal financial rewards (Askew 2010; Croissant and Chambers 2010). Hostilities over the temple thus stirred up both domestic political intrigues and cross-border ones. Protests organized by the People’s Alliance for Democracy successfully toppled an opposition-led government and politicized the temple dispute by making it a matter of national pride. At the same time, disputes were erupting over maritime territory between the two nations in the Gulf of Thailand. As stated above, the United States has commercial interests in the gulf, including the corporate giant Chevron.

Both Cambodia and Thailand were elected to the World Heritage Committee for the very same period (2009–2013), undoubtedly as an internationally driven diplomatic measure to balance national interests and find a peaceful solution to the Preah Vihear conflict. There was considerable pressure on American diplomats, especially those in the US Mission to UNESCO, to support both Cambodia\textsuperscript{39} and Thailand,\textsuperscript{40} respectively. Each drew on their nation’s vast heritage reserves and expertise in arguing for American backing. Showcasing the past and effectively managing it in modern “expert” ways has currency in international circles, as reinforced in the majority of my interviews with Asian representatives. Having that recognized through election to the World Heritage Committee, as a key “standard setting” body, is perceived as a positive step in gaining yet further prestige and power in other United Nations forums.

I have suggested that the entire World Heritage system today creates transferable values that mobilize supplemental rewards in other global domains, driven by economic, military, religious and social imperatives (Meskell 2014, 2015). This can be traced throughout the World Heritage process, but also at the level of particular properties and participants within the system. World Heritage sites, their nomination, inscription, monitoring, and conservation further leverages and consolidates international relationships, strategic partnerships, and worldviews. In these politicized transactions, cultural recognition both masks and enables a multifarious network of exchange values. One notable example of fungibility in the World Heritage arena evidenced in the leaked cables is the practice of vote swapping across UN forums, also described in detail by many World Heritage insiders (see also Dreher, Sturm, and Vreeland 2009; Slaughter and Hale 2010). One cable reveals that “Thailand had entered into a vote swap deal with Germany and Italy” to support their candidates for the United Nations International Civil Service Commission “in exchange for support for Thailand’s candidate for the U.N. World Heritage Committee.” Membership was deemed crucial given the ongoing Preah Vihear dispute, and Cambodia was also a candidate for Committee. Both nations were successful in their 2008 bid to join the World Heritage Committee in 2009. Because vote trading has become increasingly common, the Thai official ventured that it might be more difficult for his country to support the United States without Thailand receiving something in return.\textsuperscript{41}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{35} http://www.cambodianembassy.org.uk/downloads/Cambodia%20UN%20Brochure%20BLUE.pdf.
\textsuperscript{36} https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09PHNOMPENH142_a.html.
\textsuperscript{37} https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09BANGKOK1720_a.html.
\textsuperscript{38} https://search.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/08BANGKOK2167_a.html.
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The cables tell us a great deal about World Heritage politics, and while they may reveal practices we know or assume to be operative, the fact that they come from such high-level official sources suggests we can no longer ignore them. In Žižek’s terms, we cannot pretend we do not know what everyone knows we know. It is ironic, too, that the United States has been such a vociferous critic of the so-called “politicization” of UNESCO, especially during the time period covered by the leaks, citing other nations as using the World Heritage Convention to advance their agendas (see Morris 2011; Siim 2011). It has been well documented that the United States views “politicization” as the introduction of issues that it no longer has enough votes to exclude (Dorn and Ghodsee 2012; Graham 2006; Hoggart 2011; Preston, Herman, and Schiller 1989:131). Yet I would posit that if, for example, we had similar access to French and Chinese diplomatic correspondence in Thailand and Cambodia at the same time we might see similar speculations about trade and territorial and security matters. This is not simply an American issue: today, hyper-connectivity is as much about heritage as it is communication or globalization. Through the processes of globalization, territory, law, economy, security, authority, and membership, which may have once been conceived of as national, rarely possess the degree of autonomy evinced in national law and international treaties (Sassen 2006:1).

Conclusions

Ethnographic fieldwork allows for elements of surprise and serendipity to shape the research process (Shore 2007), to follow the leads that informants offer and, in the case of diplomatic elites, to dig deeper into international bureaucracies and institutional politics. Delving into the world of WikiLeaks was never intended to constitute part of my research into World Heritage. nor could it have been anticipated. Archaeologists talk a great deal about politics, but they typically have little access to politicians or those involved in the making of international agreements and policies. The diplomatic disclosures then represent a rare opportunity to untangle the complex political transactions around one World Heritage site. Moreover, archaeologists always want the past to matter in the present, yet in complex international settings, we are often unaware of the ways in which and degrees to which certain sites get bound up in political, economic, and religious issues that we cannot begin to access, influence, or even comprehend. Increasingly, this kind of mattering can have detrimental effects on sites and, more importantly, the people around them.

This is an article about the workings of foreign interests abroad, soft and hard power, military calculation, geopolitical maneuvering, and the future. We see that revealed in the leaked cables, where archaeological heritage is an asset to be negotiated like any other. By finding ways to trace the hyper-connectivity that we know to be operative today, we avoid constituting heritage as a “category that conceals rather than illuminates the analysis of social processes” (Franquesa 2013: 348). Heritage is clearly not above value in today’s world, as the transactional histories of Preah Vihear neatly illustrate. Recognition of this can be traced in UNESCO’s own future-driven strategy documents. World Heritage properties were positioned in 2002 as drivers for development and “dialogue among cultures and civilizations,” whereas by 2014 they were transformed into “assets . . . used for promoting social stability peace-building, recovery from crisis situations, and development strategies.” While heritage has long been framed as a resource, whether for development or intercultural understanding, this shift to “assets” signals a form of value available for capitalization, exchange, and debt repayment that is surmounted, as Preah Vihear demonstrates, to both the nation state and international community. More challenging still are the political and military implications of a global heritage regime in which sites and objects now play a very visible role in the struggle or, indeed, constitute the point of conflict. On the one hand, UNESCO claims that heritage might be deployed to “prevent conflicts and facilitate peace-building,” while, on the other, it recognizes that “recent years have also been marked by an increasing trend to target culture in conflict.” Despite UNESCO’s best efforts, and laid bare in glossy brochures distributed at World Heritage meetings as well as in ISIS-released videos, material heritage is being instrumentalized to exacerbate our fundamental differences and tensions.

Some might argue that the conflicts and subsequent diplomatic efforts over Preah Vihear are examples of soft power, yet I would instead suggest that we are witnessing clear-cut international struggles for territorial, economic, and military leverage. Tied to the temple dispute were issues of resource extraction, commercial contracts, infrastructural developments, regional defense, and the continued use of military installations. All of these transactions intervolved international players, including, among others, the United States and China, and in turn, any decisions had ramifications for the broader future of the region. Global regimes have long been entreated to settle territorial disputes and shore up sovereign protection in relation to ancient heritage (De Cesari 2010). Indeed, Cambodia’s nineteenth-century appeal to the French to normalize colonial administrative relations on the ground is echoed in later petitions to the ICJ (in 1962, 2011, and 2013) and in Preah Vihear’s nomination to UNESCO’s World Heritage List in 2008 as a “masterpiece of human creative genius.”

While some external brokers, such as UNESCO or the United States, might view cultural sites as proxies for larger issues, whether that be for the furtherance of peace (Labadi 2013; Pavone 2008) or investor advantage, for the Thais and Cambodians, the temple and its territorial context were precisely what was at issue, and they had been at issue for decades. The case of Preah Vihear also underscores the persistent Western imaginaries that linger around heritage sites in Asia (Byrne 2007, 2009, 2014) and that still fail to account for local
understandings, experiences, and histories. A more confronting example of cultural and religious difference toward the material past is currently playing out in Iraq and, unfortunately, after decades of crafting multilateral treaties and conventions, we appear no closer to achieving a global understanding of culture.

It is noteworthy that UNESCO, an intergovernmental organization founded after the ravages of World War II, set its sights upon the dream of peace through global treaties that bound sovereign nations together, such as the 1972 Convention. Forging an international body with a mission for mutual cultural understanding through cosmopolitan diversity, on the one hand, and conservation of global patrimony through technocracy, on the other, can sometimes engender the very type of conflict that it set out to dispel. The reasons why this dual mission remains irreconcilable and increasingly falters in today’s world is another, longer, and more complex story.

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Comments

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Meskell’s paper would not, I imagine, make comfortable reading for many heritage professionals. It is true that heritage, by its very nature as a discursive formation, is always political, but for many archaeologists, architects, and others working in the heritage conservation field, this has been hard to accept. They hold to the belief that the old objects and places they work with have intrinsic meaning and value, perhaps as reassurance that their own labor has unquestionable value. They hold, perhaps, to a vision of a less complicated world where aesthetic beauty and historical importance spoke for themselves, a world light years away from that which emerges from Meskell’s excellent exposé of World Heritage Committee machinations.

Almost three decades ago, Richard Handler (1988) pointed out that, when expressed as patrimony, old objects assume the pure aura of things with inherent value. Constrained as a material dimension of our culture, the objects are seen, not as commodities with exchange value, but as the embodiment of the nation as collective individual. What comes through so clearly in Meskell’s paper is that the politicians, diplomats, bureaucrats, and corporate lobbyists who circulate through World Heritage forums have no such illusions. They seem intuitively to appreciate that the material past is always reassembled in the present (Harrison 2011). Meskell’s deep immersion in the institutional universe of World Heritage and its murky margins gives us a view of that universe dramatically at odds with that provided by UNESCO websites and heritage tourism brochures.

The World Heritage process effects an abstraction of old places from the social context of their local setting. Meskell, here and elsewhere (e.g., 2015b), reveals the extent to which, as the process reaches its apogee in World Heritage Committee meetings, the materiality of such places is left far behind. The “transactionality” she shows to be normative in Committee forums has meant an “emptying out of the substance of heritage” (Meskell 2015b:12). This compounds the general and seemingly intractable tendency of heritage practitioners to privilege the material fabric of sites over their social context. Before the sites reach the Committee in the form of proposal dossiers, they have already been subject to a filtration process that dilutes or effaces their local social meaning. This comes on top of the abstraction from the social effected by the elevation of select elements of the material past to the status of national heritage, a practice of statecraft already under way in Siam by the mid-nineteenth century (Peleggi 2007) and in Cambodia, in the guise of French colonial-nationalism, at around the same time (Edwards 2007; Winter 2007). In the case of sites like Preah Vihear, their decontextualization from local-social settings as they were woven into national history narratives occurred in tandem with a movement by nation-states in Southeast Asia to efface the beliefs and practices of popular religion (combining animism and folk Buddhism) that invested such sites with magical-miraculous propensities (Byrne 2014).

Visiting Preah Vihear in the mid-1990s, I found that the few Western tourists who had made it there were greatly outnumbered by Thais lighting incense and saying prayers at those points in the sanctuary complex that they judged to be
the most divinely efficacious. As numerous anthropologists and historians have shown over the past decades, popular religion has not only survived the antisuperstition campaigns of the modern state in Southeast Asia but positively flourishes in the present day. Yet it does so semi-invisibly. It is effaced both from official heritage discourse and from the work of heritage experts practicing in Asia. In the case of the latter, the systemic failure to acknowledge the extent to which archaeological sites and monuments in the region are enmeshed in popular religion amounts, it seems to me, to an undeclared program of secularization (Byrne 2012, 2014). In the light of the WikiLeaks documents, one would not be overly cynical to conclude that the only people who actually believe in Preah Vihear are those pious worshippers knelling in its alcoves.

The centrality Meskell gives in this paper (and see Meskell 2015) to the exchangeability and transactionality of the sites as-commodities that are subject to World Heritage processes constitutes an important move, one that prompts my thoughts on abstraction. The yawning gulf between the way Preah Vihear and similar “monuments” are represented in official heritage discourse, including that of World Heritage, and the way they are experienced and lived locally finds a counterpart in the gulf between the conception of heritage held by those players in World Heritage Committee realpolitik and the conception of it held by most heritage professionals. To return to my opening point, for the archaeologists, conservation architects, art historians, and others who constitute the field of heritage conservation practice, heritage has never been regarded as a transactional asset. One only has to think of the long campaign the field has waged against antiquities trafficking and its antipathy to the very notion of an antiquities market to appreciate the depth of this sentiment. But you wonder whether, in holding out against transactionality, the field has not barricaded itself into an ontological corner from which it cannot allow itself to acknowledge what World Heritage has become (at least at the tertiary level of the Committee forums) and thus is ill positioned to counter the problem. The field needs to take a big step back from World Heritage in more ways than one.

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WikiLeaks makes transparent what Lynn Meskell has spent a good deal of her recent work explaining, namely that World Heritage is much less about preserving heritage than about politics and the economy. (It’s the economy, stupid!) What is particularly interesting is the ways in which this happens, the whole inscription process functioning as a value- and connectivity-enhancing device. The leaked cables about Preah Vihear, the contested temple at the Thai-Cambodian border, show how inscribing sites on the World Heritage List turns them into highly valuable assets that can be mobilized in all sorts of transactions, a kind of global currency that can earn all of the states involved in the process a wide range of gains, including international recognition but also gas concessions, capital investments, commercial contracts, political leverage, and territorial gains, among others. This is a very relevant argument, particularly in light of the burgeoning number of nominations and the growing visibility and “politicization” of World Heritage; as such, it is a matter of deep concern for critical heritage scholars and ethnographers but also for other anthropologists who analyze the politics of international organizations and globalized cultural politics. In my own fieldwork, I had plenty of opportunities to observe that what matters in the World Heritage process—at least for State Parties, the key players in the field—is getting sites on the list; this piece goes a long way toward explaining why this is so.

(World) heritagization accelerates the connectivity of sites along manifold vectors. This “hyperconnectivity,” as Meskell calls it, is both vertical, since heritagization turns a site of local and national significance into a global one, and horizontal, by making a historical place into a matter of “international struggles for territorial, economic and military leverage.” Heritagization certainly constitutes a point of entry of global forces—as the WikiLeaks cables show, “governments privilege the economic interests of large corporations, not simply national interests, abroad”—but the type of connectivity it enables and the ways in which it networks a site cross both domains and scales.

My first conclusion, then, is that the recognition of such hyperconnectivity urges us to rethink the multiscalearity of heritage processes. Much research in heritage studies is imbued with a kind of methodological nationalism and works on the assumption of an imagined cartography articulated in a set of nested, hierarchical containers—clearly differentiating a local, national, and global heritage. Working with such categories becomes deeply problematic once we grasp that heritagization, the very labeling of a site as heritage, immediately activates connections across scales and is, in itself, an act of scale-making. Such taken-for-granted, static imaginary does not help us understand the complex dynamics of scales that are not only interconnected but also mutually constituted. Such hyperconnectivity and multiscalearity pose challenges in terms of our research practices and units of analysis. How to explore world heritagization? How to look at it from multiple points of entry? Is it enough to explore it from the “top down” (focusing on World Heritage Committee meetings and expert circles) and/or from the “bottom up” (focusing on conflicts at the site itself)? An important challenge for critical heritage studies today is precisely how to think through matters of intersecting scales and grasp networked constellations of locations and positionailites; or, for example, how state actors mobilize the exchange values of World Heritage inscriptions at different scales.

What is also made transparent in the WikiLeaks cables is that world heritagization spurs conflicts. As Meskell highlights, this process often produces unintended effects that are
quite the opposite of the goals of the program, such as to preserve heritage and stimulate cross-cultural dialogue or to “build peace in the minds of men and women,” as the famous motto says. In some cases, like Preah Vihear and other contested sites, this even includes armed conflicts and military interventions, often triggered by the ways in which World Heritage recognition invests states with the mantle of sovereignty and reaffirms it: this is indeed an important side effect of the process. Conflicts are themselves the consequence of the heightened cross-scale connectivity discussed above. But they also have to do with the fact that turning sites into “heritage,” into cultural properties with exchange values, means nationalizing, commodifying, and enclosing them by entrusting the nation-state with their care and management and by propelling the economic exploitation of sites through tourism. Often, it is not only states but also, and especially, tour operators and tourism corporations that are able to reap the benefits of heritagization, in spite of the widespread rhetoric of local development and community participation.

We know by now that heritage is about politics and the economy. Perhaps it is time to move on and, following Meskell’s final call, ask about the kind of politics and economies that World Heritage promotes. Of course, there is no single answer to this question, for globalization itself produces variegated effects, but there are reasons to worry. The point, I believe, is not simply that World Heritage has moved so much beyond its original goal, the recognition and protection of the much-criticized “outstanding universal value,” even to the point of its obliteration. It is not only a matter of violence against heritage as things, such as against monuments (e.g., the recent cases of destruction of World Heritage sites by ISIS, as in Palmyra or the earlier destruction of the Bamian Buddhas). It is also about violence against people; about heritagization spurring privatizations, gentrification, and evictions; and about extreme commodification and people’s life worlds being turned into Disneylands. Once Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) noted that World Heritage essentially gives new values to old sites chiefly by listing them, the assumption being that this type of valorization will itself guarantee preservation and revitalization; in this context, she asks an interesting question: why a list? Why does the dual recognition of human commonalities and shared values and of human creative diversity, and the conservation of the monuments that materialize both, have to take the shape of an inventory? Do we really need such a list, as opposed to a set of projects and initiatives?

Martin Hall

In her perceptive critique of UNESCO’s often-cumbersome entanglement with politics, Meskell shows how World Heritage has come to be used as a set of assets in the political maneuvers of nation-states and international interests. Such manipulations are facilitated by an insistence that the World Heritage list is “above” and “outside” everyday conflicts.

This is dangerous, and Meskell shows how the inclusion of Preah Vihear Temple on the World Heritage List in 2008 provoked a military standoff between Cambodia and Thailand. It is surprising that UNESCO did not appreciate the explosive consequences of mixing ethnically based nationalism and territorial disputes with cultural heritage; they had been there before.

In 1982, and after intensive lobbying by Buddhist nationalists, Sri Lanka’s Cultural Triangle was declared a World Heritage site. This was at the beginning of a civil war that lasted almost 30 years. Here, as in Cambodia and Thailand, historic sites have never been “above” politics and identity; they are ineluctable manifestations of these processes.

Sharply differentiated and politicized Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic identities originated in the nineteenth century as part of the complex manipulations of colonial rule. This stereotyping, which saturates life in Sri Lanka today, is tied to interpretations of the island’s cultural heritage and its traces in architecture, monuments, art, and written texts that span more than 2,000 years. The dominant narrative is of a straightforward succession of Buddhist states withstanding external aggression. In this interpretation, the Sinhalese lineage was established in the sixth century BC when the island’s first king was banished there from northern India (Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority 2013). This is a story of proud and persistent defence of religion and civilization against external aggressors; Tamil Sri Lankans are, and always have been, an “enemy within.”

Neither the documentary nor the archaeological evidence supports this narrative. Both artistic representations and archaeological excavations suggest a considerable degree of syncretism. This is supported by the documentary record, which maps a complex history of alliances, intermarriages, disagreements, and skirmishes with South Indian polities, which is hardly surprising, given the proximity of the island to the mainland (Seneviratne 1996:311, 2007). The idea of a long and noble lineage, overcome by Britannia’s might, suited British imperial jingoism, while Buddhism appealed to the peculiar mysticism of the Victorians. This narrative also suited some postindependent factions and has continued to the present.

As ethnic battle lines hardened ahead of the outbreak of civil war, Sinhalese nationalists launched an extensive and successful campaign to woo UNESCO. This culminated in an elaborate display at Anuradhapura in January 1980, under an auspicious new moon. In the official account, included in the UNESCO-endorsed guide sold at the site today, some 200,000 devotees witnessed a ceremony involving 4,000 monks, 10,000 children dressed in white, 200 flagpoles, each with a drummer and bunting adorning the massive stupa (Silva 1993:179, 180). UNESCO was persuaded and declared Anuradhapura a World Heritage site in 1982, along with the remnants of the cities of Ritigala, Polonnaruwa, and Sigiriya: together, they constituted the Cultural Triangle.
The civil war began in the following year with the insurgency by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, or Tamil Tigers), who claimed the right to an independent state in the northern and eastern part of the island. As was to happen with Preah Vihear in 2008, the Cultural Triangle became a target for violence. Now inscribed with a militaristic strand of Buddhist nationalism, Anuradhapura was attacked by the LTTE in 1984, resulting in a strong military presence across the World Heritage complex as a whole that was to last throughout the war. In 1998, and on the fiftieth anniversary of Sri Lanka’s independence, suicide bombers killed sixteen people with extensive damage to Kandy’s Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic, the most important religious site in the Cultural Triangle.

Despite this evident and dangerous politicization of Sri Lanka’s cultural landscape, UNESCO continued to insist on the objectives of dialogue and development that Meskell identifies as the founding principles of World Heritage. Here is Director-General Federico Mayor in 1990, marking the tenth anniversary of the Anuradhapura ceremony: “the Cultural Triangle project is indeed steering the proper course with its underlying dedication to safeguarding the national cultural heritage in order to foster and strengthen a sense of identity that cannot but contribute to the socio-economic development of the whole nation” (Mayor 1990). At the time of his speech, Sri Lanka’s World Heritage sites were under continuous military protection from a mounting insurgency that was affecting all aspects of life in the country.

The war ended in 2009 with a decisive victory by government forces and accusations of genocide against the Tamil minority that have yet to be resolved (Sri Lanka Government 2011; United Nations 2011; Weiss 2011). This has enabled both a revival of the tourist industry and a reopening of access to sacred places that are vital to the spiritual identity of many Sri Lankans. The imprimatur of UNESCO is evident across the ruins of this extraordinary landscape. Archaeology, art history, and the scholarly interpretations of texts are presented as authoritative and definitive. There is no place here for the long-persistent counter narrative that shows how the separate historical lineages of Sinhalese and Tamil were a function of nineteenth-century colonial typologies (see, for example, Guneratne 2002; Rajasingham-Senanayake 2002).

Meskell concludes that the “Western imaginary” has yet to come to terms with the complexities of global culture. This is certainly true of Sri Lanka. The resurgence of Sinhalese nationalism in the August 2015 parliamentary elections again raised the specter of ethnically based violence. The repudiation of Mahinda Rajapaksa’s ambition to return to power as Prime Minister offers renewed hope for reconciliation, although this will still be a long journey after a war that took an estimated 100,000 lives. Cultural heritage remains a visceral part of belief and identity that is inseparable from power and politics. Violence is always imminent. To engage with world heritage in ways that fail to appreciate these complex interrelationships is to risk exacerbating deadly conflicts.

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“Culture”—“in the ‘opera sense’ of the word” (Wagner 1981: 21)—has been playing a crucial political role in many colonial and, apparently likewise, neocolonial relations in Cambodia (and beyond). “Heritage” is an exaggeration of “culture” in the way it has been used in politics: a heritigization has replaced the culturalization of politics. The Temple (or rather the temple ruins) of Preah Vihear has indeed been an excellent example of this, and the cables published by WikiLeaks and now analyzed by Lynn Meskell in her superb paper prove that the instrumentalization of “culture,” or rather “heritage” in the case of Preah Vihear, continues, although in a modified and much less obvious way. For the French, these temple ruins, then still located within the territory of Siam, constituted more or less the northern outpost of what they had imagined as a glorious ancient Khmer Empire, which they endeavored to reconstruct as their colony—a much bigger territory than that which they found when they penetrated the country. The United States decided to get involved in “heritage” politics for a similar purpose: as a vehicle to gain influence, and especially economic dominance, as aspired to by US investors and companies, facilitated by state agencies, and mediated by diplomats. The US government’s involvement in the struggle between Thailand and Cambodia over Preah Vihear also has to be viewed, as Meskell points out, in relation to China’s engagement in Cambodia (and Southeast Asia as a whole). Thus, the involvement of both states in the Cambodian and Thai dispute concerning the listing of Preah Vihear Temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site is a struggle primarily over the control of economic resources and, consequently, political influence and dominance in a geopolitically important region between (former?) Cold War opponents. Access to the cables exchanged between the Chinese government and its embassies and diplomats would be essential to get a more complete picture of the economic and political battlefield behind the veil of heritage.

“Heritage” is much more political than “culture,” first, because it is a value concept with a number of inherent assumptions (among others, notions that it is invaluable, inalienable, originates in a glorious past, maintains continuity of social relations, and involves the obligation to preserve the inherited precious testimony of ancestral culture; or, understood the other way round, its destruction is tabooed). Second, “heritage,” as a term, is always used in certain contexts and by various actors for achieving particular goals. The mere fact that an individual, a local community, or a nation (not to mention UNESCO) declares a “thing” as “heritage” is a political act per se, because such a declaration is addressed to an audience that may be either excluded or included and react accordingly, depending on how much is at stake.

Nevertheless, the lawyers who suggested using “heritage” instead of “cultural property” in laws and international agree-
mements had different considerations in mind: by using the term heritage instead of cultural property, they wanted to protect the cultural goods rather than the rights of the possessor, as property laws do. Or, as Prott and O’Keeffe put it, the “fundamental policy behind cultural heritage law is protection of the heritage for the enjoyment of present and later generations” (Prott and O’Keeffe 2012:5). This is also the UNESCO World Heritage Center’s and World Heritage Committee’s understanding of the term, although all the assumptions briefly mentioned above are embedded in UNESCO’s application and implementation of “heritage” as well. UNESCO and all its subcommittees are daughter organizations of the UN and, therefore, a political governance organization that advocates for a peaceful world; “culture,” also specified as “heritage,” plays an important role in the organization’s strategies to reach its idealistic goals. It is a matter of fact that the relationship between the member states, and especially between those acting on the committees, is framed by diplomacy, manifest also in a do-utes attitude between the states represented there, rather than strict hard-line positioning. The actions of diplomats on the UNESCO World Heritage scene and of the states on whose behalf they are performing differ only a little, if at all, from those in other diplomatic negotiations. The former French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, agreed to return to Korea the fourteenth-century manuscripts that French soldiers had looted from the Royal Archives there in the mid-nineteenth century (as an act of retaliation for the killing of a missionary). Since then, these manuscripts had been kept as French state property in the National Library in Paris. Korea requested the restitution of this “heritage.” Diplomatic negotiations set in and, finally, President Sarkozy approved their return in 2011. Although this return was celebrated as a generous gesture and an act of reparation, the “real” reasons behind it were economic considerations: Sarkozy was fulfilling a promise his predecessor, François Mitterand, had made. Mitterand had promised the return of the archives in exchange for a French-backed, high-speed rail link which had since opened between Seoul and Pusan (Hauser-Schäublin 2013:162). This example shows that “hyperconnectivity” is not limited to UNESCO’s listings of World Heritage sites.

In sum, “heritage” is highly political, since it is a term with many implications and is an instrument of governance. It appears as an innocent word in public discourses and appeals to noble feelings and altruistic efforts (to preserve a “heritage”), diverting from what it may mask.

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UNESCO and WikiLeaks

Meskell’s insightful examination of the hyperconnectivity and interdependence of factors leading to the declaration of a World Heritage site raises the question of the legitimacy of UNESCO’s mission of “fostering peace in the minds of men and women” through intercultural dialogue. If conversations about the nominations of sites are not primarily about the site but instead about trade, religion, nationalism, and economic and military interests, does it mean that the World Heritage List is merely an empty and cynical exercise?

The very resilience and popularity of UNESCO’s World Heritage project reveals a further dimension to what is going on, one that may help throw some light on the current destruction of sites by ISIS. Cultural heritage can usefully be thought of as a catalyst for conversations about dignity and what it means to be human through time. In an ideal scenario, a member state would put forward a noncontentious site of national importance. The other State Parties, even if they themselves were unable to feel a visceral link to what the site represents, would willingly vote for its inclusion on the World Heritage List, thus recognizing the common threads that bind us together as a global community. In practice, as Meskell shows, behind the scenes negotiations, vested interests, and the need for balance of the World Heritage List itself distort this normative model.

The success of the World Heritage List as a form of recognition of our common humanity comes after the failure of another. UNESCO’s original intention was to develop a global humanist educational curriculum (Huxley 1946) to refute the dehumanization of World War II. Like much of UNESCO’s output, this global curriculum was, over time, deemed to be too Eurocentric, as the fundamental principles included scientific rationalism and a belief in “progress.” Agreement over a global educational curriculum was therefore far too direct a conversation for member states to have. Conversely, the World Heritage List seems to provide the perfect vehicle for intercultural dialogue as the “thing in itself,” the site, can cope with multiple readings, ambiguous entanglements, and contradictions.

The current campaign by ISIS in Palmyra is the newest incarnation of the contestation over the meaning of World Heritage sites. Both the destruction of the site and the murder of Khaled Asaad, the Head of Antiquities in Palmyra, have focused a global debate on the importance of preserving the past for a dignified future. Although purportedly about the form of Islam that should be adhered to, it is no coincidence that the destruction is aimed at the heart of UNESCO’s cosmopolitan project. As noted by Devji (2008), the media coverage around the acts of destruction is often more important than the acts of destruction themselves.

This much publicized “conversation,” often playing out through social media, has been harnessed by UNESCO in the form of its March 2015 initiative “Unite4Heritage,” which urges individuals across the world to post photos of themselves with messages of support for the World Heritage sites that they cherish. Global partners are encouraged to down-
load media packs to help grow momentum for the campaign. Once again, we see the material and immaterial dimensions of the sites on the World Heritage List coming in and out of focus. The World Heritage List is a political document, indexing the entire complex political, economic, and religious negotiations revealed in Meskell’s paper, but simultaneously is a charter for a global humanist project.

As an anthropologist studying UNESCO, it is easy to become disillusioned with the organization’s mission. In the past, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was at first an enthusiastic supporter of UNESCO’s project, gradually became disenchanted with what he saw as the organization’s threat to cultural diversity, before returning to the fold toward the end of his life (UNESCO 2008). In my own research, charting the distance between the work of UNESCO in Paris and the life of people living in Djenné, a UNESCO World Heritage site in Mali, the tension caused by this ideological distance was palpable, leading to a vocal “UNESCO debate” within Djenné, where many residents questioned the value of being included on the World Heritage List if it meant the curtailment of their freedom to change their built environment (Joy 2012).

Since the current crisis in Mali erupted in 2012, the World Heritage status of Timbuktu has helped to focus international attention on the plight of its residents. In particular, the destruction of shrines in Timbuktu and the targeting of the Islamic libraries was a tipping point in the decision to intervene militarily in the conflict.45 Other forms of heritage in Mali that are not included on the World Heritage List, such as its internationally renowned music, have also brought the conflict to global attention, as when Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) attempted to ban musical expression.46 UNESCO is therefore not the only means of focusing global attention on the dehumanizing practices of ISIS and its affiliates.

The link between the material, the ideological, and the pragmatic is laid bare in Meskell’s paper. It seems likely that the same dynamics are a play in ISIS’s planning of its campaigns, such as those hinted at by the discovery of instructions by AQIM leaders to not impose Shari’a law too quickly in Timbuktu for fear of alienating the local population.47 The sale of antiquities by ISIS to fund its campaigns is another example of the distance between the ideological and the pragmatic when it comes to cultural heritage.48 The role of the anthropologist is thus to understand the detailed dynamics of how the material world comes to matter to people (including all the pragmatic entanglements that this entails). In this model, UNESCO should be seen as a strong voice in a complex dialogue about securing a robust future for humanity. Despite its many limitations, UNESCO may therefore prove more durable than many of the organization’s critics would hope.

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Analyses of how and why foreign countries engage in the fields of archaeology, preservation, and the presentation of history through diplomatic actions remain in their nascent stages. Scholars have begun to explore the historical legacies of heritage diplomacy and the linkages between development agendas and corporatism through ethnographic study. In this essay, Meskell unpacks the underbelly of heritage diplomacy in Cambodia. Her scholarship unveils how heritage policies are often embedded in large-scale territorial disputes and the fierce negotiations surrounding corporate contracts. Precisely because heritage is woven into the very fabric of how sovereignty is envisioned and ultimately constructed, World Heritage nominations and inscriptions reflect the pride and the political power of a country. Meskell’s careful ethnographic, archival, and political framework will shape how future researchers pursue the diplomatic domain of heritage studies.

Meskell’s research specific to Southeast Asia demonstrates the hyperconnectivity of heritage in the corporatization of transnational landscapes as they pertain to the World Heritage nomination and 2008 inscription of Preah Vihear. She calls specific attention to the American role. US embassies worldwide endorse the World Heritage brand. Statements, such as that in the 2006 Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation report, illustrate the US State Department rhetoric with regard to cultural heritage: “Without knowledge of our past and respect for our history, we are rootless and lost. The past ought to be an inspiration and a source of creativity for those who live today. Cambodia’s most precious asset is its cultural heritage.” Meskell’s work delves into this asset, yet not from the perspective that Ambassador Mussomeli intended. Rather, she points to the politicking in 2008 regarding how Preah Vihear’s World Heritage inscription became a point of massive political contention between Cambodia and Thailand, the strategic nature of US alliances, and the tacit approval of willful ignorance writ large.

Were there other US-supported heritage agendas in Cambodia and Thailand in 2008? And how did the US Congress participate, if at all? In 1999, the United States entered into an emergency MOU with Cambodia that was focused on the Khmer statutes (under the Cultural Property Protection Act, the implementing legislation for the 1970 UNESCO Convention in the United States). In 2003, the MOU became far more extensive and a more viable diplomatic tool. Under Article II of the MOU the United States and Cam-

bodia, one finds commitments to protect, preserve, and promote programs focused on heritage “in-country.” These renewable agreements are for 5 years (the most recent renewal was 2013). Thus, in the period between 2003 and 2008, the United States was to be focused on heritage matters in Cambodia, per the stipulations under Article II. One such diplomatic deliverable was the 2009 July training workshop in Siem Reap, sponsored by the US Department of State’s Cultural Antiquities Task Force (see Luke and Kersel 2013:91, 92) that “brought together heritage and law enforcement officials from Cambodia, China, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam and the United States.” Further deliverables are found in the minimally funded, yet highly visible, US commitments to a range of heritage programs and projects throughout the region.

From 2001 to 2005, the annual Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) reports highlight that the AFCP should be of “[b]enefit to the advancement of U.S. foreign policy objectives.” In 2006 and 2007, the wording shifted to a “contribution [that] would advance U.S. diplomatic goals.” By 2009, call outs to “foreign policy,” “objectives,” and “diplomatic goals” had been cut and replaced with softer terms and phrases such as “accomplishments,” “participation,” “preservation of cultural heritage worldwide,” and “our nations respect for the cultural heritage of other countries.” Most countries with MOUs regularly receive AFCP awards (Luke and Kersel 2013:98–127), and Cambodia is no exception. Yet, unlike other regions where neighboring countries do not have MOUs, those in the region of Southeast Asia (qualified as East Asia Pacific under the AFCP) have consistently also fared very well. In fact, since its inception in 2001, the AFCP has had a strong record in Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia, China, Bangladesh, India, and, more recently, Nepal.

In addition, Cambodia has received two large awards. These awards are targeted with specific country-calls made by members of the US Congress. In fact, the first year of this policy and the increased allocation of money for the AFCP was 2008. The US Congress requested proposals from only three countries: Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Guatemala. The 2008 award to Cambodia was for conservation of sections of the tenth-century Phnom Bakheng temple at Angkor. In 2008, the AFCP gave no funding to Thailand.

The AFCP is a bilateral heritage diplomatic tool. Other countries, especially Japan, Germany, and France, have long employed this type of diplomacy to curry favor, but also to support historical ties (most often colonial). These initiatives are what diplomats and development agencies have described to me as “token grants.” Clearly, for Cambodia, 2008 was a banner year, one in which US engagement was front and center through the AFCP (through line-item callouts in the US Congressional budget for the large-scale funding) and the US State Department’s MOU through the Cultural Property Implementation Act. What is more, as Meskell writes, there were also focused efforts in the corridors of US entities to support World Heritage nominations in regions of Cambodia that were not supported under the more public initiatives of the AFCP or the MOU. Regardless, the real meat for infrastructural support comes through the financial dimension of agencies such as USAID, the United Nations Development Programme, and the World Bank. The linkages between development and heritage policy show increasingly strong ties to large-scale corporate networks. That these networks are transnational adds to the perception of power, but also places heritage in an increasingly visible light. In Cambodia, USAID offers no assistance specific to heritage. Yet projects under small-scale programs, such as the AFCP, carry tremendous political currency that may be locally meaningful and regionally significant (see Luke 2013).

Meskell demonstrates that scholarship must tackle heritage policy vis-à-vis development agendas, past and present. Typically heritage, both tangible and intangible, represents among the most underfunded components of US foreign policy; yet it is often among the most contested and highly strategic for those communities who live nearby, if not within, the defined boundaries of heritage locales. Whether through World Heritage nominations or other funding programs, diplomats often unwittingly promote the past to frame specific desired visions of the present and, most importantly, the future. More research is required to explore the seemingly diverse patchwork of foreign intervention through the cultural dimension and, in so doing, to expose the woefully misunderstood importance of heritage diplomacy, particularly within US diplomacy.

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The bellicose revival of the long-standing dispute between Thailand and Cambodia over ownership of the Khmer mountain temple of Preah Vihear that followed its inscription on the World Heritage List in July 2008 left 85 casualties dead (67 Thais and 18 Cambodians) and more than 200 wounded on the two sides.49 The dispute also had an innocuous byproduct: an academic cottage industry of articles and monographs addressing the historical, political, diplomatic, and legal aspects of the dispute.

Now, as Julian Assange carries on his self-imposed recluse in the Ecuadorian embassy in London, begun in August 2012, Lynn Meskell expands the scope of discussion by considering WikiLeaks-released diplomatic cables about the dispute that were exchanged between the governments of Thailand, Cambodia, and Indonesia (which, in its capacity as chair of ASEAN in 2011, sent observers to the disputed border

area, as well as the US mission to UNESCO’s Paris headquarters. Given the nature of these documents, one might anticipate shocking revelations of behind-the-scenes dealings. Yet, while this conspiratorial scenario is largely confirmed, Meskell admits, by quoting Slavo Žižek’s trenchant view of the WikiLeaks scandal, that from the leaked cables, “we learn exactly what we expected to learn.”

Acknowledging that the emperor has no clothes is trivial compensation for what appears to be realpolitik’s perversion of the World Heritage Convention’s lofty mandate. But tensions and contradictions between UNESCO’s pluralistic rhetoric and national particularities have already been noted in the past. Building on Tomlinson’s (1991) critique, I wrote in a not-so-recent analysis of the Thai heritage industry, “The very process whereby ancient monuments and towns become World Heritage sites highlights the complicity between cultural nationalism and the ‘universal humanism’ of UNESCO despite its apparent supranational and non-political nature” (Peleggi 2002:8). Another critic (Logan 2008) stigmatizes the limited attention the international conservation system put in place by the World Heritage Convention has paid to human rights, despite their centrality in UNESCO’s avowed mission.

As pointed out by many commentators, the diplomatic breakdown about Preah Vihear and the consequent border clashes were largely a consequence of Thailand’s fractious domestic politics and the exploitation of chauvinistic sentiments. Yet those events also show that the “World Heritage regime’s moral power” (Ferrucci 2012), however remarkable, given its feeble sanctioning authority and lack of coercive force, is not sufficient to mediate between the competing claims of state parties. In fact, Article 11, Section 3, of the 1972 Convention contemplates the possibility that an inscribed site might be at the center of a bilateral dispute: “The inclusion of a property situated in a territory over which sovereignty or jurisdiction is claimed by more than one State shall in no way prejudice the rights of the parties to the dispute” (UNESCO 1972).

The moral Meskell draws from the leaked cables is that a World Heritage “property” situated on contested territory is likely to become “a proxy for territory, sovereignty, and security as well as international corporate agreements.” Meskell terms this versatility “the hyperconnectivity of heritage,” a catchy notion that evokes the digital channels of today’s communication (WikiLeaks included), but implicitly underplays the locatedness of a heritage site, its being grounded, first and foremost, in a state’s territory as much as in a nation’s consciousness, notwithstanding its universal value that World Heritage inscription is meant to ratify. This locatedness within the geopolitical framework of the nation-state remains, in my opinion, crucial to a heritage site’s sociocultural function as a symbol of collective identity and its economic function as a generator of tourist revenue.

Still, Meskell convincingly proves that heritage’s hyperconnectivity links grass-roots, institutional, and corporate actors and interests usually considered alien to the field of heritage studies, even when prefixed as “critical.” Admittedly, not every dimension of this hyperconnectivity is as novel as it might appear. The cables demonstrating the involvement in the Preah Vihear dispute of US diplomats, whose concern for an equitable solution went hand in hand with the advancement of American economic interests in Thailand and Cambodia, might induce a historical déjà vu 40 years after the end of the Vietnam War. Indeed, Logan (2008:445) noted that the United States, after quitting UNESCO in 1984 because of its alleged politicization, rejoined the organization in 2003 to protect American interests against antiglobalization initiatives. Meskell’s remark that, given the possibility of accessing the diplomatic correspondence of other countries with interests in the area, “we might see similar speculations about trade and territorial and security matters,” is hypothetical and must remain so for the time being. But after two decades of scrutinizing the politics of heritage as (mainly) a function of state power and ideology, it is time academics turn their attention to heritage’s political economy, whose inter- and transnational dynamics require more sophisticated analytical and methodological tools than those employed so far.

Reply

Rarely does one have the opportunity to engage with a group of interlocutors whose expertise covers the overlapping disciplines pertaining to a single, complex site. Together, they offer perspectives from Asian history and heritage, the study of international organizations, cultural diplomacy, and the politics of archaeology. Their own individual research experience adds significant depth and dimensionality to the findings presented here, providing insights that enrich and extend this discussion of WikiLeaks and the conflict over Preah Vihear.

Although this paper builds on my earlier UNESCO publications, my primary contribution here is to trace the political conduits into the world of international relations and realpolitik centered upon a single archaeological site in Southeast Asia. While much ink has been spilled over the rhetoric of heritage politics, far fewer studies have access to the channels of power so often occluded in academic life. In this regard, it is not another article on UNESCO’s shortcomings but rather one exposing the machinations of states and their militaries and the corporatization of cultural assets well beyond sovereign borders.

50. The ungrammatical comma following “territory” in the English text of the Convention, posted online as “situated in a territory, sovereignty or jurisdiction over which is claimed by more than one State,” is clearly mistaken, and it is correct above according to the Convention’s texts in French and Spanish.
At present, UNESCO World Heritage has many detractors from the fields of anthropology, archaeology, and heritage studies. It is not my intention to uncritically add to that refrain. As I have argued in my other papers, scholars tend to critique the organization obliquely, without fully acknowledging its functional dynamics, decision-making processes, and influential power brokers. Indeed, Charlotte Joy suggests, “Despite its many limitations, UNESCO may therefore prove more durable than many of the organization’s critics would hope.” Not since the cessation of World War II has there been such a pressing need for a cultural organization to mobilize for peace and mutual understanding between peoples, but more than this, we need modes of effective implementation. This is a daunting task and harks back to earlier twentieth-century debates and unfulfilled promises for “world understanding” and “world government,” in which UNESCO played a pivotal role (Sluga 2013).

In this article, I suggest that we work harder to recognize the multiscalar local, national, and international politics and practitioners who drive World Heritage agendas. These may not be the usual suspects, as the archived contents of WikiLeaks lay bare. They may be corporate or military concerns of WikiLeaks’ diplomatic cables, Luke suggests that 2008 was a “banner year” for relations between the United States and Cambodia, facilitated by the AFCP and the US State Department through the Cultural Property Implementation Act.

As John Burgess’s (2015) recent book on the Preah Vihear conflict reveals, for much of the twentieth century, the temple was enshrouded in colonial and cryptocolonial struggles between Cambodians, Thais, French, and Americans that played out on the ground as well as in international court rooms. Notably, American lawyers represented both Thailand and Cambodia in the International Criminal Court. Burgess uncovered numerous documents that detail how, during the 1950s, US diplomats pacified both Cambodia and Thailand for their own end (namely, the blunting of communist gains in the region), whereas no real peace settlement was successfully achieved. American diplomats in Bangkok warned then that this relatively minor border dispute might turn into a major international controversy. More than 50 years later, those events were to be repeated on the global stage, with an ensuing border war, lives lost, and heritage under fire. Significantly, Burgess stopped short of extending his analysis into the present, into the well-publicized era of Cablegate. Indeed, the discovery of WikiLeaks represents an untapped source where politically and economically entangled sites like Preah Vihear and Jerusalem have ramifications well beyond the preserve of archaeology and heritage. All this suggests that there is still more work to be done.

There is no single Preah Vihear, as Denis Byrne makes clear in his comments, but rather a spectrum of religious beliefs and practices that have not been incorporated into international designations and machinations, thus echoing the calls for more grounded and diverse fieldwork. As always, Byrne’s work effectively challenges conservation’s privileging of the material fabrics over its social contexts and living practitioners, which he describes as a “yawning gulf.” It is the “magical-miraculous propensities” invested in sites that make them significant in the first instance, and paradoxically, that same quality is curtailed by international agencies almost immediately upon recognition.

Extending this further, Maurizio Peleggi underscores how global heritage regimes and their shadowy claims of moral power make clear the “complicity between cultural nationalism and the ‘universal humanism’ of UNESCO despite its apparent supranational and non-political nature.” And when called upon, in his view, UNESCO’s “feeble sanctioning authority and lack of coercive force . . . is not sufficient to mediate between the competing claims of state parties.” This impasse has characterized the recent conflicts in Mali, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. At Preah Vihear, Peleggi recalls that we have witnessed life and death on the ground for Thais and Cambodians, in stark contrast to the win-win economic and strategic military gains for more distant international beneficiaries. Martin Hall cites...
UNESCO’s lack of institutional memory, asking why they “did not appreciate the explosive consequences of mixing ethnically based nationalism and territorial disputes with cultural heritage; they had been there before.”

Joy calls into question the legitimacy of UNESCO’s founding mission of “fostering peace in the minds of men and women.” Like Hall’s devastating example of ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka, Joy’s careful ethnographic work in Mali details the notable gap between the work conducted at UNESCO’s headquarters in Paris and the very human consequences of what happens on the ground. As she rightly states, the role of the anthropologist is to “understand the detailed dynamics of how the material world comes to matter to people.” That too leads into uncomfortable terrain, such as the current destruction of heritage sites, particularly World Heritage sites by ISIS. Moreover, Hall imputes that, today, we fail to recognize the complex interrelationships between belief, identity, power, and politics at our own peril. I concur with Joy’s point that the resilience, popularity, and high-profile nature of UNESCO’s World Heritage program is inextricably linked to the widespread destruction we are witnessing today and that the media coverage is itself explosive. UNESCO’s cosmopolitan media campaign, Unite4Heritage, followed closely by the Bonn Declaration on June 3, 2015, are direct efforts to combat and supersede ISIS’s own media onslaught. The ethos of UNESCO’s campaign draws inspiration from the kind of scientific humanism that Julian Huxley, first Director General of UNESCO, championed when the organization’s constitution came into force in 1946.

Taken together, these respondents offer an even deeper analysis that takes us from the temple precinct of Preah Vihear to the legacies of French colonialism, the ideals of world government and the United Nations, the Cold War, new extractive economies and Chinese expansion (Sharma and Rasheed 2015), and the international priorities supported by the US ACP and the clandestine leaking of the diplomatic cables. My starting point was the acknowledgement that heritage properties are wrested from their sociohistorical contexts and mobilized as transactional devices in the World Heritage arena that both mask and enable a multifarious network of political and economic values. As the WikiLeaks documents illustrate, “transaction” is the key concept here, not only referring to the process of “doing business” and the exchange of commodities and services, but also encompassing the reciprocal influences and communicative activities between nation states. The revelations of WikiLeaks and World Heritage may share more in common that any of us might have predicted.

—Lynn Meskell

References Cited


Meskell  World Heritage and WikiLeaks


