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Heritage and the sacred: introduction

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ABSTRACT

Heritage formation involves some kind of sacralization, through which cultural forms are lifted up and set apart. But success is not guaranteed in the making of heritage, and the cultural forms that are singled out may well fail to persuade. Heritage formation is a complicated, contested political–aesthetic process that requires detailed scholarly explorations and comparative analysis. Which aesthetic practices are involved in profiling cultural forms as heritage? What are the politics of authentication that underpin the selection and framing of particular cultural forms? To which contestations does the sacralization of particular cultural forms—in particular, those derived from the sphere of religion—give rise? Which aesthetics of persuasion are invoked to render heritage sacred for its beholders? Calling attention to various facets of the relation between heritage and the sacred, this special issue offers detailed explorations of how form, style, and appearance seek to vest selected objects and performative practices with sacrality.

Keywords: heritage formation, sacralization, aesthetics, authentication

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From national politics and minority movements to popular culture and entertainment, cultural heritage is much in demand these days. Heritage refers to the past, but is not automatically and directly inherited from the past. It is the outcome of a selection of certain cultural forms which are—more or less persuasively—canonized. Once brought into the framework of heritage, cultural forms are made to assume additional or even new value. The powerful effects of such framing become clear once it is realized that even ordinary everyday objects, coded as heritage, may be elevated to the level of the extraordinary and achieve a new sublime or sacred quality. The bed used by Candomblé priestess Mãe Menininha (Adinolfi and Van de Port, this issue) is a telling example: reframed through the “language of museumification,” it becomes the centerpiece of a sacred space that asserts Candomblé as central to Brazilian heritage. Indeed, not unlike religion, heritage formation involves some kind of sacralization, through which cultural forms are lifted up and set apart so as to be able to speak of what is considered to be central to social life (Jethro, this issue). Of course, success is not guaranteed in the making of heritage. It may well be that the cultural forms that are singled out and set apart are found to be lacking “authenticity” and thus fail to be persuasive for the intended beholders, who may engage in alternative heritage projects.

Heritage formation is a complicated, contested political–aesthetic process that requires detailed scholarly explorations and comparative analysis. Which aesthetic practices are involved in profiling cultural forms as heritage? What are the politics of authentication that underpin the selection and framing of particular cultural forms? To which contestations does the sacralization of particular cultural forms—in particular, those derived from the sphere of religion—give rise? Which aesthetics of persuasion are invoked—more or less successfully—to render heritage sacred for its beholders, be it “the world” (as addressed by UNESCO World Heritage schemes), the “nation” (as addressed by national heritage sites), or smaller constituencies, including minority groups for whom claiming heritage is at the flipside of claiming a voice in the political arena?

Calling attention to various facets of the relation between heritage and the sacred, this special issue aims to cross-fertilize the hitherto still more or less separated fields of the study of religion and heritage studies. As this issue shows, the very materiality of heritage forms—their design, shape, and aesthetics—are an excellent starting point for this endeavor. Moving beyond the idea of a simple opposition of materiality and signification, the

point is to explore how selected objects and performative practices are made to appear as truthful incarnations of cultural heritage. Tracing the formation of heritage by detailed explorations of how form, style, and appearance seek to vest such objects and practices with sacrality—creating a “sacred surplus”—the articles assembled here examine the interplay between heritage and the sacred from various angles and in various locations: the musealization of the home of a famous Candomblé priestess in Brazil (Adinolfi and van de Port); the project of “rescuing culture” by Pentecostal Indians in Brazil (Bakker); the cultivation of diasporic “ancestral heritage” in Mauritius (Eisenlohr); the appropriation of chieftaincy objects as state symbols in Ghana (Senah); the state-driven design of a post-apartheid national heritage site in South Africa (Jethro); and, in the In Conversation section, conflicts over preservation and destruction between local people and heritage specialists at an archeological heritage site in Laos.

The relation between heritage-making and religion merits particular attention. While the very setting apart of certain cultural forms as “heritage” taps into religious registers of sacralization, in many instances the re-formation of religious forms as “heritage” entails a process of profanization through which their initial sacrality is being lost. In short, two processes are at the heart of the interplay between the fields of “heritage” and “religion.” First, the *heritagization of the sacred*: how religious traditions become represented and recognized (or contested and rejected) in the framework of “heritage.” And second, the *sacralization of heritage*: how certain heritage forms become imbued with a sacrality that makes them appear powerful, authentic, or even incontestable. The articles in this issue engage with these two moves and their hybrids from a variety of cultural settings.

The first two articles focus on religious actors’ negotiations of heritage as a language or frame to underpin their political claims in current politics of belonging, in which having a recognized heritage is a necessary prerequisite for being taken seriously and getting state support. Appropriating the language of heritage as it thrives in the Brazilian public sphere, religious players exert considerable influence on the reframing of objects, language, and practices as heritage. Their complicated position is well exemplified in the article by Maria-Paula Adinolfi and Mattijs van de Port. While leaders of Candomblé struggle for public recognition of Candomblé as a *religion*, rather than mere cultural heritage, in turning the living quarters and personal belongings of a celebrity priestess into a memorial they

speak the “language of museumification.” Intriguingly, despite the potentially profanizing dimensions of the museum as an expressive form, it actually lends the memorial space a new kind of sacrality—that is somehow at odds with the “official” Candomblé discourse, which locates the sacred in African origins and purity.

Religious actors’ tricky navigations between cultural form and sacred surplus are also evident in André Bakker’s analysis of the project of “rescuing the culture” by Brazilian Pataxó Indians, many of whom have converted to Pentecostal Christianity. This may seem surprising in the light of familiar observations across the world of an incompatibility, or a tension at least, between Pentecostal conversion and involvement with indigenous traditions (a tension also at work in the South African case presented by Jethro). What makes these two projects compatible in the Pataxó case, Bakker argues, is a “disenchantment of cultural forms,” whereby items such as body paintings and adornments are “made safe” for affective attachment and “ethnic pride.” Heritage, in this case, becomes a matter of stylish representation, reduced to “mere” culture. This process, however, is never final: a “spiritual surplus,” coded in terms of demonic danger, always lurks at the back of such presumably harmless, disenchanted aesthetic forms.

The remaining three articles draw attention to the state as a key actor in foregrounding heritage as a framework for interpreting and evaluating cultural forms and the imagined communities to whom they belong. In the making of heritage, the appropriation of religious and cultural forms by the state into a new, national frame impacts on these forms and their evocative power. We can see different outcomes of this process.

Patrick Eisenlohr shows that in Mauritius the notion of “ancestral culture” serves as a meeting ground between diverse religious traditions (and their representatives) and state power. It is basic to the making of “diasporic heritage” in a non-homogeneous imagination of the nation that consists of diverse ethnic and religious constituencies. Focusing on the annual Shrivati pilgrimage that invokes a sacred geography through which Hindus on Mauritius are tied to the Indian ancestral homeland, on the one hand, and on the performative use of sound reproduction technologies for Islamic devotional poetry, on the other, he explores the dynamics through which diasporic heritage is mediated and authenticated by invoking “plausible links.” Inspired by Peircian semiotics, he presents a conceptual framework that overcomes the “widely assumed opposition between immaterial signification and material presence of objects,” recognizing instead that signification

and materiality are intertwined. As noted already, this insight is of great importance for understanding the process through which particular cultural forms—things, practices—are made to incarnate a sacred surplus.

In contrast to the Mauritian example, in which showcasing diversity forms the dominant nation-building strategy, many postcolonial states seek to develop a more homogenous language of heritage that cuts across ethnic diversity. This is the central issue explored in Kodjo Senah's article on the Ghanaian state's relation to traditional chieftaincy. He shows that the state faces the difficulty of persuading national constituencies of the authenticity of its newly framed national heritage. Faced with the challenge of crafting a new, Africanized state imagery, post-independence leaders (in particular, Kwame Nkrumah) attempted to appropriate the evocative power of chiefs through their material culture. With limited success, however, as turning sacred objects of chieftaincy—that derive much of their power from their connection to ancestral spirits and secret rituals—into national symbols of state power emptied them of their aura. While objects as the stool and the sword are held to incarnate the power of chiefs, when appropriated by the state these objects fail to conjure the surplus on which successful heritage-making depends.

In the case of Freedom Park analyzed by Duane Jethro, the South African state faces a similar difficulty. Located opposite the Voortrekker Monument that testifies to the historical claims mobilized by the Afrikaner apartheid regime, this recently designed heritage site is driven by deliberate attempts on the part of the state to sacralize diverse heritage forms so as to represent the new post-apartheid Rainbow Nation. This includes the park's "African" aesthetic conceptualization as well as the performance of healing and cleansing rituals by indigenous religious specialists. Rooted in a modern understanding of "indigenous African knowledge," such efforts at filling the spiritual void of the site, however, compromised its "all-inclusive" objectives, evoking fierce reactions from some Christians who named it a "national demonic altar" and "a park of blasphemy." Taking readers on a virtual tour by key icons of Freedom Park, Jethro spotlights the complexities and paradoxes of heritage formation in action, showing that the "power and meaning of material cultural artifacts as evocative registers of the past" is not given, but subject to continuous negotiation.

In sum, what each of these examples brings out is that these processes of heritagization of the sacred and sacralization of heritage entail intricate interactions between various actors in the field over

politics of representation, and issues of animation and “disanimation,” revelation and concealment, authenticity and its contestation. Both heritage and the sacred are not given but fabricated. While any object or practice may lend itself in principle to being sacralized as heritage through cultural labor, this process entails “inevitable contestation over ownership of the means, modes and forces for producing the sacred” (Chidester quoted in Jethro). Taken together, this collection of articles opens up a fruitful field for analyzing practices of heritage formation from the vector of sacralization. Understood as a political–aesthetic practice, as the contributions show, sacralization involves concrete acts of selecting, setting apart, designing, fashioning, and inscribing cultural forms as heritage. This is rarely a straightforward, successful process, but one ridden with paradoxes, ironies, doubts, and tensions. We contend that a focus on sacralization is helpful to better grasp the success or failure of making heritage appeal, as well as the contestations invoked by it. That the study of heritage formation has much to gain from a dialogue between scholars in heritage studies and scholars of religion, is particularly evident in the In Conversation section, in which Berliner and Rassool respond to Karlström’s critical evaluation of the preservationism dominant in the heritage field and to her suggestion to take seriously local perspectives on heritage that may call for its destruction.

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