

Book Reviews...

Schnepel, B. and Sen, T. (eds). (2019). *Travelling Pasts: The politics of cultural heritage in the Indian Ocean world*. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill. €99.00; xi, 275 pp.

Mahé, the main island of the Seychelles archipelago, rises steeply from the ocean to a series of granite peaks. On the slopes of the highest of these, within a national park, is Venn's Town, home in the last quarter of the nineteenth century of a missionary refuge for the children of liberated slaves. Today there are only ruins but the site is officially recognized for its heritage value. From a viewing platform, one can gaze across the surrounding tropical forest to a distant view of vivid blue sea and a scattering of islands. There is nowhere better to contemplate the ending of slavery than in this remote mountain idyll; it marked the closure of one chapter and the start of another, in which creole culture has played a leading role in the development of the post-colonial nation. Nor can there be many places more meaningful to gather one's thoughts before reviewing the present volume.

Following a conference held in May 2017 at the Max Planck Institute of Social Anthropology in Halle, Professors Burkhard Schnepel and Tansen Sen have brought together a set of papers to explore the politics of cultural heritage in the Indian Ocean region. Their book is, in fact, the first in a new series, edited by Angela Schottenhammer, under the banner of 'Crossroads – History of Interactions across the Silk Routes'.

In his introductory chapter, Burkhard Schnepel shows how the subject of heritage is constantly evolving. Definitions do not stand still and because heritage is socially constructed it is frequently a source of contention – hence 'the politics of cultural heritage' that forms part of the title. An early focus on physical sites has given way to more encompassing themes, featuring social processes and cultural aspects of the past. Nor any longer is heritage solely about a landscape of palaces and castles; as the Seychelles example illustrates, the ruins of a former missionary school in the aftermath of slavery can tell a no less compelling story. Likewise, from a pronounced Eurocentric emphasis, the scope of the subject has been widened to include examples of heritage in contrasting cultures and from different parts of the world. Heritage is not constrained by any one period and the idea of 'travelling pasts' reflects a phenomenon that moves forwards and backwards in time. Mobility becomes an important part of the discourse. Thus, Schnepel dismisses the idea that

the book is limited to the spatial frame of the Indian Ocean, even though the evidence is drawn from that region. Instead, the intellectual aims of the volume 'focus decidedly on the mobility of heritage beliefs, practices and discourses across a vast maritime space over a very long stretch of history'.

Through its designations of world heritage sites, the United Nations body, UNESCO, has had a pivotal influence on what are regarded as the most important exemplars of heritage. This influence is illustrated in two chapters, one by Christopher Brumann and the other by Himanshu Prabha Ray. With his firsthand knowledge of the workings of UNESCO, Brumann is well placed to point to the emergence of an understanding of connectivities as a means of widening the designations of heritage. In turn, Ray shows how India has sought to involve other nations in a combined effort to draw together some the main themes and places of a connected ocean.

A third chapter, by Ulrike Freitag, introduces a different perspective for UNESCO. The thesis is ostensibly about the annual Hajj in Saudi Arabia but, through that episode, it points directly to difficulties in defining heritage itself. This historic event has grown exponentially and now attracts some three million Muslims each year from around the world. In the course of catering for this exceptional number the key urban centres at the heart of it, Jeddah, Mecca and Medina, have each sacrificed much of their historic character in exchange for ease of movement and the safety of crowds. Freitag identifies other reasons, too, for the clearance of old buildings, like the prospect of commercial gain from rising property values, and, through iconic towers, the aggrandizement of politicians. In the circumstances, UNESCO has been faced with a dilemma as, with so much renewal, the designation of the sites has become less straightforward. One is left with the thought that perhaps the urban fabric is not the issue at all; instead it is surely the annual event itself, starting in the countries of origin and progressing to the desert environment where the multitude of pilgrims congregate to devote themselves to prayer. It is a remarkable process, with long historical roots (although, traditionally, on a smaller scale), and can surely offer a new interpretation of heritage in a modern context.

In addition to the substantive introduction, the book draws on eleven papers from the conference. As anyone who has sought to organize conference proceedings will know, the task of producing a coherent book is challenging in the least. The editors in this case, have responded by providing a theoretical background in the opening chapter and then by grouping the rest into four thematic sections: Indian Ocean Heritage and the 'World'; (Im)materialities on the Move; Travelling Pasts in the Eastern Indian Ocean World; and Travelling Pasts in the Western Indian Ocean World. There is plenty within these sections to attract the reader's interest and also to trigger further thoughts about this changing subject.

To take two further examples, one of the co-editors, Tansen Sen, shows how the present heritage of a small city, Sihui, in the Guangdong Province of China, reflects the influence and needs of long-departed emigrants. It seems that former residents who left their homeland in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries retained close ties over the years, and more recent generations have kept these connections alive. So much so that they have encouraged the preservation of key artefacts in a city that most of them have never visited. Heritage, therefore, becomes a link with ‘the travelling pasts of its emigrant populations’.

In another chapter, Mareike Pampus draws attention to the distinctive character of Nyonya cooking in the Malaysian port city of Penang. Using the term ‘heritage food’, she shows how this is a product of a long history of cultural connectivity, originating in a very specific area of China but subsequently evolving through interactions with other groups. In a fascinating paper, Pampus argues that ‘the way food is prepared, performed, eaten, and offered has deep connections to different historical factors, localities, and contemporary politics of heritage-making’. A favourite dish in Nyonya cuisine, popularly known as ‘Captain’s Chicken’, thus becomes a novel emblem of heritage.

A short review such as this cannot do justice to the depth and diversity of the various discussions but it can at least indicate some of the different meanings of heritage explored in successive chapters. Given the title of the book, it is also fair to conclude that an ocean provides an obvious framework for numerous connections, along temporal as well as spatial axes, enmeshing heritage in a complex web of social interactions. There is much to glean from a close reading of the thoughtful contributions, and much to enjoy.

It might seem petty, therefore, to conclude with a carp but, in deference to the high quality of the contents, one can only hope that the publisher has plans to offer a lower-cost version to enable the wide readership that it deserves. As the new series unfolds, it would be a lost opportunity to restrict the debate to the already-converted.

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