“Shared Heritage – Shared Responsibility”

Representation and Visitor Experience of Intangible Heritage

at Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park

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Abstract: This paper discusses the necessities and possibilities of alternative cultural representation at the World Heritage site of Uluru. The example from postcolonial Australia illustrates that the notion of a collective, cross-cultural heritage holds potential conflict. The concepts of intangible heritage and of secret-sacred knowledge are central to the analysis of how tourist representation can foster understanding of intangible heritage while respecting cultural protocol and integrity.

Key-words: heritage, tourist gaze, (non)representation, Aboriginal Australia

1 Introduction

Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park in Central Australia was listed as a UNESCO World Natural Heritage in 1987 and as World Cultural Heritage in 1994. The latter listing is the result of a long struggle by the local Aboriginal people, the Anangu. It represents the recognition of their continuous presence in Central Australia for more than 30,000 years. It also acknowledges the importance of Anangu’s management of country. Used to justify the colonisation of Australia, the British construction of terra nullius (no man’s land) was based on the perceived lack of agrarian and man-made landscapes. Recognizing the landscape around Uluru-Kata Tjuta as a cultural landscape thus acknowledges Aboriginal ownership and living heritage. Today, this insight has opened an important avenue for political recognition of Australia’s Indigenous people nationwide, particularly regarding issues of land rights and cultural authorship. In 1985, the Australian government officially handed Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park back to Anangu. Currently being leased to Australia Parks and Wildlife Services, it has become a major tourist attraction.

2 Questions of this paper

As one of the oldest living cultures of the world, Australian Aboriginal culture upholds a rich human heritage. However, the UNESCO’s notion of World Heritage as the common heritage of
humanity [1], also holds potential conflict. The problem is illustrated in the postcolonial context of Australia where the idea of a collective, cross-cultural heritage sits uneasily within the bicultural configuration of (former) coloniser and colonized. Aboriginal heritage is increasingly commodified for the tourist gaze [2] – a fact that continues to raise questions about contemporary appropriation and exploitation. The representation of Aboriginal heritage thus remains situated in the question of who controls historical discourse and representation [3]. As heritage is the reference point for collective identity constructions, heritage sites are often deemed the “symbolic property of the wider culture” [4]. Similarly, Central Australia and Uluru feature prominently in Anglo-Australian national mythology. In the wake of the 1985 Handback, many non-Aboriginal Australians feared that their access to Aboriginal land – and thus to Australia’s national icon – would be denied. Opponents in the Northern Territory government criticized the Handback with the slogan “The Rock belongs to Everyone” [5]. UNESCO’s statement that “World Heritage sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located” [1] may therefore raise troubled memories on behalf of Anangu traditional owners of Uluru-Kata Tjuta. The Western sense of ownership is unknown in Aboriginal law and mythology, called Tjukurpa. Anangu see themselves instead as guardians and safe-keepers of country and culture. In addition to contrasting notions of ownership, increasing visitor numbers at the World Heritage site add to the pressure of protecting both the fragile natural and cultural environment against the intrusive tourist gaze. Yet, the UNESCO’s World Heritage declaration aims to protect and preserve important human heritage for present and future generations. This paper therefore discusses how this may be done at the highly frequented tourist site of Uluru and in accordance with Aboriginal cultural protocol and obligations. Central to this analysis is the notion of intangible heritage, embodied in the orally transmitted Tjukurpa, and the related issue of secret-sacred knowledge. Based on data gathered from interviews and in participant observation at Uluru, my paper explores how alternative tourist representation may foster intercultural understanding and create meaningful experiences while respecting and protecting Anangu intangible heritage and identity.

3 Discussion

Tjukurpa is a complex concept. It is often inaccurately translated as ‘Dreamtime’, the creation time, when the ancestors travelled across country. Creating the land, they put down the law of the country which is embodied in topographical features like Uluru. This law is recorded in song and re-enacted in ceremony. However, Tjukurpa is not just about the past – the creation time embraces present and future beings. It thus expresses the connection between the physical, the human and sacred world. Out of this connection arises a mutual responsibility between people, plants, animals and the land. People therefore have a close sense of kinship with their country.
Tjukurpa teaches them how to care for and manage country, a knowledge that is crucial for survival in the harsh environment. In addition to a spiritual and ecological responsibility, Tjukurpa also contains moral and social directives for human behaviour [6].

The tangible cultural landscape of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park is thus the result of this orally transmitted knowledge system which is central to Anangu’s sense of identity. To avoid environmental degradation and cultural disturbances [7, 8], today Anangu and non-Aboriginal rangers jointly manage the park adhering to the principles of Tjukurpa. Since the Handback, Anangu have been able to control representation and management of the site significantly. The Rocks’ colonial name, ‘Ayers Rock’, was changed back to ‘Uluru’ in 1993, but the actual scope of Anangu control is summarized park’s maxim of management [9]: “Tjukurpa above all else”. Workshops and compulsory accreditation for tour operators aim to protect cultural integrity, emphasising Anangu interpretation of Uluru. The award-winning Cultural Centre is central to this mission, extending Anangu’s ability to simultaneously share and manage knowledge of country. Amongst the cultural display, the visitor is introduced to Anangu regulation of the gaze as photography in the Cultural Centre is prohibited. Photo displays of traditional owners will be concealed during mourning periods in the case of a traditional owner’s death. Spatial restructuring in the park aims to create culturally and environmentally sensitive infrastructures. Sacred sites are fenced off to prevent visitors from entering and signs prohibit photography at these sites. Recently installed voice displays on the walk furthermore emphasise Anangu connection to country.

However, different cultural perspectives on the Rock create different ways of interacting with the site. Amongst these, the climb to Uluru’s summit is the most contested. Since the early days of tourism, the journey to Uluru has become a pilgrimage for non-Indigenous Australians [10-12]. Uluru as a topographical symbol of the Australian nation harks back to the foundational myths of the explorers who opened the wilderness for European settlers [13]. Within this colonial discourse, the elevated, surveying gaze from Uluru’s summit expresses the colonial occupation of new territory [14]. The topography of the mountain furthermore, is central to European imaginations of nationhood:

The view from the top of the mountain, downwards, suggests a posture that is proper when symbolizing an autonomous and brave new nation that has just begun to maintain an upright position, like a mammal or a human child that has learned to walk [15].

Today, the climb onto Uluru has been constructed as an important performance of Australian settler identity [11, 12, 16]. Different modes of seeing, the perspective from ‘above’ or ‘below’, transport and perpetuate different forms of knowledge. The view from above is associated with the Western notion of objective overview and analytical knowledge. The view from ‘below’, in contrast, is
associated with the child-like, premodern perspective [17].

According to Anangu cultural protocol only initiated men of the mala clan are allowed to climb the Rock during ritual. Anangu ask visitors not to climb. This request is represented throughout the park. In addition to repeating the colonial gesture, climbing violates Tjukurpa and disrespects Anangu culture.

As traditional owner Barbara Tjikatu says in the visitor guide: “If you worry about Aboriginal law, then leave it, don’t climb it” [18]. Respect for Anangu culture and heritage is only adequately expressed by respecting cultural protocol. Framed more broadly, the idea of a collective World Cultural Heritage can only be sustained if it also creates notions of respect and responsibility for a culture’s intangible heritage.

The Anangu perspective of Uluru shows the site as a ‘map’ of various ancestors travels. These tracks do not stop at the park boundaries but may lead to sites that can be hundreds of kilometres away. For Anangu, Uluru is thus not the centre as which the white gaze constructs it. It is in continuous connection and interaction with other sites.

One of Uluru’s Tjukurpa stories shared with tourists tells of the epic battle between two snakes, Kuniya the python and the poisonous Liru. This battle has been eternalized in the shape and texture of the rock. The story deals with a number of issues, such as family duties and the correct use and maintenance of the waterhole located here.

Tjukurpa hence informs a way of seeing – and acting – that is often hardly perceivable for the Western gaze which remains in the frontal, objective position. A local man illustrates these different ways of seeing when he says,

You whitefella [look at] the rock and maybe you can see a shape here that looks a bit like a snake, a bit like Kuniya and you think, alright, I can see Kuniya alright. But us blackfella, we look at Uluru and we say, oh yes, Kuniya, she’s getting old, she’s starting to look a little bit like rock now. (Field notes, Nov 2006)

Scrutinizing its object for signs of a perceived mythological past, the tourist gaze fails to understand the place’s meaning. Uluru’s real cultural meaning is invisible to the direct gaze. As Žižek says,

[An] object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at it “at an angle”, i.e. with an “interested” view, supported, permeated, and “distorted” by desire. [19]

Aboriginal intimacy with country extends far beyond the visual. The rock in Anangu perspective is a living co-presence, forming personal and collective links to country and across generations. In contrast to the Western habit of visual consumption, Anangu have a dialogic relationship to country. They thus encourage visitors to walk around the base of the Rock, a walk that takes about 3-4 hours.

Most of my interviewees, having learnt about the Anangu’s request, decided against climbing the Rock out of “mutual respect” (field notes, 2006). On the walk, visitors learn to experience the place as a unique
habitat and living entity rather than seeing it as a static image. Being encouraged to take the posture ‘below’, they enter a face-to-face-level with the Rock. This re- or displacement of the gaze contributes to a shift in perspective as a closer look allows a more personal, embodied knowledge of place. Being conscious of their own physical vulnerability in the desert heat most interviewees experienced Uluru as a place of refuge for the exposed human body. This realization led to an increased appreciation of Anangu’s knowledge and their relationship to the site.

The course of the walk is directed by the sequence of the stories told by the various Tjukurpa sites. Retracing the story, the visitor is thus led into the Anangu story of place. But not all knowledge can be shared, and sacred sites are taboo for the uninitiated gaze.

Tourists often find signs that prohibit photography at sacred sites. Being tourists, they still try to see what they are not allowed to see. Yet they cannot know or comprehend what is being withdrawn from their gaze. Here they encounter the Other in its ‘authentic’ place but are unable to see or photograph it. Their habitual gaze is hence dispersed, or distorted by desire, as Žižek says.

The cultural marker of Tjukurpa is expressed here through the absence of the visible. The prohibited and dispersed gaze can thus open the other senses to wider dimensions of place meaning. By extension, a shared understanding of place and culture may transpire, creating the ‘authentic’ experience the tourist is looking for. Through knowledge of Uluru’s Tjukurpa visitors learn to see Uluru as a cultural rather than a natural landscape. Anangu’s cultural presence, their resilience and skilful survival become inseparable aspects of the tourists’ experience.

Encountering the ‘other’ knowledge, tourists were often willing to reconsider the presumed universality of Western knowledge and to consider the relevance of local Aboriginal knowledge instead.

4 Conclusion

While Anangu themselves often prefer to not be too closely involved with tourists, their cultural presence is tangible in country. In my interviews I found that tourists who had done the walk and visited the Cultural Centre – and thus had opened to Anangu interpretation of place – perceived themselves as guests in an Aboriginal space rather than as paying consumers. As other ways of seeing open up other possible ways of knowing, they create an ethical moment for the recognition of difference while accepting the terms of the Other. The authenticated experience of Aboriginal heritage is enabled only in accepting its ultimate unavailability. In a wider sense, Anangu’s politics of (non-) representation extends to the tourists the responsibility of respecting cultural integrity as a contribution to preserving both tangible and intangible World Cultural Heritage at Uluru.
References

1. **WHC-UNESCO** 2008 [cited 29th April 2008]