

Cultural Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean: Scientific Research and Issues about Identities

The questions pertaining to the cultural heritage and its use in politics, economy and ideology have recently grown crucial in social sciences. Research programmes including some from the *Maison de l'Orient et de la Méditerranée* (MOM) are based in particular on the correlation between identity and heritage. Owing to the nature of their activities and the areas involved, several members of the MOM have had to tackle these problems: the specialist in archaeology, history and related sciences contributes to expose past evidence that may be turned into cultural heritage while the anthropologist, ethnologist or geographer proposes new approaches and alternative views on a “popular” living heritage such as traditional architecture, *souk*, religious practices, diet, craftsmanship, folklore, music, etc.

The MOM's fields of investigation are the eastern Mediterranean and the neighbouring regions including the Balkans, the Near East and the Middle East. This cultural area is the legacy of an interactive network that has developed since the Neolithic from interconnected maritime (the Mediterranean) and continental (the Middle East isthmus) crossroads. As far as the present problematics is concerned, it appears to be specific for two main reasons. Firstly, because it constantly supported contacts between peoples through trade, migrations and wars, it hosts a significant ethnic diversity, in most cases unrelated to modern political boundaries, as well as heterogeneous ways of living, both in a diachronic and synchronic perspective. Such diversity correlates with intricately overlapping cultural identities that create open spaces for conflictual heritage claims and the manipulation of historical and archaeological data.

Secondly, in the 19th the area was the focus of intense archaeological and ethnological exploration by several western European countries. Today, some of them have remained a major driving force although they no are longer the sole protagonists in current research. This condition, described at times as scientific neo-colonialism, resulted in a double process of constructing identity out of a single excavated past, one from the native population, and the other from foreign discoverers. The latter generally consider the East as the cradle of western civilization due to the birth of writing at Sumer, the influx of oriental features into the Graeco-Roman civilization after the conquest of Alexander the Great or the source of the Judaeo-Christian religion in the South Levant, among others. In doing so, they extend - or overstretch

- the space-time radius of the potential heritage, as well as that of its cultural background. Since archaeological research is being conducted in an administrative framework where both local and foreign researchers collaborate, both sides may use their results as political or identity tools in order to build local, regional, or national identities.

Considering the above, it seemed appropriate to explore further the issues on cultural heritage by focussing on the eastern Mediterranean and its specific features and by taking advantage of the large range of individual researches in the MOM, namely by confronting the views of specialists of the past and of the present. Indeed, it is always the attention payed by present-day actors which gives an object its patrimonial quality (either institutional or popular), whatever its origin (excavations or living tradition), according to various processes and aims.

A cultural heritage appears when a matter of physical or non-physical nature is contemplated in such a way that it implies a break between this matter and its contemplator through a distance in time and space. In this case, the process towards building a heritage calls for political action and institutional steps (classification, preservation or conservation, exhibitions) as well as the need to train perceptions and to produce meaning. Nevertheless, a cultural heritage may also arise from a number of living traditions which are not necessarily engaged in a general cause such as national identity, but are rather associated with a shared feeling of the past, a feeling of “being together” as described by the ethnologist J.-L. Tornatore¹.

In many countries, however, the building of a cultural heritage is still in progress or at a very early stage. In the Arabic Near East, for instance, it is not customary to contemplate monuments. The word used for both heritage and culture is linked with the religious sphere and is therefore in touch with the sacred rather than with the historical time (*al-turâth* derives from a root also found in an epiclesis of God which means the Eternal, *Al-Wârith*). Thus the heritage is of a spiritual, non-physical nature although competition with a physical cultural heritage is now growing following the western understanding.

Such a background allows for, on the one hand, claims by separate groups over the same object, or, on the other hand, the suppression of entire parts of a historical past that is considered unsuitable for the construction of a shared identity. In fact, operating selections in the past is a possible option that consequently leaves some legacies to escheat: exclusion

¹ TORNATORE Jean-Louis, "Les formes d'engagement dans l'activité patrimoniale. De quelques manières de s'accorder au passé", in Vincent Meyer et Jacques Walter (dir.), *Formes de l'engagement et espace public*, Nancy, Presses universitaires de Nancy, p. 515-538.

instead of integration has strong meaning even if it is hardly ever mentioned. Our main concern is the study of the still poorly examined phenomenon which generates disregarded legacies such as the Hellenistic heritage in the Arabic and Muslim worlds, the Turkish and Balkanic heritage in the Aegean or the Persian and Iranian heritage in the Gulf States.

Instead of dealing with theoretical issues and general views, this study will be based mainly on personal field experience and on the concerns of researchers who were faced with heritage claims related to the results of their work. Next, it is our intention to encourage discussion on a broader level between those who have experienced the problems and the specialists on heritage so as to analyze the positive (claims, retrieval) or negative (rejection, denial) exchanges that may develop between the product of research and the local or distant “consumers”.

This four year project is built up around thematical workshops organized in Lyon once a year. It is meant to gather members of the MOM and invited researchers. The contributions to the workshops will be available on line in the form of an electronic publication on the web site of the Editing Services of the MOM until they are published in a common volume in the series *Travaux de la Maison de l’Orient*. The titles of the planned workshops are the following:

1. Cyprus. A Stratigraphy of Identity. (November 29th 2007)
2. National Identity and Archaeological Research: the Hazards of the Process towards Cultural Heritage – Levant, Gulf States, Egypt (November 27th 2008)
3. Between Claims and Desertion : the Legacy of the Ottoman Empire – Maghreb, Near-East, Balkans (November 2009).
4. Institutional Heritage versus “Popular” Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean. Issues about the Accession to the Status of Heritage (2010).