

Continuity as the key to living heritage

There is a risk to trying to define heritage. The World Archaeological Congress (WAC) has an e-mail server for its members. In 2008 one of the members proposed to form a group to define heritage. This was resisted by the majority. As one scholar put it, “I think heritage is too important a field of enquiry to be left to ‘experts’ who wish to fix it and thereby kill it stone dead!” (John Carman, in a WAC e-mail) another scholar endorsed this and said, “It strikes me that all such ‘definitions’ are (and should be) contingent, context-sensitive, and fluid” (Carol McDavid, in WAC e-mail). However, throughout the Living Heritage Sites programme, it was abundantly clear that there was a need to expand the way we think about heritage that will capture the significance of living dimensions just as we do for the material remains of the past. This was necessary for professionals and practitioners to reorient their approaches to conservation. Most importantly, this helps to convince communities that they have a role in the conservation and management of heritage and indeed could be the main beneficiaries.

At the strategy development meeting mentioned above, it was concluded that continuity is the key to characterizing living heritage and, since then, all our work carried out within the programme has reinforced this conclusion. The Intangible Heritage Convention also recognizes continuity as a key element in defining living heritage. Continuity is therefore the basis on which to characterize living heritage. Indeed, all heritage places (as we call them today) have continued to survive and change. Some adapting to the times and needs of society but still performing some function, others abandoned by the people. Of the former, some functions (uses) are the same for which the heritage places were created and such places are characterized as living heritage which will be discussed below. In many ways, heritage which ‘continues’ to perform functions for society has not been divorced from present society, has not been isolated by the ‘museumification’ process that many Western management systems have created. The need for new approaches to conservation and management continuity is therefore a need of the day.

The conventional conservation approach, which is the legacy of the modern conservation movement, was built on some assumptions and with some knowledge gaps.⁵ In particular, it has overlooked the living dimensions of heritage places by placing greater emphasis on the fabric. This often results in the suppression and even the breaking down of communities’ connections to heritage and the marginalization and exclusion of communities from heritage conservation and management, with long-term negative consequences for the heritage itself (Ndoro *et al.*, 2003). We have argued elsewhere that the conventional conservation approach has overlooked three key