

Balancing between the “World Heritage” brand and local recreation in Bagan

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Abstract

The archaeological site of Bagan in Myanmar is one of Asia’s prominent Buddhist destinations. Its landscape with over three thousand monuments ranks it as one of Myanmar’s most visited sites. Nevertheless, its possible inclusion in the World Heritage List raises concerns around the conservation of its living heritage. Some scholars argue that the World Heritage title acts as a placebo brand attracting cultural tourism seeking authentic experiences (Adie *et al.*, 2018). However, in settings such as Myanmar, with a recently isolated society and post-conflict situation, the prompt arrival of tourism could pose a threat to its socio-cultural dynamics. In this context, tensions arise while finding a balance between keeping alive heritage practices and adapting the site to tourism needs.

Keywords

World Heritage; UNESCO; brand; Buddhism; tourism; community.

Getting the World Heritage status is a ‘double-edged sword’. After inscription, tourism increases up to 30%, turning sites into ‘cash-cows’, an effect that is particularly favourable for developing countries (Adie *et al.*, 2018: 400; Barron, 2017). On the other hand, tourism can threaten the socio-cultural dynamics of core communities in the long term (Adie *et al.*, 2018: 399). This phenomenon is usually associated with an absent integration of communities into the planning and management of heritage sites. One example of this is the Bagan Archaeological Zone (also known as Bagan or Pagan) in Myanmar (former Burma).



Currently, Bagan is one of Asia's most prominent Buddhist sites and a popular destination for national and international tourism (Buentello *et al.*, 2018; Kraak, 2017a: 436; Rich and Franck, 2016: 333). Nevertheless, its possible inclusion in the World Heritage List raises concerns around the conservation of its living heritage. Kraak (2017b) argues that Bagan's so expected World Heritage title implies constraints to community's cultural rights. Following this idea, this article is limited to open discussions on the possible effects that the 'WH brand' poses to the site's socio-cultural dimensions (Mansfeld, 2018: 32-33). Due to the complexity of the subject, many topics that appear as the reader immerses himself in the text cannot be addressed. Thus, strategies on sustainable tourism, management, community engagement, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on-going efforts to foster dialogue in the conservation of religious heritage sites will have to be addressed elsewhere.

Familiarising with the context

Since Myanmar opened to the world in 2011, the country gained visibility after five decades of isolation (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013; Kraak, 2017a: 435; Rich and Franck, 2016: 333-334). The new government transitioned from an authoritarian military system to democratic governance with a market-oriented economy, leading to social transformations engaged with the international community and international organizations such as UNESCO (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013; Kraak, 2017a: 435; Rich and Franck, 2016: 333-334). Along this process, Myanmar became a tourism magnet for travellers seeking for natural and cultural sites with 'genuine hospitality and spiritual values' (Crabolu, 2015: 2; Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013).

From 2012 to 2013, tourist arrivals in Myanmar increased 52%, and according to the Asian Development Bank international arrivals are estimated to rise to 7.48 million in 2020 (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013: III; Rich and Franck, 2016: 334). In response to this dramatic growth, tourism has become a governmental priority envisioning its potential to generate and diversify job opportunities in the development of domestic industries and services (Crabolu, 2015: 2; Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013: III).

Being a top touristic destination with an economy reliant on tourism, Bagan's integration into the World Heritage List foresees an increase of touristic flow between 20 to 30% (Adie *et al.*, 2018: 400; Crabolu, 2015: 2; Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013: 8). Since 2012, the government has been joining efforts toward submitting Bagan's nomination file for revision¹ (Kraak, 2017a: 435), representing an opportunity for the site to be finally listed and benefit from its international status.

Bagan Archaeological Zone is located in the Mandalay region of Myanmar. Unlike other archaeological sites, Bagan holds strong historic and religious significance associated with merit-making practices of Theravada Buddhism (Kraak, 2017a: 437). Nowadays, the site is managed by the Department of Archaeology, who closely monitors the state of conservation of over three thousand monuments scattered in an area of 108 square kilometres (Figure 1) (Hudson, 2008: 55; Kraak, 2017a: 439; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019e). Its landscape comprises monuments (stupas, temples and monasteries), agricultural fields, natural protected areas, and diverse human settlements with an estimated population of 500,000 inhabitants (Rich and Franck, 2016: 337; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019e).

¹ The site has been in the State Party's Tentative List to the 1972 *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (World Heritage Convention or WHC) since 1996 (Crabolu, 2015: 2; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019a).





Figure 1. Overview of Bagan Archaeological Zone. Image: ©Desirée Buentello García, 2017.

Most monuments in Bagan were constructed between the 10th and 14th centuries AD during the height of the Kingdom of Myanmar with its capital in Bagan (Pagan) (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019e). Bagan's reputation as a top Buddhist destination in Asia has endured over the centuries holding spiritual practices that go from paying respect to Buddha images, organizing festivals, re-gilding monuments, and pilgrimage (Figure 2 and 3) (Hudson, 2008: 555; Kraak, 2017a: 436). Throughout time, the site was severely damaged due to earthquakes, weathering, and 'treasure hunting'. In response, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the military government sponsored a massive reconstruction project (Hudson, 2008: 553-556). The outcome of this project was severely criticised and described as a 'Disney-style fantasy version' of its glorious past (Hudson, 2008: 5523). Today, its pagodas² as well as its monasteries are partially or completely reconstructed and require continuous maintenance (Hudson, 2008; Kraak, 2017b). Here, it's important to underline that construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of pagodas are actions closely related to merit-making practices of Theravada Buddhism, a belief that is widely practised throughout the country³ (Dove, 2017: 205).

Merit-making is an activity with multiple dimensions, for merits can be generated through meditation, good deeds, making contributions to monks and nuns, and donating for the maintenance of pagodas (Kraak, 2017b: 1). From these activities, construction and renovation are considered of the highest merits (Kraak, 2017b: 1-2). Therefore, the monuments in Bagan were erected in the belief that their sponsors would increase their chance of a good reincarnation or salvation (Hudson, 2008: 555, 558; Kraak, 2017b: 1). Today, renovation practices follow the same principle. Thus, Bagan's monuments are not merely historical testimonies of the past, they are

² The generic name for stupas and temples.

³ 87.9% of the population in Myanmar practice Theravada Buddhism —according to the latest census of 2014— (Dove, 2017: 208).



living elements that play a crucial role in the continuity of religious beliefs. Merit-making practices are so important for Myanmar's cultural life that despite its rank as one of the least developed countries in the world it maintains a prestigious reputation for generosity and volunteering (Dove, 2017: 205; Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013: 3; Rich and Franck, 2016: 335).



Figure 2. Buddhist monks visiting the Shwezigon Pagoda. *Image: ©Desirée Buentello García, 2017.*



Figure 3. Local community paying respects to the Buddha. *Image: ©Desirée Buentello García, 2017.*

It is important to highlight that Bagan's unique atmosphere is the result of a symbiotic and symbolic relationship between its natural resources, man-made elements, and living culture. The interaction of these elements gives the impression that the place has remained 'intact' since the time of the British colony, showing Asia 'as it once was' (Rich and Franck, 2016: 333-334).⁴ In this way, Bagan's spirit is broadly expressed in 'the socio-cultural connections that are linked to the physical environment' and it is strongly attached to the community's identity and sense of belonging (Prestes *et al.*, 2019). Besides, Bagan has always been an important site for pilgrimage, but it has recently attracted a vast range of visitor's profile (Crabolu, 2015). Thus, the potential increase in visitor's figures after obtaining the World Heritage title poses a significant imprint to its socio-cultural practices that is ought to be evaluated due to its prior isolated and post-conflict condition (Rich and Franck, 2016: 334).

The 'World Heritage brand'

When Second World War ceased, its destructive effects pointed at the urgent need to develop an international instrument ensuring the protection and conservation of places with cultural and/or natural significance. Soon after UNESCO was formed in 1946 as a specialized agency of the United Nations, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted in 1954 leading to the later promulgation of the World Heritage Convention (WHC) (Cleere, 2011: 519). The WHC was adopted in November 1972 providing a blanket of protective legislation and management to its prospective sites (Adie, 2017: 49). Each listed site is an example of cultural and/or natural significance 'which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries' (Adie, 2017: 49; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2009a). Its significance (also known as Outstanding Universal Value or OUV) is so unique that is believed to be of common relevance for all the present and future generations of humanity (Adie, 2017: 49; UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2009a).

The World Heritage List was originally estimated for one hundred properties but political interest from countries that ratified the Convention and weaknesses in the evaluation process exceeded expectations (Cleere, 2011: 520). Currently, there are 1121 sites on the List, yet, as the number increases each year, so does struggles to balance between tourism consequences and social development (Barron, 2017). Some scholars argue that the World Heritage title works as a brand or franchise that guarantees authenticity and quality for tourism, acting as a 'commodity label' that increases visibility to the sites and conveys commercial benefits (Adie, 2017: 49-5; King and Halpenny, 2014: 768). From this perspective, UNESCO moves in favour of the benefits that tourism brings to the sites and the local community. In this sense, 'conservation by commercialization' moves with the belief that the World Heritage designation will generate revenue to raise the local economy and living standards⁵ (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019d; Edroma, 2003: 38; Prestes *et al.*, 2019: 26). Additionally, according to King and Halpenny (2013), the 'World Heritage brand' triggers positive emotions and behaviours in visitors and generates funds for conservation projects. Thus, if managed appropriately it assures the site's long-term conservation in a sustainable manner (2014: 768; Prestes *et al.*, 2019: 26).

⁴ This text speaks only of Bagan's socio-cultural practices and spiritual associations in a broad sense. Other practices associated with traditional knowledge such as art craft production, agriculture, animal husbandry, the construction of vernacular architecture or its oral traditions are not addressed.

⁵ Through actions and investments of local stakeholders, who contribute directly or indirectly with jobs in the hospitality industry, through retail, performing arts, agriculture or developing infrastructure for varied goods and services.



The other side of the coin shows that most regions of the world have experienced the negative impacts of tourism in a phenomenon that Marco D' Eramo called 'UNESCO-cide' (Barron, 2017). This phenomenon calls out to the inevitable decay of the cultural character of the site after being listed. Some examples of this phenomenon are Venice (Italy), Lijiang (China), and Chan Chan (Peru), among many others, largely found in urban centres of historic towns (Cleere, 2011; Barron, 2017). This standpoint sustains that tourism purposes have suffocated the social function of many properties, drawing a melancholic trace of its living culture (Cleere, 2011: 522). Besides, the constant expansion of the List and the overexposure of the 'World Heritage brand' have been repeatedly criticised. In this regard, the List's credibility to represent the world's diversity has also been questioned due to different perceptions of what an OUV means in different regions of the world (Adie *et al.*, 2018: 403). Misunderstandings of the World Heritage title as a lure for tourism conceal the actual purpose of the Convention (Adie *et al.*, 2018: 403). To this, the misappropriation of the list for promoting national interests has also been a relevant point of discussion, just like the decreased number of heritage professionals representing National Delegations in the annual World Heritage Committee meetings (Arizpe, 2007: 370; Cleere, 2011: 520). UNESCO has been tackling the issue through diverse tools and initiatives. The numerous volumes of the *World Heritage Series* and its *Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest* are just some examples (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019c). Yet, there are still no clear strategies or guidelines to control the effects of over-commercializing the 'World Heritage brand' (Cleere, 2011: 523; Kraak, 2017b). Also, sites where spiritual practices have endured until today, are much more complex to address due to the way social, historic and symbolic values interact.

Heritage tourism vs local recreation in Bagan

Myanmar Tourism Master Plan 2013-2020 states that quality tourism should be endorsed through responsible actions that are equitable to social well-being⁶ and environmental sustainability (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013: 3). However, according to Rich and Franck (2016), knowledge around the impacts that tourism will have on Myanmar is limited (2016: 333-334). Besides, although studies have developed over the need to foster community-based strategies acknowledging local peoples cultural and other human rights, the issue has not had sufficient attention (Logan, 2016: 256).

Kraak (2017) mentions that despite that a human rights-based approach has been developing recently in the heritage field, it has still not reached Bagan (Kraak, 2017a: 439). She explains that the community's voice was not considered during the nomination process, and consequently, their cultural rights have been gravely overlooked. One example of this is that more concern exists over conserving the fabric of the monuments rather than the spiritual associations that erected them in the first place (2017: 436). From this standpoint, conflicting interest emerge while balancing between local recreation, international conservation standards, and the country's urge for economic and social development. In this sense, local recreation could represent a threat to the material conservation of monuments. As previously mentioned, Bagan's cultural practices are closely related to religious beliefs that imply beautifying, repainting, and reconstructing pagodas; practices that impact directly on the fabric of the monuments 'risking' its material authenticity (Kraak, 2017a: 436). In this sense, Kraak (2017) maintains, that Bagan's cultural significance has been predominantly framed under its architectural and archaeological significance, while its association to religious beliefs has been merely studied as a textual object (2017a: 438). This approach rooted in the British

⁶ Enhancing economic development, reduce poverty, and increase living standards of its multi-ethnic population (Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013: 3; Rich and Franck, 2016: 334).



legacy in Bagan during the 19th century, disengaged the symbolic and religious significance of the pagodas from its materiality, leaving popular religious practices and its oral traditions to a lower rank (Kraak, 2017a: 438-439).

It is a fact that culture's ever-transforming nature is always adapting to the present (Rich and Franck, 2016: 335), but the real question behind the 'conservation by commercialization' strategy is if such transformations on WH properties should be rushed through tourism. UNESCO's website suggests that tourism provides funds for conserving WH sites and forges a sense of pride and identity in the community which benefits from showcasing their characteristic lifestyle (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2019b). Nevertheless, the line between witnessing a social practice to its commodification is fragile (Olsen, 2015: 99). In this sense, as cultural tourists seek authentic experiences, cultural practices tend to be customized satisfying their expectations diluting the real meanings and symbolism of religious practices (Olsen, 2015: 100). In the worst scenario, ethnic, cultural, and religious groups, and their practices get trivialized (Olsen, 2015: 99).

In accordance with article 27.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1947), a human rights-based approach reflects on the community's 'right to freely participate in the cultural life' (Kraak, 2017a: 438), which includes respecting the community's interest to protect their privacy, cultural norms, and life quality (Mansfeld, 2018: 32). Nonetheless, communities living in World Heritage sites have manifested feeling objectified, fallen into the 'zoo syndrome' or in a 'staged authenticity' that disassociates them from their heritage (Mansfeld, 2018: 32; Olsen, 2015: 99). For instance, the mandatory rule for tourist's guides in Bagan to wear traditional clothes (*longyi*) and makeup (*thanaka*), illustrates how cultural attributes of a community can be forcedly staged in the sake of tourism (Rich and Franck, 2016: 345). In this matter, Cohen (1998) reflects that tourism can lead to 'a weakening of the local adherence to religion and the beliefs in the sacredness and efficacy of holy places, rituals and customs' (Olsen, 2015: 100).

Not many years have passed since Myanmar's popularity increased, yet, the socio-cultural impacts of tourism have already started to show its first signs. For younger generations tourism brings both opportunities and disruption to their cultural identity as a result of immediate influences of globalization (Rich and Franck, 2016: 335). In one way, tourism brings improved opportunities for education and the development of international relations and knowledge transfers. But on the other, it carries instability to local values, customs and moral standards (Rich and Franck, 2016: 339). These changes occur due to the introduction of new commodities to satisfy visitor's needs and the adoption of new attitudes gained while observing tourist's behaviour, for example, related to alcohol consumption (Rich and Franck, 2016: 338). Today, young adults in Bagan identify the adoption of the American, European, Japanese, and Korean popular cultures into their own (Rich and Franck, 2016: 344).

Tourists' behaviour in Bagan is also the result of an absent interpretive discourse to share its spiritual significance (Buentello *et al.*, 2018: 7; Crabolu, 2015: 37, 49). Thus, most tourists visit Bagan pursuing its romantic archaeological landscape, ignoring that it holds strong spiritual associations in the present (Buentello *et al.*, 2018: 98). For instance, the dress code to visit sacred places tends to be overlooked despite the multiple signs displayed at the entrance of pagodas (Crabolu, 2015: 35). Another activity that invites tourists to 'climb' over pagodas to admire the sunset and sunrise, not only represent a direct impact to the fabric of the monuments, but it is disrespectful to the community's spiritual beliefs (Buentello *et al.*, 2018: 7) (Figure 3). Nevertheless, contradictory attitudes show that locals would not intrude in tourist's misbehaviours to maintain a friendly relationship with them and to get an immediate economic benefit by selling art crafts, snacks and beverages in viewing spots (Figure 4) (Buentello *et al.*, 2018; Crabolu, 2015: 44).





Figure 4. Visitors admiring the sunset from Swe-gu-gyi Temple.
Image: ©Desirée Buentello García, 2017.



Figure 5. Girl selling snacks. Image: ©Desirée Buentello García, 2017.

Up to now, Bagan's premature popularity as a touristic destination has not fully altered its socio-cultural dynamics. However, Bagan could potentially lose its 'charm' as a place with 'genuine spiritual values' becoming one more ghostly property. The main concern lies in the so longed World Heritage title, raising questions on how it will affect the continuity of the social practices that keep it alive.

Final comments

Considering Kraak's (2017) extensive study on the lack of a human rights-based approach to Bagan, several points need to be pondered. As she rightly mentions, the complexity of the situation requires a new level of expertise about the ethics of cultural heritage conservation. From this perspective, heritage conservation policies and tourism strategies should be sensible to geographical and historical contexts, accounting the cultural, political and social rights of the host community (Kraak, 2017a: 442).

For this, a socio-cultural viability assessment should be as important as the Heritage Impact Assessments (HIA) or the Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) before applying any tourism strategy to the heritage sites. This extends not only to possible World Heritage properties, but to all sites with cultural and/or natural importance. In addition, as heritage professionals, we must be aware of the possible consequences of our decisions and act more critically, particularly if we fight between the thin line that divides the conservation of commodification. Similarly, as outsiders to the identity and sense of belonging of a group, we must reflect on the consequences of imposing a "brand" on heritage sites and how it threatens people's beliefs and lifestyle, for we are not in a position to decide the fate of living heritage practices. Instead, we might consider shifting our practice on promoting collaborative management structures aimed to protect the associations or spiritual bonds formed between people and heritage, thus, conserving the spirit or essence of a site.

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