Enshrining the Past: Religion and Heritage-Making in a Secular Age

Workshop at the Centre for Advanced Studies
"Multiple Secularities – Beyond the West, Beyond Modernities", Leipzig University

27 – 29 October 2021

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As the intensity of the politics around cultural identity is growing across the world, the notion of heritage-making, or "heritagization", has acquired new political urgency. At the same time, these politics have animated far-flung controversies over the religious and secular sources of belonging along with the values of ethnic, religious and racial majorities, minorities and the states that are supposed to represent them. This raises an intriguing set of questions: Under what conditions and with what consequences are certain religious artefacts, rituals and worldviews framed as heritage? Whose religious heritage is considered worthy to be selected, canonized and ennobled as elementary for nations' collective memory? Who is systematically excluded and left to oblivion in the politics of religious and secular heritage? Which social groups are central to these processes?

This workshop seeks to explore the contours of the politics around cultural heritage and the ways it is enmeshed with the religious-secular dynamics in societies past and present. We suggest that these concerns manifest in three substantive ways, each provoking suggestive research questions: legal frames, immaterial values, and material patrimony. In 2003, the question of whether and how Europe's religious heritage, which is largely Christian, should appear as the basis for common values and norms in the European Constitution was highly controversial. Religious heritage as a legal concept also appears in the national constitutions of many countries. Such legal frames have a direct influence on the way public authorities enshrine certain aspects of religion and culture as heritage while denying the status and value accruing from such enshrinement to others. For this reason, it is essential to address the way in which legal definitions of religious heritage have historically emerged. Certain places and practices considered sacred, such as temples, cemeteries, and prayers, are transformed into tangible and intangible national cultural heritage, sometimes receiving World Heritage status. The inclusion of float festivals in Japan, held annually to honour deities to prevent natural catastrophes, on UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list is a case that drew fierce criticism from priests and traditionalists alike, while exposing the political implications of heritagization. What is at stake when cultural goods are defined as religious or non-religious cultural heritage? In the latter case, heritagization means that religious items are culturalised and thus secularized thereby acquiring the status of secular-sacred. This raises the question how the redesignation of cultural goods from religious-sacred to secular-sacred shapes people's affects as they engage with them.

Material artefacts – monuments, architectures, but also statues and objects – give tangible shape to otherwise abstract values, imagined histories or codes of belonging. Religious pluralism, secularization but also national/cultural identities are often the backdrop against which controversies over what to preserve and who is in charge of preservation emerge. Sacred objects such as amulets or beads used in religious rituals in different parts of Africa, for instance, come to occupy a prominent discursive and material place within visual culture, art and fashion as part of the traditional African heritage, whose contours are under constant negotiation. Material artefacts imbue these politically and economically motivated negotiations with affective and sensorial dimensions. In a similar vein, both religious and

nonreligious people often develop affective attachments to religious artefacts and architectures as heritage. Religious heritage thus invites a reconsideration of the affective and performative politics of the secular that often raises distinctions between "religion as belief" and "religion as culture/heritage", which play out differently in different parts of the world.

Focusing on these three axes of legal frames, immaterial values, and material patrimony that contribute and shape the discursive and affective assemblages of heritage, we invite contributors from around the world and various disciplines (including sociology, anthropology, history, heritage studies, geography, and religious studies) to participate in the call for papers. **Please send an abstract of maximum 300 words by 13 June to multiple-secularities@uni-leipzig.de. Selected participants will be informed by 12 July.**

Depending on the state of the COVID-19 pandemic, the workshop will be carried out in a hybrid format. We are able to cover costs for travel and accommodation for those presenting on-site in person.