

Whose Heritage, Whose Standards?

Geographic Imbalance in the UNESCO World Heritage List

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The river was rising, and fast. In the scorching Nubian desert, workers meticulously dismantled the Abu Simbel Statues of Egypt. To save the monuments built by the ancient people that shaped the image of Egypt today, UNESCO organized the 1960 Nubian campaign to relocate these historic relics (UNESCO “Monuments of Nubia-International Campaign”). How ironic that the very project that birthed the concept of World Heritage began in a region that is now systematically overlooked. Today, UNESCO World Heritage sites are clustered in the core of the global north, leaving regions such as Africa underrepresented. UNESCO sites are imbalanced due to eurocentrism shown through the history of UNESCO’s beginnings, neo-colonialist economic disparities, and cultural biases. This essay will explore the importance of cultural heritage and how UNESCO preservation of sites is especially important to human identity.

Colonial Foundations of the Heritage System

UNESCO's geographical imbalance reflects historical patterns of eurocentric influence within the international heritage system. When UNESCO was first created in 1945, it started out by a treaty made with 44 countries (UNESCO “74th Birthday”). The majority of those countries that initially signed the treaty were in North America or Europe. Only two African countries signed the treaty, Egypt and South Africa. This was not because other African nations were absent by choice, but because most of them were at the time still under colonial rule by other European countries. This structural silencing

extended across the Global South; only five Middle Eastern nations were present, as the vast majority of the region was trapped under British and French mandates or restrictive protection treaties that stripped them of foreign policy sovereignty (UNESCO "The Creation of UNESCO"). During the era of decolonization, African states rapidly joined UNESCO. In 1960, nineteen countries from Africa alone joined (UNESCO "Working Towards an African Renaissance"). The surge in membership demonstrates that many newly independent African states sought participation in international cultural and educational institutions once sovereignty was achieved. The beginning structure of UNESCO directly demonstrates path dependency. Because of the lack of sovereignty of early African and Middle Eastern countries, they were prohibited from joining. By the time they gained independence, a majority of European countries had already set the rules, giving European states disproportionate influence over UNESCO's early standards.

Colonial influence did not only exist in how UNESCO functioned, but also through maps. During colonial rule, the colonizers used maps to legally and visually erase existing Indigenous groups. They often labeled large, populated areas as blank or unexplored, enforcing the legal doctrine of *terra nullius*, the myth of "nobody's land" (United Nations "Impact of the Doctrine of Discovery"). By telling the world that these places were free for taking, mapmakers omitted Indigenous landmarks, territories, and sacred spaces. Colonial cartography also erased thousands of years of traditions and heritage, replacing them with eurocentric titles of lords or cities ("What's in a Name?"). A famous example is a dispute regarding Uluru, also known as Ayers Rock. The Anangu Aboriginal people of Australia called it Uluru and used the red rock as a deeply sacred and spiritual site for thousands of years. In 1873, a colonial surveyor renamed it Ayers Rock after a British colonial politician. While the area eventually received a UNESCO

World Heritage site nomination, a dual-name registry (Uluru/Ayers Rock) was only legally restored following decades of persistent Indigenous pushback (UNESCO World Heritage Centre “Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park”). This illustrates how UNESCO inherited and operated within landscapes already shaped by colonial cartography. Essentially, it deemed whole cultures non-existent, erasing the very linguistic and geographic heritage that UNESCO aims to preserve.

The influence of colonial mapping extends beyond place names and territorial representation. It also shapes who possesses the legal authority to define and nominate heritage in the first place. Although more than 30 million Kurds share a distinct language, culture, and history across several countries in the Middle East, they are not allowed to independently nominate sites to the World Heritage List (UNESCO “Who Nominates Sites?”). As explicitly stated in the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention*, “Nominations of properties for inscription on the World Heritage List shall be submitted by the State Party in whose territory the property is moving or located. The Committee will not consider nominations from any other entity.” For the Kurds to submit a site nomination, they must rely on the government of the country in which they reside. However, the government usually prioritizes the preservation of their own culture, leading to fewer Kurdish heritage sites. This demonstrates how UNESCO's reliance on the sovereign state system can contribute to unequal representation, even when culturally distinct communities possess a heritage of significant historical value.

Nature vs Culture Division

In the early years of UNESCO, its world heritage sites were defined to have “Outstanding Universal Value” through a European lens. The idea was to focus heavily on manmade architecture, monuments, or cathedral ruins. The originally written cultural criteria was

significantly eurocentric with its requirements such as "masterpiece of human creative genius" or "outstanding architecture." Early definitions of OUV were drawn directly from the 1964 Venice Charter, the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites. The meeting was held for post World War II reconstruction, where an overwhelming number of delegates representing Western European countries were present in drafting. Its primary goal was to establish standardized rules for restoring the bombed historic town centers, stone cathedrals, and classical ruins of Europe. Importantly, the resulting framework reflects the specific mid-century bureaucratic goals of these architects, rather than a broad European preference for tangible monuments over the natural world. The same European congress that wrote the Venice Charter directly created ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites). UNESCO later appointed ICOMOS as the chief advisory body to evaluate all cultural world heritage monuments (ICOMOS "The History of ICOMOS").

Under the strict European guidelines of the Venice Charter, monuments requiring continuous rebuilding were often deemed "inauthentic" due to the loss of original material (UNESCO "Reconstruction: Changing Attitudes"). International committees initially applied this rigid lens to reject non-Western site submissions that relied on organic, perishable, or living materials. A prime example is Japan's timber shrines, which are ritually dismantled and rebuilt every 20 years. In the Shinto tradition, authenticity lies in the unbroken continuity of craftsmanship, cultural practice, and ritual, rather than the physical survival of the original building fabric (National Geographic). To shift this evaluation framework, the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity expanded UNESCO's understanding of heritage. It acknowledged that authenticity may be expressed through continuous rebuilding, craftsmanship, ritual practice, and spiritual connection. Nonetheless, geographical imbalances persist despite these reforms

(UNESCO “Nara Document”). Although the Nara Document introduced diverse types of heritage sites, it did not completely dismantle the Cartesian dualism that persists in official UNESCO listings. Decades of early nominations and established evaluation systems created path dependency, firmly locking the shape of the World Heritage List today.

Although the Nara Document broadened UNESCO's understanding of authenticity, another eurocentric assumption remained embedded within the World Heritage system: the separation of nature and culture into distinct categories. World Heritage properties are categorized into Cultural sites evaluated by ICOMOS, Natural sites evaluated by the IUCN, and Mixed sites assessed jointly by both advisory bodies (UNESCO “Advisory Bodies”). Although the UNESCO World Heritage Centre treats all three tracks as fundamentally equal, Cultural inscriptions overwhelmingly dominate the official list at over 78% (UNESCO “List statistics”). This imbalance reflects UNESCO's historical emphasis on monumental architecture and built heritage, the categories that align more closely with European conservation traditions than with many Indigenous and biocultural landscapes.

Natural nominations face stricter integrity and management requirements, creating additional barriers for large transboundary African landscapes. Natural site approval rates hover between 50% and 60%, compared to the 70% to 80% success rate for cultural sites (UNESCO “List statistics”). A milestone thematic study by the IUCN and BIOPAMA identified dozens of massive terrestrial and marine landscapes across Africa that possess significant World Heritage potential, yet remain absent from the official list. For example, Lake Tanganyika is the longest freshwater lake in the world, hosting critical endemic biodiversity found nowhere else on Earth. However, because its waters span four sovereign nations, the site struggles to meet the strict IUCN Conditions of Integrity and Management Requirements, which dictate that a natural

property must encompass the entire ecological unit under a unified protection framework. These requirements reflect a conservation model rooted in clearly defined state boundaries and centralized administrative control. While such assumptions may be easier to satisfy in regions where heritage management developed within long-established bureaucratic systems, they create additional challenges for vast African ecosystems that extend across multiple jurisdictions. As a result, the framework can privilege administrative coherence over ecological reality, limiting recognition of some of Africa's most significant natural landscapes (IUCN UNESCO).

The underrepresentation of Mixed sites stems in part from an epistemological bias: the separation of nature and culture into distinct categories. This dichotomy is not a universal truth, but rather a direct product of the 16th and 17th-century Western Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment thought. Prominently codified by René Descartes' formulation of Cartesian dualism, Western intellectual tradition separated *res cogitans* (the thinking human mind) from *res extensa* (inert, material nature). This philosophy treats humanity as an external agent acting *upon* a passive natural environment, rather than an interconnected part of it (Harmon 380). Mixed sites are also severely underrepresented. In Africa, a study conducted by the IUCN states that at least 26% of Africa's wildlife and biomes could qualify as a World Heritage site; however, only 3% of them are actually inscribed (IUCN, "Natural World Heritage"). The Western ideology that Cultural and Natural sites must be evaluated separately creates a "double jeopardy" situation where the site must be evaluated twice, which results in double the costs for the country. While most European countries might not have an issue with this, many emerging economies in Africa cannot afford to absorb these expenses. Many African cosmologies and worldviews see nature and culture as inseparable, similar to the Shinto beliefs noted earlier. By forcing sites into a

dual-evaluation system, the framework penalizes cultures that do not divide the world the way Western academics do.

Economic factors

To understand the financial disparities in UNESCO, it is useful to look through the lens of Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory. Wallerstein argues that the global economy is divided into a hierarchy: wealthy core nations that control global capital (such as Europe), and developing peripheral nations that are exploited for their raw materials (such as Africa). This system is maintained through "unequal exchange," a process where economic wealth is continuously drained from the Periphery to enrich the Core (World Systems Theory).

Becoming a world heritage site involves a process of nomination, inspection, voting procedure, and long time preservation after inscription. To nominate a site, the Member State must first hire experts to prepare a detailed document demonstrating why the site has Outstanding Universal Value (UNESCO, "Nomination Process"). This first step alone could already cost substantial financial investments. In the framework of Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, this process highlights the dominance of "Core" nations. Capital accumulation of wealthier European countries allows them to consistently absorb the significant expenses, therefore dictating the geographical location of sites. Conversely, "peripheral" nations are structurally disadvantaged. As a result, the nomination process risks rewarding states with greater financial and institutional capacity rather than solely recognizing the historical significance of heritage itself. For instance, a

report by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP revealed that compiling a single nomination dossier can cost between £420,000 and £570,000 (approximately \$520,000 to \$700,000 USD). Much of this capital is consumed by financing specialist fees, hiring external consultants, and developing massive bureaucratic dossiers, effectively pricing lower-income nations out of global history.

These disparities are not accidental. Many of the economic advantages that enable European states to fund heritage nominations emerged through historical colonialism and continue through modern forms of neocolonial economic extraction. This dynamic perfectly illustrates Wallerstein's concept of "unequal exchange," where raw materials are drained from the periphery to enrich the core. African countries are still constantly being exploited for their resources. Shell, a British multinational oil company, extracted oil from Nigeria for decades. However, local communities still suffer from oil spills, gas flares, and systemic underdevelopment. In the town of Bodo, Nigeria, the community was permanently altered by two major oil spills in 2008 and 2009. According to Amnesty International, "Crude oil continuously leaked into the water for at least 10 weeks on each occasion." This affected communities immensely, polluting their water supply. The spills also caused health issues, including headaches and eyesight problems (qtd. in "Shell agrees"). This disparity directly mirrors UNESCO's economic warnings regarding global wealth imbalances. The wealth generated from African soil benefits foreign countries, yet leaves Africa itself ecologically impacted in negative ways. By undermining local economic development, these extractive relationships contribute to the persistence of global wealth inequalities. Such economic inequalities limit the resources available for preservation and protection of world heritage, making it more difficult for many developing countries to secure World IHeritage inscriptions.

Ultimately, because the Core strips the Periphery of its economic wealth, it also robs these nations of the financial capital required to claim their rightful place in global cultural history.

Cultural Bias

Linguistic hegemony was fundamentally woven into the creation of UNESCO by its European founders. At UNESCO's 1945 inception meeting held in London, English and French were established as the primary working languages (UNESCO, "Conference for the Establishment of the United Nations Educational 1945"). While a common language is practical, only enforcing Western tongues transformed a functional tool into an apparatus of hegemonic control, a form of dominance where ruling groups dictate the accepted values, frameworks, and norms of a global society. Requiring sovereign nations from all over the world to articulate their indigenous ideas in these specific European languages doesn't just give an advantage to native speakers, it also forces non-Western societies to distort their own cultural concepts to fit into eurocentric frameworks. Because languages construct reality differently, and necessitating English and French ensures that the foundational definitions of global history, education, and heritage are written, debated, and codified primarily from a Western epistemological perspective. For decades, UNESCO's foundational policy traditionally prioritized tangible versus intangible heritage. This concept stems directly from the French tradition of *patrimoine* (heritage) and the English focus on historic preservation. African nations struggled to protect their heritage under this framework. In their languages, there is no linguistic separation between a physical object and its spiritual essence. For example, in many Bantu languages, a sacred grove or a physical artifact is linguistically and ontologically inseparable from the ancestors and

rituals bound to it. By forcing this kind of heritage into English or French frameworks, they are fragmented to fit into UNESCO's criteria. The consequences of these eurocentric definitions stretched beyond language and into the very categories that UNESCO uses to evaluate heritage.

UNESCO does not just protect physical monuments; it acts as a gatekeeper that determines which societies and heritages are deemed historically significant. When certain groups are excluded from this global recognition, it can contribute to perceptions that their cultural lineage is less valued within broader society. Human beings often understand their own worth through culture and heritage, shaping how they perceive themselves and their place in society. However, external factors might affect that. This can be especially evident from how colonial times functioned, by constantly pushing that one culture could be somehow superior to another; it slowly erodes away self confidence, making one aspire to be something that isn't achievable just because it seems more desirable. In the Jim Crow era of America, western beauty standards made children believe they were less beautiful. From Hollywood movie stars to day to day life, children of the time period constantly were told they weren't valued because of their skin color. For example, the Clark Doll Study conducted from the 1930s-1940s showed how young Black children perceived themselves. By using baby dolls identical except for color, African American children between the ages of three and seven were asked questions to determine racial perception and preference (CUNY, "The Doll Study"). Results showed that the majority of the children chose the white doll as the one that was "nice" or had a "better color." The Clarks concluded that under a system of segregation and discrimination of the time period, Black children had created a sense of self hatred or inferiority(Clark, "The Doll Test"). In the book *The Bluest*

Eye by Toni Morrison, the protagonist of the story, Pecola, wishes for blue eyes. In the society she grew up in, Western beauty standards made her believe that she could only be loved and protected if she had white skin like Shirley Temple or if she had blue eyes like the girl on the Mary Jane candy bar she eats. Crushed by a society that equates beauty, innocence, and worth with whiteness, Pecola ultimately reaches a state of mental illness when she believes she finally acquired the bluest eyes in the world (Morrison “The Bluest Eye”). The experiences of Pecola and the children in the Clark Doll Study demonstrate that cultural narratives shape how people perceive themselves, raising a larger question of who has the power to create and control those narratives. The UNESCO World Heritage List functions as a powerful global narrative that validates which cultures hold universal significance. By granting preservation status, the organization implicitly dictates whose histories are deemed valuable to humanity. The lack of representation extends past material consequences like funding; it actively influences collective memory and can inadvertently lead underrepresented groups to view their own cultural lineage as less.

George Orwell once said, "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past." The actions of powerful Western states within UNESCO demonstrate how influence over global narratives has often remained concentrated among a small number of nations. In 1980, developing nations tried to pass a "New World Information Order" to stop Western media monopolies from controlling global news. The reform demanded equitable access, calling for fairer, more accurate, and culturally sensitive portrayals of developing regions rather than relying on stories dictated by foreign powers. In retaliation, the United States and the United Kingdom both pulled out of UNESCO to stop the reform from passing. Without 30% of the funding provided by the

two superpowers, the reforms ultimately failed (Transcontinental, “Global South”). The failure of the initiative revealed that the struggle over heritage is not merely about preserving the past, but also about determining whose stories are heard, whose cultures are valued, and who possesses the authority to define humanity's shared history.

Conclusion

The story of UNESCO began on the rising river banks of the Nile. The international community united to save the Abu Simbel temples, creating a new vision of heritage that belonged to all nations. UNESCO was founded upon the ideal of universal heritage. However, the standards used to define and evaluate heritage were shaped by specific European historical, economic, and intellectual traditions. These influences continue to impact which places are recognized, how heritage is interpreted, and who possesses the resources necessary to participate in the nomination process.

This does not mean that UNESCO has “failed” in its mission to protect Outstanding Universal Heritage. Reforms such as the Nara Document demonstrate a growing recognition of these challenges and an ongoing effort to improve geographical representation. True universality requires more than just preserving sites across the globe. It requires reconsidering the assumptions and policies that determine not only what is recognized as heritage, but also whose histories and cultural narratives are given a voice. To fulfill UNESCO's mission of enshrining the shared heritage of humanity, it must continue moving toward a system that recognizes the many different ways cultures understand and define history, identity, nature, and memory. Only then can the global community fulfill the visionary promise first ignited under the incandescent sun by the stones of Abu Simbel.

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