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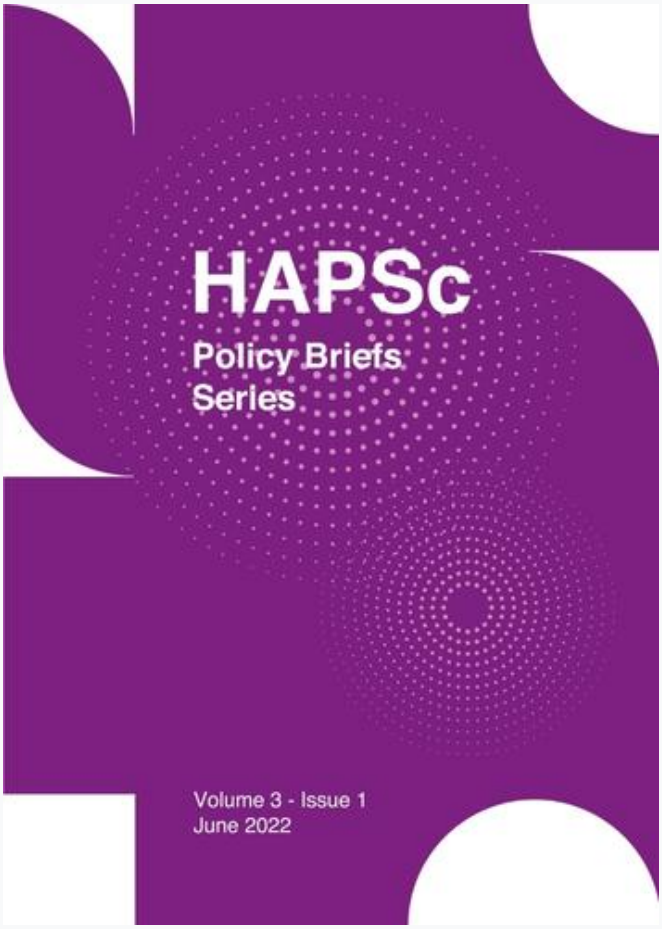

Conflict Transformation and Cultural Heritage Use in Cyprus

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Conflict Transformation and Cultural Heritage Use in Cyprus[1]

Nikos Pasamitros[2]

Abstract

Cultural heritage use is often a point of friction between antagonistic groups in intrastate conflict. In other instances, use of heritage may facilitate intergroup contact and provide space for conflict transformation. The Cyprus issue is not an exception to this phenomenon. Although Cyprus is one of the most researched frozen conflict cases, cultural heritage use vis-à-vis conflict transformation is relatively understudied focusing primarily on tangible heritage protection, restoration and museology. This brief examines the degree of influence (be it positive or negative) of cultural heritage activity on conflict transformation between the two Cypriot communities. In specific, it examines bicommunal heritage projects, use of in-group and out-group heritage and, visits to own heritage sites on the other side of the divide. Results show that bicommunal heritage projects foster contact and cooperation, use of tangible heritage becomes the ground for antagonism over neglect and care of in-group and out-group sites, and visits to heritage on the other side provoke questions over use and reuse of neglected heritage of the other. In total, this brief demonstrates that often heritage issues are exploited in order to back ethnocentric positions. Both sides use own, neglected, damaged or lost heritage to support arguments of in-group superiority. Contrarily, the Cypriot communities do not consider intergroup cultural differences a deterring factor to transformation. The dynamic potentials of heritage can be utilised towards conflict transformation through bicommunal heritage activities, ventures attributing local ownership and joint management, and critical notions of heritage that favour intangibility and hybridity.

Keywords: Cyprus, Cultural Heritage, Heritage Use, Unofficial Diplomacy, Stereotypes, Conflict Transformation, Conflict Analysis

Introduction

Contemporary approaches in international relations tend to take into account the role of non-governmental actors in intercommunal conflict, considering them as important elements of conflict preservation, escalation and transformation. According to the Multitrack Diplomacy approach, citizens' activity, research, training and education are important diplomatic tracks that may support social peace building (McDonald, 2003). Like in other frozen conflict cases, in Cyprus, cultural heritage is a dimension that influences the perpetuation and, at the same time, the transformation of the conflict depending on its use by key actors. Given that culture and (social) identity are interrelated (Côté, 1996), and that definition, interpretation and use of heritage is highly political in nature (Pasamitros, 2017), cultural heritage use has the potential to feed both strife and rapprochement.

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Theoretical Framework

In Cyprus, physical and psychological division defines cultural heritage by creating dichotomies in the perception, framing and use of tangible and intangible heritage. Conflict resolution theories claim that stereotypical images of the "other" are preserved by the lack of contact. Therefore, contact between members of communities is considered important for both maintaining and transforming protracted conflict (Coleman, 2006) and for contradicting negative stereotypes in direct interactions (Burgess, 2003).

Sociological theories on the causes of conflict support that contact can improve intergroup relations (Hodson & Hewstone, 2012). In specific, direct contact under non-competitive circumstances, combined with cooperation towards common goals, leads to a decrease in intergroup tension (Sherif et al, 1954/1961, Wedge, 1990). In addition, Contact Theory supports that interpersonal contact is an effective way to reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups under certain preconditions (Allport, 1954/1979/2007, Pettigrew, 1998). At the same time, sociological research also stresses the negative effects of contact, focusing on the generalisation of positive in-group – out-group experiences (Barlow, et al., 2012, Graf, Paolini, & Rubin, 2014), ambiguity of the effect contact has on prejudice (Wilson, 1996), in-group – out-group interaction anxiety (Wright, et al, 1997), and issues of internal and external validity of research (Forbes, 1997).

It is often claimed that intercultural dialogue, support for cultural diversity, and protection of heritage is important for building sustainable solutions. Specifically, culture is seen as an integral element of peacebuilding (Peace Direct, n.d.) that promotes tolerance, understanding and sustainable coexistence (Fukushima, n.d.). Post-modern reality demonstrates that, not only the possession of multiple identities is possible, but also that these multiple identities come to the surface according to the environment and external stimuli. Furthermore, certain theoretical approaches consider hybridity and transculturation as the ongoing condition of all human cultures (Rosaldo, 2005) and perceive cultural structure the result of prior hybridisation (Mac Ginty, 2011). On the opposite side, culture is also considered a source of conflict when ethnic or cultural differences coincide with economic or political interests (Galtung, 1990). Moreover, cultural heritage has been used as a tool for establishing and preserving identity, and heritage sites and practices as points of reference of common group identity. Material culture as heritage is often used to provide a physical representation to the ephemeral and slippery concept of 'identity' (Smith 2006).

According to the aforementioned theoretical approaches, on the one hand, culture is a potential peacebuilding factor, connected to cultural cooperation. On the other, cultural heritage use can

exacerbate real or perceived cultural differences that may deepen conflict. Given that culture and heritage are controversial terms and all individual or group activity happens within a cultural context, the present brief concentrates on cultural heritage activity, joint cultural heritage management, and visiting heritage sites on the other side.

Identities and Culture in Cyprus

In Cyprus, two different cultural realities prevail for each community: 1. a Cypriot and a Greek for the Greek Cypriots (GCs) and 2. a Cypriot and a Turkish for the Turkish Cypriots (TCs). In relation to the Cyprus conflict, for many years the dominant narratives have been those of the motherlands (Greek and Turkish), with the Cypriot cultural identity pushed to the background. Until 1974, the Greek and Turkish cultural identities were linked to the notions of "enosis" and "taksim" respectively. In recent years, there are systematic and non-systematic efforts to prioritise Cypriot culture. From 2004 on, under the Europeanisation process and the domestic political developments, there have been changes in the school curricula towards reconciliation (Hajisoteriou, Neophytou, & Angelides, 2015) and a more Cypriot-centric approach of a common heritage (Charalambous, Charalambous, & Zembylas, 2013, Gillespie, Georgiou, & Insay, 2013, Philippou, 2007). In practice, while there are cultural differences, like language and religion, there are also cultural similarities, like family structure, societal significance of the neighbourhood, localism as self-determination, gossip habits, non-verbal expression, culinary habits and traditional dances (Broome, 2005).

An asset in cultural rapprochement is the rich cultural landscape of Cyprus, which includes hundreds of archaeological sites (Louise & Morgan, 2013), offering the fertile ground for the communities to interact, cooperate, and pursue conflict transformation. Overall, in Cyprus, interconnection of conflict and cultural heritage is fraught with tension over cultural violation, heritage destruction and communal obliteration but at the same time, the restoration of particular sites of cultural heritage has become a tool for rapprochement efforts at the local authority and civil society levels (Constantinou, Demetriou, & Hatay, 2012).

Bicommunal Heritage Management in Cyprus

The most prominent body that facilitates bicommunal cultural heritage cooperation in Cyprus is the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH). The TCCH consists of archaeologists, architects, art historians and town planners from both communities and is dedicated to the recognition, promotion and protection of the cultural heritage of the island (Tuncay, 2012, TCCH, 2015). It was formed in 2009 and is supported by the European Commission and the UNDP-ACT programme. The

work of the Committee, not only preserves cultural sites of Byzantines, Greeks, Lusignans, Ottomans, Phoenicians and Venetians, but also stresses the pan-Cypriot nature of heritage. In addition, it promotes cooperation through the work of the bicommunal team of experts. Beyond the TCCH, the ACT programme has invested in planning, implementing and facilitating projects that aim to protect culturally important sites and bring the two communities closer, through collaboration (Louise & Morgan, 2013).

In 1979, an era very close to the division, the first bi-communal cooperation project was formed. The Nicosia Master Plan (NMP), along with the Nicosia Sewerage Project, were led by the two mayors of Nicosia at that time (Lellos Demetriades in the south and Mustafa Akinci in the north), and were planned and implemented by GC and TC professionals (Europa Nostra, 2019). In the context of the NMP, several urban and infrastructural upgrading was realised in both sides of the walled city of Nicosia through the collaboration between technical teams from both communities (UNDP, 2013). In total, the NMP was an important heritage project that attempted, to revitalise the historical centre of Nicosia by focusing on abandoned areas from the time of the division, to preserve and exhibit cultural heritage of all the residents of Nicosia and to get experts from both communities to work together for an extended time.

The Cultural Heritage Preservation Circle in Kontea project is an example of cooperation of both experts and local people. The 6-year project (2007-2013) was implemented by the Kontea Heritage Foundation and the Union of the Chambers of Cyprus Turkish Engineers and Architects and managed to bring together the former GC and the current TC residents of the Kontea village in order to revitalise and rehabilitate it, through grassroots activities and community engagement. Through the project, important cultural heritage sites were restored. Furthermore, the scope of Cultural Heritage Preservation Circle was broader than preserving cultural sites. It experimented with an inclusive approach to public consultation with town meetings, exhibitions, information and feedback networks, and was structured around joint decision-making by parallel, TC and GC management committees. A pioneering, participatory, locally-owned decision-making model was planned to foster conflict transformation. Overall, the Kontea project demonstrates how combining reconciliation and citizen participation in decision-making around tangible assets of common significance can transform conflict dynamics (Louise and Morgan, 2013).

Along with successful cases of bicommunal cooperation in the field of culture, there are also efforts that failed. A representative example is the attempt to make the Kyrenia ship project, bicommunal. The Kyrenia ship is a wreck of a 4th-century BC merchant ship and is exhibited in the Ancient Shipwreck Museum in Kyrenia Castle in the city of Kyrenia, Northern Cyprus. Three full-size

replicas of the ship have been constructed so far. The replicas occasionally travel around the world as a floating ambassador of Cypriot culture. The shipwreck is of ancient Greek origin and the replicas were constructed under GC initiatives. There have been efforts, to rebrand the Kyrenia project in civic rather than ethnic terms but there was little success in this since the only achievement up to now is the inclusion of a TC in the crew-team of a replica ship. (Constantinou, Demetriou, & Hatay, 2012).

Culture and Cultural Heritage as a Factor of Antagonism

Beyond the positive side of contact and cooperation on cultural projects, there are dimensions of heritage use and management that preserve negative perceptions between Cypriot communities. While the Cyprus case is not a cultural or religious conflict, these two elements occasionally fuel strife and enrich ethnocentric narratives. A common claim in both communities is that the in-group protects cultural heritage of the island, while the "other" destroys it by straightforwardly targeting or deliberately neglecting the heritage of the rival group in an effort to perform ethno-cultural cleansing. Preserved heritage of the "other" is used to manifest in-group tolerance and "own" lost heritage is used to reproduce ethnic identity in similar and often more intense ways than the actual possession, access and enjoyment of heritage (Constantinou & Hatay, 2010).

Both communities instrumentalise heritage in order to legitimise claims and support policies concerning the Cyprus problem. In each side, one's own preservation of selected heritage is opposed to the other side's destruction of heritage. The Greek-Cypriot side, that has been comparatively more diligent in protecting and reconstructing the ethno-religious heritage of the TCs, has often communicated preservation in order to emphasise the destruction of GC heritage in the north. Respectively, TCs emphasise the multicultural character of the island and downplay its Greek heritage. This means that while ancient Greek sites and a few historically significant Byzantine churches are preserved, late churches and monasteries have been either neglected or vandalised. The reconstruction of such sites occurs under negative international publicity and pressure. TCs fear that site restoration will facilitate the return of displaced GCs to the north (Constantinou & Hatay, 2010).

When information demonstrate that the "other" respects in-group heritage and opposes established perceptions, the other community is often accused of demonstrating symbolic tolerance for the culture of the other (Constantinou, Demetriou, & Hatay, 2012). Instances where the in-group participates in a reconstruction project in cooperation with the "other", while one would expect them to oppose consolidated perceptions, sometimes work in a reverse manner, confirming the image of a civilised and tolerant "self" vis-à-vis a rarely enlightened "other" (Constantinou & Hatay, 2010). In these instances, cooperation cases function as the exception that proves the rule.

Visiting Heritage Sites on the Other Side

The 2003 opening of the Green Line crossings allowed displaced persons from both sides to visit their former villages and properties. Religious heritage sites were important destinations of private and spiritual visits. These visits were emotionally and politically loaded (Constantinou, Demetriou & Hatay, 2012). Mass media depictions of neglected religious heritage sites on the other side of the divide, stressed in-group self-victimisation while contradicting these images with the care taken by their own community for the preservation of the cultural heritage sites of the "others". What is more, social context dignifies cultural heritage. In the absence of the people for whom religious heritage sites were important, a damaged church, mosque or cemetery could fade into the background, occupying a minimal space in the landscape of everyday life. With the opening of the Green Line crossings, these sites became noticed again, as visitors lit candles in churches or rummaged through broken tombstones looking for the names of relatives. For the TCs, loss of heritage was a bitter experience on the one hand showing that life in the south as it was in the past does not exist anymore and on the other leading to the realisation that in some cases recovery of heritage is practically impossible (Constantinou & Hatay, 2010).

Lastly, tangible heritage also privileges manifestations of cultural wealth of dominant groups in the expense of "ephemeral" and "mutable" cultures. In this way, the two dominant Cypriot communities benefit from this discourse as it favours the construction and enhancement of their ethno-cultural identities and sustains bicommunalism. Such understanding presents cultural hybridity in Cyprus as anomalous and marginalises heritage of smaller, subaltern communities, like the linguistic heritage of the Maronites or the Cyprus Roma travelling traditions (Constantinou & Hatay, 2010).

Conclusions

Research on cultural heritage use vis-à-vis conflict transformation, shows that culture is a field of contact and cooperation. At the same time, there are also indications that there is an antagonistic use of heritage and a dividing perception of culture. The present brief argues that bicommunal contact and activity on a cultural heritage basis in Cyprus can be either supportive, or dissuasive to conflict transformation, according to the framework and present conditions. On the one hand, bicommunal activities aiming to preserve and restore cultural heritage create contact and cooperation that challenges established images. On the other, cases of neglected heritage sites by the "other", serve conflictual narratives of a civilised "self" and an uncivilised "other". Given that heritage is (connected to) identity, heritage use-based cooperation or antagonism reflects either the different identities (Greek and Turkish) narrative or the Cypriotness narrative. Furthermore, non-ethnic or cross-ethnic

heritage is downplayed and hybridity is marginalised since they are not exploitable by ethnocentric narratives. As a result, strictly communal or bicommunal use does not reinforce cultural tolerance and long-term, conflict transformation-oriented solutions.

Cultural Heritage use in Cyprus suggests that:

(a) Cultural heritage issues are used to back ethnocentric positions and confirm established images of the "other".

(b) Both sides exploit own, neglected, damaged or lost heritage of the conflict to support arguments of in-group superiority.

(c) The two communities do not understand ethnic, religious, and cultural differences as inseparable and rigid elements for the perpetuation of conflict.

Proposed paths for utilising the dynamic potentials of heritage as a factor of conflict transformation are to:

(i) Sustain, prolong, and create new bicommunal heritage activities. Cooperation of experts offers the Cypriot communities a chance to appreciate their diverse heritage and to gain direct experience of how bicommunal cooperation can build interpersonal trust.

(ii) Support projects that actively involve local communities in the process. Through restoration and reconstruction projects, communities have the opportunity to re-imagine physical spaces around them, to pursue contact with the "other", and to claim and exercise local ownership of the (re)use of heritage and the conflict transformation processes.

(iii) Bring to the fore the notion that individuals and societies are not passive recipients of heritage but rather active producers and consumers of it. Stress the importance of intangible heritage, practices, traditions and the ways people give meaning to them. Thus, acknowledge intangible heritage in parallel to tangible in order to soothe ethnic competition fuelled by heritage sites and heritage practices use.

(iv) Let heritage and identities of smaller communities and marginalised groups come to prominence. Support multiculturalism and cultural hybridity based on the rich history and diverse past of Cyprus.

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