Safeguarding Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage

The Role of the Heritage Professional and Implications for Nation-Building

Honors Capstone by

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, Afghanistan's cultural heritage sites have faced the dangers of conflict, looting, neglect, and erosion amidst a volatile political climate. Examples that stand out include the looting (1993-96) of the National Museum and the destruction (2001) of the Bamiyan Buddhas, and there are numerous others that are less well known. With the support of the Afghan government, since the early 2000s heritage professionals (archaeologists, anthropologists, embassy workers, and UNESCO workers) have worked to safeguard the existing cultural heritage sites, to excavate new sites, and to increase the awareness of the country’s cultural history among its people. This study seeks to understand the role of the heritage professional, how the mission of their organizations dictates their work, and the extent and impact of their collaborations. Data were collected through key informant interviews with three heritage professionals working in Afghanistan today. Findings demonstrate that inter-organizational collaboration is a positive force in determining whether or not a site will be preserved. Further, professionals view success for one organization as a success for the cause overall. Heritage professionals appreciate that their choices will have an impact on the cultural identity of Afghanistan’s people in future generations, and that this will be crucial to nation-building in a country that has faced a great deal of trauma.
INTRODUCTION

“Our argument is always that if you don’t believe that this country will be in peace in twenty years or thirty years, you shouldn’t be working here. And if you believe the country will be in peace in twenty or thirty years, you should spend money in culture.”

Through the past several decades of conflict in Afghanistan, the country’s cultural heritage has suffered immense destruction and loss. From the neglect of unstable monuments to the looting of the country’s numerous archaeological sites, the destruction has been vast, traumatizing, and unending. Often during a conflict, culture is not the priority of those working to aid the situation. Countries that have suffered innumerable losses to human life face the additional losses to their culture and identity, making the processes of rebuilding and nation building even more challenging.

Following decades of conflict, Afghanistan is currently in a state of political flux, as the country looks to elect a new leader following Hamid Karzai. In addition to the changing political climate, the country continues to face threats to its cultural heritage. Though there are a number of organizations and people working on the issue in the country today, and they have made an immense amount of progress in preserving the cultural heritage, the situation is still evolving and some threats continue. In a country that will hopefully no longer have to suffer from conflict in the coming decades, it will be important for the cultural heritage to exist for a variety of political, social, and economic reasons.

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1 UNESCO Program Specialist, personal communication, February 21, 2014.
2 As of the completion of this paper the results of the Afghan election have yet to be decided. The elections took place on April 5, 2014.
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION TO HERITAGE

In order to frame the context for understanding the situation in Afghanistan, we must first discuss the meaning of “heritage,” specifically “cultural heritage,” and how this concept has influenced international law and government policies. It will also enable us to understand what is so important about its preservation and protection. In his book, *Understanding the Politics of Heritage* (2010), Rodney Harrison describes heritage as something “that can be passed down from one generation to the next” and retains “historic or cultural value” (p. 9). The entire concept of heritage encompasses not only the tangible, including movable cultural heritage (buildings, sites) and immovable (objects), but the intangible as well, such as practices, languages, and traditions. Harrison explains that heritage, whether tangible or intangible, becomes inscribed in a society’s collective memory, in how the heritage “commemorate[s] and represent[s] their own history” (2010, p. 11). The author also distinguishes cultural heritage as something “manufactured by humans” as opposed to an object of natural heritage, such as the Great Barrier Reef (Harrison, 2010, p. 11).

In their article entitled, “‘Cultural Heritage’ or ‘Cultural Property’?” (1992) Prout & O’Keefe state:

> Heritage creates a perception of something handed down, something to be cared for and cherished. These cultural manifestations have come down to us from the past; they are our legacy from our ancestors. There is today a broad acceptance of a duty to pass them on to our successors, augmented by the creations of the present (p. 311).

LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are many legal protocols to take into account when evaluating how to respond to issues involving cultural heritage. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural
Organization (UNESCO) is the agency of the United Nations that, among other things, creates international agreements that govern cultural heritage issues.

The central legal framework that has governed the way international law must respond to cultural heritage damage in times of war is the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict. According to Patty Gerstenblith (2009), the convention was drafted in response to the massive destruction and looting that took place during World War II (p. 21). The Convention established the International Committee of the Blue Shield (ICBS), the organization that in effect functions as the Red Cross for cultural heritage during wars. Though there had been more minor conventions and agreements in the past that related to international law and governance during war, this Convention brought the idea of heritage protection during conflict into the consciousness of many governments. Since the signing of the 1954 Convention, UNESCO has created several other conventions with similar themes.

Ana Filipa Vrdoljak (2009) discusses the legal rhetoric of cultural heritage protection during conflict, and highlights how shifting attitudes about heritage have contributed to its inclusion in human rights law as well. She notes that as human rights and international law became more integrated in the twentieth century, the idea of cultural heritage shifted from being perceived as valuable to “the advancement of the arts and sciences and knowledge” to “its

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3 See Nicholas (1994). The author details the systematic looting of the world’s great cultural treasures and works of art along with bombing campaigns that destroyed numerous monuments.
4 While not specifically concerned with heritage protection, the Hague Conventions and Declarations of 1899 and 1907 dealt with international law and customs during war, and conceptually formed the basis for future consideration of enemy property during conflict.
importance to the enjoyment of human rights and promotion of cultural diversity (Vrdoljak, 2009, p. 2).

CULTURAL HERITAGE AND NATION-BUILDING

In his book, *Imagined Communities* (2006), Benedict Anderson traces the progression of the understanding of the “nation” and how, even though the concept of the nation as a community and a whole remains rather abstract, given the likelihood that we will never meet the vast majority of the people who make up this community, this devotion and identification with the nation is deeply rooted and real. Without minimizing the impact of nationalism, he argues this concept is “imagined” and that only through representations in our culture that exist to represent this sense of nationhood are we able to define ourselves as belonging to a particular community.

This idea informs our understanding of the formation of nationhood, and how a sense of belonging can tie a group of anonymous individuals together. In Afghanistan, a country that has long had a fractious ethnic identity, the idea of a “nation” is not as familiar. The country will need elements that have the potential to bridge these divides that allow for a national identity to develop and strengthen.

“WHO OWNS CULTURE?”

Scholars have long debated the question, or a variation of the question, “who owns culture?” This question draws responses from scholars that further the debate and expand on the inherent questions that arise about how this affects lending, trade, and the responsibility (especially during conflict) of cultural objects.

CULTURAL INTERNATIONALISM VS. CULTURAL NATIONALISM
John H. Merryman (1986) grounds his position in the texts of the 1954 and 1970 UNESCO conventions and focuses on the legal implications of the transfer of cultural property from country to country. He defines the debate in terms of “cultural nationalists” and “cultural internationalists.” Cultural internationalism is a cosmopolitan viewpoint characterized by a belief in a common cultural heritage, or the “cultural heritage of all mankind,” a phrase included in the 1954 UNESCO Convention (Merryman, 1986, p. 845). In contrast, cultural nationalists have a more “retentive” viewpoint, and believe culture belongs to and should be kept in the source nation (Merryman, 1986, p. 846). This debate focuses on the issue of export controls and how countries choose to and are able to protect their cultural property (Merryman, 1986, p. 832). Though Merryman emphasizes that at the time of publishing the nationalist viewpoint was more dominant, he calls for a greater understanding of the idea that the orientations are not mutually exclusive, and that separately they are both “legitimate” (Merryman, 1986, p. 853.)

Derek Gillman (2010) furthers Merryman’s argument about the need to view culture from an international standpoint, though he also discusses those who are in disagreement. Gillman mentions that Jeannette Greenfield for example has a “particularist” viewpoint, closely related to cultural nationalism (2010, p. 46). She emphasizes the need for “justice” in “cases where cultural things have been taken on by force, unequal treaty, theft, or deceit” (Gillman, 2010, p. 46).

Further, in the case of Afghanistan in particular, Gillman asks, “Does Afghani heritage comprise the heritage of all those who have ever lived there, or the heritage of those who live there now, or the heritage of some of those who live there now?” (2010, p. 12). These questions tie the philosophical idea of heritage to the practice of how to prioritize sites in a continually challenging field.
Harrison observes, “In contemporary society the power to control heritage is the power to remake the past in a way that facilitates certain actions or viewpoints in the present” (2010, p. 154). Sometimes international organizations (such as UNESCO or ICOMOS) have this privilege, and other times state governments are motivated by political reasons to systematically include and exclude heritage from a country’s “cultural canon” (Harrison, 2010, p. 14). In every country in varying capacities there are professionals specifically tasked with protecting and/or preserving certain “objects, places, and practices” that sometimes transcend national boundaries, and Harrison asks how the selection process lends to the “relationship between ownership of heritage and power” (2010, p. 169). These competing forces and viewpoints may come into conflict but their ultimate decisions have the power to shape the cultural landscape of the country.

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN CONFLICT

GENERAL THREATS

As mentioned above, following World War II, there was a growing need to understand the risks and challenges cultural heritage faces during conflict. Fabio Maniscalco (2006) explains that during conflict, cultural heritage can be targeted for numerous reasons including for strategic military reasons, political reasons, and ethnic reasons, among others (p. 335-336). Indirect risks include mechanical risks (mobility/transport, insufficient fortification, weakened residual stability), physical risks (water infiltration from bombardments, light, pollution, fire), biochemical risks, and man-made risks (neglect, improper use of monuments for military purposes) (Maniscalco, 2006, p. 336-339). There are also ways in which the cultural heritage is directly affected from blasts, vandalism, and looting (Maniscalco, 2006, p. 340-342).

IMPACT ON COLLECTIVE MEMORY
On the issue of direct intentional damage to cultural heritage, Harrison mentions, “The process of destroying or removing an object, place or practice is not only a destructive process but a process by which an attempt is made to clear the way for the creation of a new collective memory” (2010, p. 165). In his book on architecture in conflict, Bevan (2006) similarly discusses iconoclasm and the impact of destruction on memory. He argues that throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, architecture has become the target of those in conflict looking to eliminate the presence of a specific group or groups of people, and that destroying architecture has become a “weapon of war” (Bevan, 2008, p. 210).

BACKGROUND TO AFGHANISTAN’S CULTURE

Nancy H. Dupree (2002) describes the culture of Afghanistan as a “complex ethnic mosaic” where for millennia diverse groups have settled and resettled, and have created a modern society filled with regional differences, similarities, and contradictions (p. 977). (fig. 1.)

TRIBAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Afghanistan’s society has a multifaceted structure as many groups belong to different branches of Islam and have multilayered cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Thomas Barfield (2010) notes that the tribal and cultural demarcations are often “locally idiosyncratic,” which makes it challenging to categorize these disparate groups (p. 18).

The region has long been host to various Buddhist and Islamic empires, and historical figures such as Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan passed through the country at different points (Van Krieken-Pieters, 2006, pp. 201-203). In addition, the country was an important location along the Silk Road, and serves as the route by which Buddhism spread from India to China (Van Krieken-Pieters, 2006, pp. 201-203).
These rich and diverse influences are reflected in the existing cultural landscape of the country today. Though the country today is predominately Muslim, there are still a variety of ancient Buddhist shrines and sites that have survived. There are hundreds of sites that exist today throughout the country, but some of the most recognizable include the Bamiyan Valley (fig. 3-4), the Minaret of Jam (fig. 5), the Minarets of Ghazni (fig. 6), the Citadel of Heart (fig. 7), and the recently discovered (2009) site of Mes Aynak (fig. 8-9). It is important to remember that while sites may be recognized as individual monuments, their surroundings are also part of the cultural heritage, and context is key to their study and evaluation.

**Cultural Heritage Before the Taliban**

Abdul W. Najimi (2011) observes that cultural heritage tourism began to increase in the country with the more widespread publication of guides to visiting the country’s tourist sites (mostly published by N.H. Dupree). By this time, there had been many ongoing excavations by mainly French archaeologists. Many of these projects had just begun to take place, along with the creation of the Ministry of Information and Culture, in the 1960’s and early 1970’s, just before the Soviet occupation. Najimi remarks that during and before this time, beginning in the 1950’s, “in an effort at ‘modernisation,’ many historic constructions were demolished for widening roads… The works entailed the removal of many historic structures in the Old City before there had been any survey or documentation of them!” (2011, p. 345). At this time, sites or buildings were preserved based on their “historical significance according to decision-makers” or if they “were considered suitable for adaptive use” (Najimi, 2011, p. 347).

During the short period between the ending of the Soviet occupation and the rise of the Taliban, several “community-driven conservation and repair projects were initiated by local
leaders or NGOs” in areas less affected by war, but nevertheless, “funds were rarely available; cultural projects were considered a ‘luxury’” (Najimi, 2011, p. 349).

**RECENT POLITICAL HISTORY**

Following the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-1989), in which nearly one million civilians died and nearly six million fled to neighboring Iran and Pakistan, there was a period of political uncertainty and instability in the country, and the country fell into a period of civil war (Barfield, 2010). From 1989-1996 various political leaders fought for power and tried to maintain order and control of the country. The Taliban formed in Kandahar in 1994 was originally thought to be a force for good because the members promised more security and stability in a region where the government forces had little power (Barfield, 2010, pp. 255-57). However, it developed into a vicious militia, demanding the resignation of the current government and later the implementation of Sharia law (Barfield, 2010, pp. 257-258). The Taliban began to garner support and take control in the southern and central regions of the country, and their influence spread north to Kabul, where they would take over the government in September 1996. The Taliban would remain in power until December 2001 when the government fell to the U.S. and British forces who placed Hamid Karzai in power, and the Taliban fled to northern Pakistan (Barfield, 2010, p. 271).

**AFGHANS AND THEIR CULTURAL IDENTITY**

In her discussion of fostering a national identity, Dupree also mentions the lack of knowledge many Afghans have about their own heritage and history, in part because of a lack of access to the information. The National Museum of Kabul was incorporated by the 1950’s, and was by the 1970’s known as “one of the world’s most opulent depositories of ancient art” (Dupree, 2002, p. 983). However, few Afghans visited the museum, which Dupree regards as a
missed opportunity to “encourage Afghans to take pride in their heritage” before the onslaught of continuous violence for decades:

Heritage subjects were not included in any meaningful way in the school curriculum. School children were rarely taught about the richness of their past; field trips to museums or historical sites were not part of school activities. Few mature adults ever visited the museum. The articles on history and archaeology that appeared in government publications were written by scholars for scholars and reached few among the general public (2002, p. 983).

Throughout the political turmoil in the country, sustaining cultural values suffered, as those who continued to live in the country faced discrimination and violence and others fled. Dupree remarks, “Three generations of refugee children grew to maturity in exile with little knowledge of the wonders that exist in their homeland” (2002, p. 984).

**LOOTING OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS**

Through this period a great deal of looting of sites and museums took place for several reasons: “a newfound lust of money, the absence of responsible governments, consequent breakdowns in law and order, and the staggering effects of three years of drought and the decline of the economy in general” (Dupree, 2002, p. 985). Dupree indicates that the list of losses is “endless” and reminds us, “artifacts must be studied in situ if the dynamics of the culture from which they spring are to be understood. This is no longer possible at many sites in Afghanistan” (2002, p. 985).

Dupree describes that when the National Museum was looted between 1993-1996, “an estimated 70% of the collections disappeared,” but that once the Taliban took over, the looting ceased (2002, p. 986) (fig. 2). Museums in other cities such as Ghazni and Herat were looted as well of nearly their entire collections.

**BUDDHAS OF BAMIYAN**
The Buddhas of Bamiyan were carved into niches in the cliffs of the Hindu Kush at a time when the region was under control by the Buddhist Empire. The larger Buddha (55 m/180 ft) was likely completed in 615 CE, while its smaller counterpart (38 m/124 ft) was likely completed in 550 CE (Morgan, 2012, p. 4). Carved into the cliffs surrounding the Buddhas are large networks of caves where the monks once resided, but have since been inhabited by members of the Hazara community, the largest ethnic group in the Bamiyan Valley.

Upon coming to power, the Taliban expressed no desire to destroy the Buddhas because “there was no worship of them” and they were once known as a popular tourist site, which would be beneficial to Afghan society (Morgan, 2012, p. 3). Even by September 2000, Mullah Mohammed Omar, the leader of the Taliban, expressed his continued opposition to the Buddhas’ destruction as they had the potential to be a “major source of income” for Afghanistan (Morgan, 2012, p. 3). However, on February 26, 2001 the Taliban issued a statement saying, “all statues and non-Islamic shrines located in different parts of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan must be destroyed” (Morgan, 2012, p. 15). Soon after, historical artifacts, paintings, and other objects in the Kabul museum, in libraries, and in cultural ministries were being destroyed. After several weeks the Taliban succeeded in destroying the monuments, and after allowing one journalist from Al Jazeera to film one of the more massive explosions, the international community saw the evidence of the Taliban’s power and impact. By March 26 the Buddhas had been completely destroyed, despite widespread pleas, and the Taliban’s actions would prompt a number of questions regarding their right to carry out such an iconoclastic act in their own country, the

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6 See Mousavi (1997) Today the Hazara are the dominant ethnic group in the Bamiyan Valley. The Hazara practice Shia Islam, unlike the Taliban, who are predominately Pashtun and are Sunni Muslims. These divisions have caused great strife in the country, and the Hazara, as well as many of the other ethnic groups, have long been subject to discrimination and prejudice by the Pashtun majority.

7 See Morgan (2012) for a more in-depth discussion of the factors that led to the destruction of the Buddhas, including the UN sanctions against Afghanistan, the role of Al-Qaeda, and the impression that the international community “was more interested in stone sculptures than the thousands of Afghan children who were facing starvation in the winter of 2000/2001” (Morgan, 2012, p. 3).
potential repercussions, and what role outside actors could play in preservation (Morgan, 2012, p. 17). Dupree discusses the reaction of many Afghans to the destruction:

Some described their feeling after the destruction as equal to what they might feel on losing a beloved grandfather. Over the past many years Afghans had endured with fortitude the traumas of war, drought, displacement, a collapsed economy, inept governments, and a disrupted society. Now they felt the meaning of their sacrifices had been taken from them. They felt betrayed (2002, p. 986).

RECENT CULTURAL HERITAGE DEVELOPMENTS

The main legal document governing cultural heritage in Afghanistan is Law on the Protection of Historical and Cultural Properties. Following the creation of the new constitution in January of 2004, the law was drafted in May and still serves as the primary legal document governing cultural heritage in the country. The law was drafted with provisions for the protection of movable and immovable objects, the creation of museums, and the continuing archaeological excavations (2004). In addition it established the Archaeological Committee with members from different areas of expertise including archaeologists, a historian, a representative from the National Museum, among others, all led by the Director of the Institute of Archaeology (2004). The Committee is tasked with the “study and research of the historical and cultural properties” and the Ministry of Information and Culture approves the authenticity and value of the Committee’s findings (2004).

CHALLENGES

Throughout this time, there have been many reasons why preservation has been challenging for those who want to preserve the country’s heritage. Some key concerns have been financial limitations, lack of community engagement, and safety. Najimi mentions that UNESCO over the years has continued to face budget restrictions, especially from the ongoing conflicts
with the USA and the UK who have at times withdrawn their membership for political reasons (2011, p. 346).

Najimi asserts:

Today, the government’s policy for conservation is weak and the law on protection of archaeological artifacts does not clearly safeguard monuments, especially those located away from the eyes of the authorities and experts. Lack of co-ordination among executives, shortfall of funds and expertise also adds to the challenges and make conservation in this country difficult. Extraction of geological resources and mining activities are going to be another threat to the archaeological sites (2011, p. 343).

Brendan Caesar & Ana Rosa Rodriguez García (2006) define the primary challenges to preserving cultural heritage today. Overall, they first mention that “geography—high mountain ranges, isolated valleys and arid zones” and a “lack of infrastructure” create an array of challenges through the country, which make neglect and “relative isolation” the reality (Caesar & Rodriguez García, 2006, p. 16). Within this framework, they define three subject areas of challenges: ongoing political instability, development projects that do not regard heritage sites, and social issues related to Afghans and cultural heritage (Caesar & Rodriguez García, 2006, pp. 15-19). Sites in provinces that are particularly unstable face “increasing looting, vandalism, neglect, and occasional military action” but also they remain inaccessible to professionals working elsewhere in the country (Caesar & Rodriguez García, 2006, p. 16).

On the social issue of a younger generation without ties to an Afghan national identity, Caesar & Rodriguez García comment:

For these people, refugees and the ongoing Afghan migration, the connection between identity and history was fragmented or bound to notions of political, ethnic, and tribal affiliation in the more immediate context of war, rather than in a sense of national unity derived from a universally-owned heritage and history (2006, p. 17).

Najimi discusses the need for continuing to improve capacity-building measures in the country to better educate students and even community members in conservation techniques and
skills to engage them with cultural heritage in practice. He points to Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) initiatives that have increased student conservation training at Kabul University. Several partnerships exist and have existed that connect archaeologists and conservation NGOs with communities to restore sites and buildings and to “raise awareness of cultural heritage among the communities who also used the restored buildings as education centres” (Najimi, 352).

**ORGANIZATIONS**

Najimi lists UNESCO, AKTC, and DAFA as organizations that have taken on specific projects to register and create inventories of various sites (2011, p. 344-345). The Society for the Preservation of Afghanistan’s Cultural Heritage (SPACH) was founded in response to the looting of the National Museum, and continues to work on other projects. Other non-governmental organizations and independent consultants have started to work in the country as well, with expertise in anthropology, archaeology, history, and other specialties.

**METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS**

The goal of the study is to understand heritage professionals’ approaches to cultural heritage preservation in Afghanistan. To do so, data were collected from three semi-structured open-ended interviews with key informants (KI) currently working in the country, and who have had significant experience in the field. I sent emails to heritage professionals in different countries from a variety of professional backgrounds. Several emails went unanswered and other respondents recommended other prospective participants. However, I was limited to those who had access to a phone and Internet, who spoke English, and who would be available during the timeframe of the study.
I was able to meet with three key informants, two via Skype and one in person in Washington, DC. Each interview lasted roughly one hour. With each key informant’s permission, I recorded the conversation to later be transcribed and coded for analysis.

The participants will be referred to based on their occupational affiliations as follows: a UNESCO Programs Specialist, a State Department Specialist, and the CEO of a non-governmental organization (NGO).

It should be noted that the key informants know each other personally and have, to a varying extent, worked with the others on different projects.

DATA ANALYSIS

The three key informant interviews were coded in such a way that yielded three primary categories for analysis, and within each theme there are subthemes that further explain the key informants’ perspectives.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

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<tr>
<th>Approaches to Heritage Preservation</th>
<th>Obstacles in Heritage Work</th>
<th>Attitudes Toward the Value of Cultural Heritage</th>
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<td>▪ Providing for Future Generations</td>
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**APPRAOCHES TO HERITAGE PRESERVATION**

The first section of the data analysis will address the practical considerations that inform heritage professional practices. There are many personal, organizational, and collaborative
considerations that must be made that decide how funding will be prioritized to protect certain sites over others.

**Personal Background of Key Informants**

The key informants from UNESCO and the State Department both have a general knowledge of Central Asian cultures from personal experience and/or academic experience. On the other hand, the NGO key informant’s understanding of the culture was “completely learned” through her experiences as a volunteer for her organizations.

The key informants from UNESCO and the State Department have backgrounds in anthropology and archaeology, and the NGO KI has a background in business and education. On her interest in preserving the culture of another country, the UNESCO KI responded:

> Culture for me is much more universal. It’s not because I work for UNESCO but it’s from my educational background, which is anthropology. And you become a universal person—you forget national identity, your cultural identity. You can’t go much further than that because you understand that in human kind we’re much more alike than different.

The key informants had varying opinions and experiences using the language in the country. The UNESCO KI knew the language (Dari), which was part of the reason she was selected to work in the office there, and the State Department KI noted that English is the “lingua franca.” In addition, because all of the key informants are women, it is more culturally acceptable to speak through a male interpreter.

**Organizational Role**

Each organization has different motivations for engaging in heritage work in Afghanistan and this is reflected in the projects they select and develop. Often the relationships among those working in the field are strong and those who engage in the work collaborate and coordinate their projects.
Organizational Projects

UNESCO is primarily concerned with its two World Heritage Sites, the Minaret and Archaeological Remains of Jam and the Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley, both of which are on the organization’s World Heritage in Danger list as well. The NGO was created by President Karzai and Prince Charles to rehabilitate a neighborhood of Kabul, and as well to rebuild the craft industry. The U.S. State Department worked on several projects to assess the damage to certain sites, to work to rebuild them, and to work with the National Museum.

Organizational Purpose

UNESCO as a worldwide organization is tasked with a variety of activities related to culture, science and education. In Afghanistan specifically, UNESCO’s primary purpose is to make sure the World Heritage Conventions are being adhered to, with specific reference to the 1970, 1972, 2003, and 2005 conventions. In addition the organization engages in projects related to education and heritage rehabilitation overall.

In comparison, the U.S. State Department has only had two cultural heritage managers at its embassies, and the creation of this type of position is rare. Following the damage to the National Museum of Iraq and the building of a military base on the site of ancient Babylon, the U.S. government decided it needed to ensure these types of activities did not occur in Afghanistan.11 The State Department decided to engage in more “creative public diplomacy” to show more “sensitivity” to a country like Afghanistan that is so “deeply rooted in its history,” and to put funding into “getting to what really matters for Afghans.” The KI commented on the situation in the country upon her arrival: “It was a time that was a good alignment of things with

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11 For more information about the U.S. military efforts to protect cultural heritage in conflict, including education and training of personnel, refer to the work of Laurie Rush at Fort Drum and to the Cultural Property Training Resource website.
great support in the Embassy from the Ambassador down—great money to do creative, meaningful projects with long-term views on them.”

The NGO KI described that the idea for the creation of the organization was suggested by President Karzai, who said, “Afghanistan has this amazing culture and history and we’re losing it. Wouldn’t it be great if we had an institution to train the next generation of people to keep this all going?” The organization then selected “one neighborhood that was probably the most vulnerable,” that was also historically the “craft neighborhood,” to clear of trash and to rebuild. They then created a vocational institute to train new artisans in old crafts and to have an outlet for them to “sell, market, produce, and export traditional crafts around the world.”

How Organizations Prioritize Sites

The UNESCO KI describes that how the organization prioritizes which sites will receive attention is very much determined by how donors choose to spend their money and how the organization can fundraise for different projects:

We don’t have a pot of money that we decide to allocate. We have a specific project that we think is really essential and we have to do it now and they we develop a project proposal and go to the donors and convince them to give money for that. The decision is made when we decide which projects are essential. It’s not like we a certain amount and we can take that money and we allocate to projects. We have a bunch of projects and we take the projects out and we think this is urgent and then we take that to the donors. And we do this all the time, non-stop. As I said, for the museum and cultural center in Bamiyan, we’ve been trying to fundraise for that since 2006. And it just happened a year ago.

She also notes that some education programs and border control training programs have had to be circumscribed due to lack of funding, which therefore limits their efficacy.

The State Department KI in contrast noted not how funding dictates the projects but rather how the mission of public diplomacy and urgency determined their actions. After “most urgent” the focus was on “centers” in the country, from locations with a large population, to
locations “where ethnicities are mixing” and in addition where the “strong U.S. military presence” was clear.

It was really in ranking order of centers of population that also had monuments that were really on the visual and mental landscape of the population. And if we could engage there with all the proper support around us to be effective. And then just as much as I could fit in.

The issue of prioritization for the NGO was less evident, as their mission had been dictated from the start in that their organization does not select sites on a case-by-case basis but rather works on solely the projects it was founded to preserve.

COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES

Working With Afghan Government and Museum

Each KI described the integrative and collaborative approach to heritage work that occurs in Afghanistan today, especially in reference to work with the Afghan government. It became clear in the interviews that the Afghan government wanted to engage these outsider professionals who wanted to make a meaningful impact in the heritage sector as much as possible. Though their priorities at the outset may differ, and given each organization’s specific opportunities and restrictions, not all projects are able to be fulfilled, but the overall outcome is based on a close collaborative relationship at the outset.

It was very much collaborative with the Afghan government. First and foremost, what did they want to see done? Then, okay, let’s say they gave us a list of ten things. Then we could say, ‘Well we can’t really work in those four provinces so let’s put those on the backburner. Now we’re left with six, and we know that the Aga Khan Trust for Culture really has an excellent team in that place. So why don’t we all meet there and look at some sites together. We can talk about what’s possible. How can we use our efforts? Is that going to work?’ ‘Well, no.’ ‘Okay so then let’s go over here.’ So it was collaborative in that sense.

Responding to Requests from Afghans in Communities
The NGO KI spoke most extensively about working within and developing close relationships with those in one particular community. She noted how this allowed them to better respond to the needs of those in that community, and how they created a primary school and health clinic because that was central to rebuilding the neighborhood: “When you work with 1,000 people day in and day out and nobody’s going to school or to doctors and they say please help us with doctors you end up helping.” She described how their projects and their purpose were dictated by their conversations and connections with the Afghans in their community, and how this allowed them to shape specific goals under the umbrella of “rebuilding the craft industry.”

Our agenda was pretty simple: get this thing rebuilt, both the craft industry and the old buildings. We didn’t have other indicators. If someone says, “You’ve been focusing on figurative wood carving and that’s not important or that’s going to get us in trouble or whatever… instead we should be focused on carpentry or something.” Then we just look and see if they’re right and then we change it. Everything that we did was just dictated by the Afghans who know the stuff and what they think was right.

Aside from developing relationships with those in communities, each KI spoke about extensive conversations they have had with Afghans within the context of what should be done for the country’s cultural heritage. Though one KI noted that some feel it is “rude” to speak about culture with people when their country is at war, the key informants overall found that people were receptive to their work and to their organizational interests. On the response by the people of Bamiyan, the UNESCO KI stated:

The difference with Bamiyan is that the people are sensitized because their cultural heritage was endangered and the two Buddha figures were such iconic figures of the country. And after ten years of UNESCO working and filling the niches of the Buddhas, it’s important for them. And the Buddhas were not the only heritage of Bamiyan; there are eight sites and the Buddhas are two of them. There are citadels outside the city. And it’s really important for them and they ask for it. They ask for restoration of those sites, they’re worried that about what will happen if it gets worse. In Herat it’s the same and
that’s a good thing. The local population doesn’t think we spend money on things that are not important.

Engaging Expertise from Other Organizations

The number of organizations and individuals engaging in heritage work in Afghanistan is not large, and therefore the community of these professionals, mostly in Kabul is small. Each organization has its own area of expertise and region in which it works, but collectively the organizations coordinate and ensure the most effective candidates are responsible for working on different projects. Among some of the organizations there is competition for funding from international donors, but at the same time because the organizations are so familiar with the people and work that others can perform, they are not directly competing for the same project. Although there were mentions of specific projects on which the organizations would collaborate, the idea of coordination and sharing expertise was more visible.

The KIs mentioned a Heritage Advisory Board and an Old Cities Commission on which different members sit and make decisions about how certain projects should be executed and that “coordination in what we do and in Afghanistan is one of our strongest qualities.”

Obstacles in Heritage Work

In each interview with the KIs I encountered varying degrees of uncertainty about the future of the country’s cultural heritage in relation to specific ongoing threats. Their opinions are certainly based in the work that they do and in the threats their projects confront, but each noted different concerns moving forward.

Paying Attention to Culture

In a country that has faced numerous challenges throughout the last several decades of conflict, it has been challenging to encourage people to pay attention to culture. “Paying
attention” in this section does not imply funding but rather getting people who would not ordinarily be interested in culture or cultural heritage to see the importance of preservation and protection. Certainly there are those in the country who may have an attachment to certain sites or monuments, or who are interested in culture in general, but some people may not personally be interested or may not see the real need for preservation in the country.

The State Department KI described the current situation specifically in relation to the antiquities trade:

We tried to do some training of border control to get the border guards more visually attuned to look for not just guns and narcotics and people but antiquities also. But it’s very difficult to convince people, and I can understand this, that when it’s weapons and narcotics and women and children that are being trafficked, that seems much more urgent than a Buddha head or a Buddha hand. And I respect that. But all of it is part of the same pipeline, that that money comes back and finances the same problems. And the thing about drugs and guns and people is that all of those are renewable. All of that can be renewed. But a Buddha head, once it’s out of the ground and sold to Peshawar and then carted off to Dubai or Tokyo or Antwerp, it’s never coming back. It can never be replaced once its context is lost. And I don’t mean to suggest that I value a Buddha head over an Afghan woman and her children at all. Its just that it’s not either or but let’s do the whole thing here.

The KI specifies that when these antiquities are lost, the country is not only losing a piece of its heritage that will not be able to be retrieved, but people do not often realize that the money people get from the antiquities trade later turns into funding for the Taliban insurgency.¹²

The UNESCO KI added to this idea of calling for a more integrative approach to developing solutions in the country and pointed out, “The problem is that in a post-conflict country culture is never a priority for the donors” and that culture can be seen as “luxurious” rather than an actual need. Though aid and development are essential as well, “education and

¹² The KI made specific reference to a recent article entitled, “The Illicit Antiquities Trade as a Transnational Criminal Network: Characterizing and Anticipating Trafficking of Cultural Heritage.” In addition we discussed a documentary about antiquities trafficking from Afghanistan and Pakistan called “Blood Antiquities.”
“culture” are more “fundamental projects” with long-term goals that should be incorporated into the overall agenda from the outset, rather than after other goals have been achieved.

Another theme that emerged across the interviews was a lack of ability to take on too many additional projects than what they had already committed to. The key informants all expressed regret that they are not able to take on additional projects, but at this stage, as many of these projects are new and the situation in the country is still very much evolving, it is challenging to be too ambitious at once. The NGO informant remarked, “I’m perpetually being asked to start schools in different provinces. I can’t do that. If I can manage to keep this thing going by driving the craft industry in Kabul for the next ten years, I will be ecstatic.” She added that “focus” is key at this stage and that too many dispersed projects without long-term funding will be unsustainable.

Confronting Ongoing Uncertainty

Though the key informants have been successful in many ways, there are certainly ongoing challenges and threats that remain out of their control and in addition they face problems that for a number of reasons are unable to be resolved.

The NGO KI expressed grave concern about the future of the craft industry in the country, and that given the organization’s relatively recent creation and the somewhat small and focused scale of their projects, there is a continuing chance that people may not engage in crafts in the country. The vocational institute at the moment is still small, and without ambitions of growing at the moment.

[The craft industry] is basically incredibly fragile still. I think people underestimate it. I’ve had somebody say to me before, “Well what do you mean? The craft industry can’t die out in a generation.” It can most certainly die out in a generation. It can die out in five years. If nobody picks it up again then that’s it. It simply dies with the people whose brains it exists in…if it all stopped tomorrow it wouldn’t erase those people who had
been trained but it would stopped being passed down and it would eventually again die out. It’s a really critical moment.

In general the heritage professionals mentioned the overall structural struggles that make their work challenging and that there are a variety of factors that contribute to not only the complexities of the situation but to the complexities in developing solutions as well. The State Department KI remarked:

As you get to know to know a place more and more you realize it’s staggering, and it’s so complicated. To try to unravel it and say, “How can we address this problem of looting?” And yet you’re trying to unravel all this stuff and there’s no mechanism to support you.

The KI here highlights the struggle that not only are there continuing threats to the sites but at present solutions can seen elusive for many reasons. On the topic of looting and illicit trafficking for example, people continue to benefit financially at all different levels in Afghanistan and elsewhere, and without sustainable and successful ways to guard sites from looters or to train customs officials in Afghanistan and in foreign countries to look for antiquities, there are no solutions at present that seem like they will have any major impact.\(^\text{13}\)

**Confronting Ongoing Threats in the Context of the Security Situation**

Aside from the ongoing threats to the heritage specifically, within the larger context of the continuously unstable political situation in the country, the key informants noted varying degrees of certainty and uncertainty that their projects would remain safe.

The UNESCO KI felt secure about her projects and noted, “Bamiyan and Herat will always be safe” and that despite the security situation in the south, “it can’t get worse for us.”

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\(^\text{13}\) The Afghan Heritage Police, a division of the Afghan National Police, are tasked with guarding archaeological sites and monuments from looters but unfortunately many of these sites are enormous in scale and there is not enough continued funding for them to continue this work. Recently UNESCO trained customs officials at border control to look for antiquities, but when they have to prioritize looking for narcotics or weapons, antiquities become less important. In addition, customs officials are often bribed into allowing antiquities to leave the country.
The NGO KI echoed similar sentiments that her neighborhood, in the face of potential fighting, is “in the best position” because of its location inside Kabul. However, she did warn with particular reference to the recent elections and the worsening of the security situation over the past several years they have had to limit the number of foreign staff. She added however, that “that could all get washed away. We have no idea what will be next…anyone who downplays the amount of insecurity at the moment is fooling themselves. By insecurity I don’t necessarily mean danger, but I mean we don’t know. It is not clear what is happening.

**ATTITUDES TOWARD VALUE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Aside from a practical or academic interest in anthropology or archaeology and an obligation to an organization, the key informants expressed tremendous respect and appreciation for the value of cultural heritage for the future of the country and therefore the need to preserve it. Especially in the context of people not taking culture seriously as a need for the country’s future, how these professionals frame this need is crucial to understanding why this cause is important.

*Responding to Afghans Tying Cultural Heritage to the Past*

The key informants related that through their conversations with Afghans about cultural heritage, they learned about how people in the country today identify with their history. Regardless of ethnic identification, as the country is majority Islamic today, people still identify with the history of their city, region, or province and they use this to create ties with the past. The State Department KI noted, “Alexander was here. The Buddhas of Bamiyan were theirs. You could be a good Muslim and still recognize that that belongs to us.” She also told a story of how she came to understand the meaning of the cultural heritage to a man she encountered:

This was actually was a conversation I had with a man who was 120 years old. He said, “This lump of earth over here—that’s my grandfather’s and he said that Alexander built
that. So that belongs to us and we know there’s treasure in there. We don’t want you messing with it.” And I said, “Okay, I won’t mess with your treasure. That’s not why I’m here. And P.S. Alexander never crossed this way.” But that’s irrelevant. And I of course would never correct him. But for me, whether he historically had the facts accurate, did not make a bit of difference. He is identifying as belonging to the land and that it is part of who he is, and he has ownership of the place. That means it’s significant for him.

The NGO KI described her similar understanding of how Afghans have ties to their history. She appreciates the way in which people identify with the crafts that make them Afghan:

I would say that the older generation is more familiar with these things. They lost it but when they come over and they see the woodcarvings and the ceramics they say, “This is the Afghanistan from my childhood.” So that’s real memory and connection but it’s one they haven’t accessed in a while.

The key informants made clear the understanding that they cannot dictate what specifically Afghans will identify with or what they will find important, but that through the understanding that cultural heritage is important, there is a foundation for nation-building.

Value of Nation-Building

In a country that has been at war for such a long time, and involved in wars relating to ethnic disparities, there is a need to nation-build and to create a national identity, and the key informants point to culture as the basis for this to happen:

I think the most important goal of cultural heritage in Afghanistan is a political goal. And it’s a pity that the politicians and the international community do not pay attention to that because this is actually where they can start nation-building and developing a common history. You can’t build a nation with law, and governance and capacity building…I think that cultural heritage can really lead to nation building and peace because this nation is composed of so many ethnic groups speaking different languages, most of these people feel that they have a common history and a common national heritage and that can be a good starting point for nation building. And without nation building you can’t reach peace in this country because war is the reason they don’t have this national identity; they have ethnic identity.

Providing for Future Generations
The idea of creating a national identity inherently carries a long-term outlook and needs to be sustained over generations to be effective. Currently the country is still unstable and the ability to visit and explore these cultural monuments is not as feasible as it will hopefully be in at least another generation. The State Department KI describes the long-term goals:

This generation of kids who are in Afghan school now, say between the ages of 5 and 16, probably not, maybe a few will if they go on to higher education, they might get this and might appreciate that this Minaret in Ghazni is still here. But hopefully it’s for their grandkids. It’s for them to go visit in 100 years to go to Ghazni and see that tower or go to the north and see the oldest mosque in Afghanistan.

Although these goals are long-term, the sense of urgency now is rooted in the reality the cultural heritage is still in danger of ruin. On the topic of potential tourism in particular, the UNESCO KI described, “In thirty years, tourism, for example, and cultural heritage can be the most important source of revenue in this country. But if you don’t save them now, you won’t have anything in thirty years.”

One theme that emerged that has more immediate benefits is the economic motivation for preserving cultural heritage. The NGO KI described that a successful craft industry, “has the potential to be a big contributor to the export economy and to jobs” and now that her organization has stopped crafts from dying and has been able to sell works internationally, there is hope for this to continue in the future.

In addition, it is important that current projects engage people in the country now and spread the idea that culture is important. Certainly there are long-term goals on these projects, but saving them now ties in with providing people with hope for these projects. The NGO KI describes how her organization nurtures the interest in cultural heritage in the hope that activities can be sustained:
Afghanistan is a traumatized place where people have really difficult lives and have lived with insecurities for the last couple of decades. None of us really know what that’s like. And in the face of that, with real poverty and real disease and child infant mortality, actually it feels like the projects that we do are the most successful things that are going on.

LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Though this study has been able to address the viewpoints from the key informants, it has several limitations. In addition to the small sample size, I did not interview professionals from every background represented by cultural heritage professionals. I did not conduct interviews with all of the heritage professionals working in the country today, nor did I interview professionals from every background. Another limitation is that I was only able to speak to participants who had access to a phone and/or Internet, and who spoke English.

Further research could focus on interviewing other professionals, particularly those working in the Afghan government or in Afghan institutions (the National Museum of Afghanistan, the Institute of Archaeology) to better inform conclusions that incorporate the national background of those in the country.

However, we must also acknowledge that it is likely that there are concerns or tensions that did not appear as challenging in the interviews but that are underlying or unstated in practices. It is likely that the key informants were cautious about revealing some aspects of their work for a number of reasons, but this would be expected.

Further research may also expand the viewpoints of those involved in cultural heritage preservation in Afghanistan. Beyond studying heritage professionals it would be interesting to interview those who protect the heritage through informal means (e.g.: hiding works particularly during conflict, guarding a site from looting, informing authorities of illegal actions, those taking part in classes to become artisans to revive crafts or music). In addition, it would be valuable to
understand Afghan attitudes toward culture and cultural heritage in communities and to what they feel particular ties. National sites? Sites with ties to ethnic/religious origin? Sites located in their own communities?

This research area could also connect to how to understand heritage views for countries in conflict, particularly Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. These countries in addition to Afghanistan have faced heritage losses during conflict, either as a direct result of conflict (damage from militaries, weapons) or as a product of the conditions conflict fosters in a country (looting, neglect).

**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Heritage professionals certainly face a number of constraints in their decision-making and they must respond to a number of viewpoints and interests from those in their organizations to communities and national government agencies. However, understanding how they work independently and together is influential to guiding how the future of the country will be shaped. They all may vary in approaches, goals, and opportunities but the crucial finding from this study is that they view success for one organization as a success for all, regardless of background. There are obviously instances in which one person may not agree with another person’s or another organization’s practices, but when there are positive developments, competition does not come between them because they view these successes as beneficial to the overall cause of the preservation of Afghanistan’s national culture.

Much of the current understanding of Afghanistan on the international level has centered on the country as a country at war, and the focus is on poverty alleviation, security, and development. These projects are undeniably important now, but in the future the country will not

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14 See Rothfield (2008) for further information about the situation in Iraq and recommendations for future cultural crises during armed conflict.
always be at war, and a cultural heritage will need to have been safeguarded upon which to contribute to how Afghans identify as Afghans.

In a country in which the majority of the young population has grown up outside of the country or has lacked a general knowledge about their national heritage and heritage practices, it will be essential for the nation’s future for them to identify with their culture. Regardless of how they choose to identify with heritage, from intangible practices to tangible monuments, it will be important that there is heritage that exists to be valued.

The people of the country are resilient, and increasingly young Afghans choose to become involved in the heritage sector in some way. Outside the once looted National Museum, there now stands a plaque with the statement, “A nation stays alive when it’s culture stays alive” (fig. 10). The phrase was also written on banners hung in front of the museum when it was still in disarray, and is representative of a group of people who truly value their culture and identity.

This situation is still active and ongoing, and continues to require support to achieving the goals of cultural heritage preservation. In addition, there is still an immense amount to excavate and uncover. Archaeologists at Mes Aynak for example are just beginning to learn more about the ancient civilization(s) at the location, and they have recently found what are believed to be the oldest wooden representations of the Buddha, among other notable discoveries (Marquis, 2013). Other sites require research and excavation as well, and the multilayered histories of the region are continuously being pieced together and evaluated.

The State Department representative articulates how she justifies the need for continuing engagement in Afghanistan:

Someone once asked me, in the context of The Monuments Men, “Aren’t we glad they saved the Ghent Altarpiece and Michelangelo’s Madonna and Child and all of those paintings? Aren’t we glad? But, what’s our business in saving a minaret in Afghanistan or a Buddha at Mes Aynak?” And my response to that was, “It just so happens that the
Ghent Altarpiece, and the Michelangelo come from our cultural canon, our artistic background, so we identify with that. How then can one say we should devalue the Buddha, or a minaret, or those rare Islamic tiles in Afghanistan?”

These issues are certainly invaluable to the country’s future but there is no reason that should mean it is an inherently Afghan problem that should not be aided by outsiders. Culture in Afghanistan needs to continue to be funded the way any other project in the country has been, especially as the country seeks to move forward from the trauma of conflict.
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Appendix: Referenced Images

**Figure 1:** Map of Afghanistan’s major cultural heritage sites

**Figure 2:** The second floor of the National Museum of Afghanistan after looting and destruction http://wwwiranicaonline.org/articles/kabul-museum
Figure 3: The niche of the larger Buddha of Bamiyan before and after the Buddha was destroyed.  
https://www.flickr.com/photos/83713082@N00/3067223785/

Figure 4: The Bamiyan Valley, showing the empty niches of the two Buddhas of Bamiyan. http://sidzeman5.edublogs.org/bamiyan-valley/
Figure 6: The Minaret of Jam
http://www2.mcdonald.cam.ac.uk/projects/iarc/culturewithoutcontext/issue14/thomas.htm

Figure 7: One of the Minarets of Ghazni
http://in.reuters.com/article/2008/08/11/idINIndia-34937120080811

Figure 5: The restored Citadel of Herat
Figure 8: An uncovered stupa at the ancient Buddhist site of Mes Aynak. http://www.flickr.com/photos/35604701@N07/6349956826

Figure 9: An archaeologist studies one of the thousands of Buddhist statues at Mes Aynak. http://wisdomquarterly.blogspot.com/2012/05/worlds-greatest-buddhist-site-mes-aynak.html
Figure 10: A plaque that stands outside the National Museum of Afghanistan.
http://www.ucd.ie/archaeology/research/phd/patrizia_lapiscopia