

5 Innovation and preservation

Shadreck Chirikure on the performance of heritage—A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling

Shadreck Chirikure is an archeologist and a leading scholar in discourses surrounding the politics of knowledge production in archeology and heritage. Professor of Archeological Science in the Research Laboratory for Archeology and the History of Art, University of Oxford (where he holds a British Academy Global Professorship), he also acts as Adjunct Professor of Archeology at the University of Cape Town. His research methodology combines hard sciences with humanities and social sciences to explore ancient African technologies and political economies of precolonial state and non-state systems. In his current research, he focuses on the precolonial urban landscapes at two World Heritage Sites in southern Africa, Great Zimbabwe and Mapungubwe and their place in African and international trade networks. Chirikure is the author of *Great Zimbabwe: Reclaiming a “Confiscated” Past* (Routledge, 2021) and is co-editor (with Webber Ndoro and Janette Deacon) of *Managing Africa’s Heritage: Who Cares?* (Taylor & Francis, 2018). In this conversation, we discussed the ideas behind the preservation of performance, practice and heritage. Chirikure addresses heritage as a living and ever-changing inheritance, in which performance itself is the key to conservation.

Hanna Hölling: Shadreck, thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. Our research project *Performance: Conservation, Materiality, Knowledge* explores the idea that performance persists not only as object, archive and documentation, but also as an event, oral tradition and gesture. We have been impressed by your insights into different notions of heritage and your observation that heritage may have different meanings for different people.¹ Your scholarship on Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Zimbabwe’s heritage and archeology, has shown that heritage is viewed as an active and living entity. In this conversation, I’d like to think with you about the performance of heritage and heritage as performance, as I believe this will provide us with a valuable perspective on how we approach conservation in general, and the conservation of performance in particular, both within Western institutions and beyond.

Shadreck Chirikure: The ideas of, or attitude to, preservation and conservation differ depending on various cultures and geopolitical settings. The ideas dominating in Europe and in the West are derived from the Enlightenment tradition. For example, the ideas of John Ruskin and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc imply that you

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cannot falsify the historical record, the historic document, and that if you are not preserving it, you are going to lose it. Those ideas were extended into the other parts of the world through colonialism and through international best practices such as the Venice charter and the 1972 UNESCO Convention. Then, if I'm to go back to my village and think about what preservation and the intangible heritage or performance are, the main idea that comes up is that preservation is through use. That is how you are going to sustain intangible heritage: you perform it, you use it. This understanding is quite opposite to the Ruskinian idea of "this is old, so don't touch it." If you wish to keep a performance as something that was done by your ancestors and which now belongs to you, you must perform it—that's how you continue heritage. Otherwise, it gets abandoned and forgotten.

The idea of preservation as use and innovation, which is associated with performance, is a major point of contrast with the notion of authenticity, with the idea that, in order to preserve an authentic performance or a tradition, you need to freeze them. There's nothing like that. Innovation is a part of preservation. And, importantly, regardless of whether it's intangible heritage or tangible heritage, performance as preservation by use is most significant. Think of Timbuktu where the walls are plastered periodically and this process is part of a cycle that brings life into a building. Think about the dances and masquerades in West Africa, and in parts of Central Africa such as Malawi. These performances have to be performed, they have to be used, because otherwise people will forget them. Intangible heritage and traditions such as wall plastering, or rain ceremonies, cannot be frozen. The more people use and perform them, the more they preserve. Keeping those behaviors alive in people's daily routine and memory is also what intergenerational exchange is all about. This is how the young learn from the old and how the old will pass on this knowledge to the young and to the upcoming generations. That's how preservation works. It is not conditioned by the Venice charter or the Burra charter.

HH: The concept of preservation through performance is fascinating. In my work with contemporary art and media, I frequently encounter changeable works. Performance art—particularly within the visual art tradition—is perceived as continually changing and fluctuating. We tend to talk less about an "authentic object." Furthermore the notion of "loss" in relation to change is being reevaluated. However, if we consider a scenario in which performance changes indefinitely, to the point where we can no longer discern whether it is still the same or a different performance, how can we meaningfully grapple with the notion of change? If preservation occurs through people and is intergenerational, passing knowledge about the work from one generation to the next, how can we effectively address the challenges posed by change?

SC: But why would you like for the performance to remain unchanged? The idea is that each generation is responsible and is custodian of their own performance. If this is the masquerade, for instance, you do it using the materials available to your generation. And another generation, doing this performance, will use different materials available to their generation. There is no need to fix things. Loss is when a practice is lost, when people are no longer gathering

under a tree to perform a dance. Loss is when the missionaries started to say to people: “No, no, no, this is devilish, this is Antichrist, this is anti-white! You can’t do this performance, or you can’t do this dance!” But there is no loss as long as people are performing and modifying their practice.

The process of heritage is ongoing. Heritage is created every second, every minute, every day. Whatever unit of time you use, heritage is being created. We create heritage through the everyday, the mundane and through the ritual. Heritage is made and remade. There is no need to fix things. Why should we be afraid of change? Change is a part of heritage. Each generation looks at the same culture and the same materials from its own position. That’s what makes heritage dynamic and what connects people with heritage. The problems occur if you were saying “Do what your grandmother was doing, do what your grandfather was doing.” There is an important issue of relationship: How do you relate to that heritage? Take, for instance, Stonehenge: no one identifies with Stonehenge, it’s just a circle of stones. Thank God, there are druids, who sometimes can say “Maybe this is what Stonehenge once was,” but no one else identifies with the structure. And then, authorship is claimed over heritage. You say, “That is ours.” But how is it yours, if you can’t perform it? As generations succeed each other and as people find what appeals to them in heritage, heritage is performed. Through this performance, heritage becomes not only relevant, but also sustained. That’s linked with the concepts of curation and co-production. We should let people perform their heritage and let them innovate, without fixing practices or traditions in time and space, because these things cannot be fixed. Great dancers and great musicians are great improvisers. These are people who go against the script, and that creativity is at the center of performance and heritage. So, you can’t say that in a practice characterized by innovation, you have to stick to what someone saw in 1950 as being the authentic experience. This is where we disconnect people from their heritage. As long as we connect, we encourage people to perform, that is preservation through use. Such preservation also connects people to some of those cultural practices. If you take, for example, churches in the Western world, you realize that in some contexts, people no longer go to church and those buildings are no longer being used. So why should they be sustained? As long as people are using the churches and continue the tradition of going to church and worshipping every Sunday, that’s an example of the preservation of tradition through use. The moment people stop doing this, they kill the practice. The idea of preservation through use also applies in the Western world, there is nothing exceptional about the West, except that people should learn to understand that heritage is performed, heritage is used. If this is not being done, heritage is either killed, or you are creating something different that people don’t identify with.

HH: Your assertion that African heritage revolves around performance is intriguing, particularly as you suggest that those who are more creative and skilled at improvisation are held in higher esteem as performers. I must question the practical implications of this perspective, however: If the future generations inherit practices or performances that have been significantly altered—

such as a new dance or an entirely different ritual—would these still be accepted as a continuation of the original cultural practice, or would they be considered a distinct cultural expression altogether?

SC: What if the next generation decides to innovate on a dance tradition and say, “Instead of moving my right foot first I must start by moving my left foot.” Does this represent continuity? The crucial point to consider is that people—my grandfather or my great grandmother—are no longer alive to witness these changes. This is about us in the present. And then why not give the future generations the chance to choose what *they* want to do with the dance? Why should one generation think that it has the moral, philosophical, ethical rights to say that what they have seen is what all the future generations should enjoy? Do your dance the way you want but let those in the following generation also dance. If that is the same dance, a dance with the same name but a dance that has been improved, if this dance works for this future generation, that’s continuity. Continuity is not about stopping change, improvisation, or creativity. To the contrary, continuity embraces change. And it embraces stasis, too. If people feel there is no need for a practice to change, so be it. We have celebrated many heritages in the past. For example, the heritage of perpetual consumption and a practice of collecting objects. Now we are saying, “Oh, hang on, this is at the expense of great damage to the planet.” And we contend, “This performance is not good, let us change it—this is not a good type of heritage.” There is continuity because we still continue to manufacture things and thus we continue to perform this heritage, but now with the consciousness of endangering the home we call Earth. So, are we going to insist on continuity by burning more fossil fuels? Will we insist that we must go on along those lines? I don’t think so.

HH: In light of your previous statement, it is worth considering that each generation should determine whether to preserve a heritage object or pursue a drastic change in performance. As you suggest, we must allow the future generations to dance their dance and to shape tradition according to their own vision. Not unrelatedly, I’m also contemplating the Western conservation tradition and whether, at a meta-level, it constitutes a form of performance. Within this framework, we perform the preservation of works in specific conditions and enact the freeze-paradigm based on the knowledge criteria established within the epistemic cultures of their time. The performance of conservation provides a valuable tool for self-reflection and helps us understand who we are as humans in a constantly changing world.

Your answer has anticipated my following question concerning time and its potential impact on our approach to the ongoing life of performance, or to the performance of conservation. If, as you imply, the past is present both in the present and in the future (resonating with my own ideas influenced by Henri Bergson’s concept of *durée*), how might this concept apply to the continuity of performance, ritual, dance or technique?

SC: The biggest question is, what is time, anyway? From a Western sense, you can say that there are millisecond, seconds, minutes, hours and days, but

what does that all do, at the end of the day? Seconds, minutes, hours and days repeat. And then there are cycles: a year that repeats and then seasons that repeat... Time seems both cyclical and linear. But how does it affect the notions of heritage and continuity? The key aspect is that each generation learns from the generation that preceded it and makes its own additions to heritage. So, when thinking about time, not only is the present informed by the past, but it also creates its own identity. And then, heritage is handed over to an imaginary future. Generations overlap, you might also have your grandparents, and you might have grandchildren and so on. So, under those circumstances, how to define a future? This affects how time can be grasped. There is an understanding that time is change, and that the past might not always be the past, the present might not always be the present and the future might not always be the future. And at the center of all this, there is the concept of preservation by use: if you keep on performing the ritual, then you are also preserving it. Continuity is an arena for innovation and contestation.

This takes me to the concept of performance of conservation that you mentioned. In the museum—think of the 1900s or the 1950s—people were applying harmful chemicals to objects, in the very well-meaning intention to prolong the lives of the objects. Should this practice continue because it was performed in the past? No, we introduce change. “Western exceptionalism” doesn’t really work. Even in the West, one can still make the argument that performance is through use and through practice. When you realize that these chemicals are harmful then you modify the practice. There is no need to fix things in space and time and say that this is how it was done.

To go back to the concept of time, yes, we need to allow things to change, and, at the same time, we need to allow things to remain the same. That’s all part of the creative process and what makes the performance of heritage and culture resilient. It is the sum of all those contradictions—that in one way you try to change and to innovate and in another you try to keep the same—that constitutes the southern African value system. People say, “Well, we learned from what happened before us, we use that to improve what we are doing, and we will hand over whatever we can to the people who are coming after us.” And these future generations will also look at these traditions and practices that they inherited and hand over to the next group, and the cycle will continue. If time is understood in that way, then it makes it worth the while in terms of each generation enjoying what is heritage and what is performance, namely the act of handing over the practices and allowing others to perform them in their own way. Here, in the West, we talk about democracy and the idea of choice, but in conservation, we don’t want to give people choice. That’s counterintuitive.

HH: We are also intrigued by the relationship between archeology and preservation. Is archeology a form of preservation? How are the actions of the past societies—such as daily chores, rituals, dances and conservational efforts—recorded in the archeological record? How do artifacts either assist or impede our comprehension of the dynamic aspects of the people who created them?

SC: The short answer is that archeology deals with mute objects, buildings, or ruins. You can’t ask the people who engaged with a room or a space about

how they did it, since they are long gone. Therefore, archeologists attempt to bring back those gestures to life through interpretation. To reveal the performances that people were doing in the past depends on the models archeologists use to get to those questions. If we were to take, for instance, a Marxist interpretation to understand and reconstruct the economic practices in Great Zimbabwe, then that's a completely different performance altogether. Interpretation is performance and a reconstruction of Great Zimbabwe is an entirely different performance. In the past, people were living their lives, and, if you are lucky, in some areas there were written records that might support the work of archeologists.

Archeology is performance, too, although there are rules. We might refer to an agreed-upon standard of performance, which prescribes how archeology is done. But that's why we need to bring in various perspectives, because they will bring in different types of performance, which will then bring in varying types of heritage and ways of understanding and knowing. Sometimes the views meet, sometimes they collide, but it is still a part of the same performance. Why shouldn't we accept the belief that people came out from the hole in the ground? Why should we say, "This doesn't work," imposing our value system? Why, rather than marginalize those voices, shouldn't we bring in different worldviews and understand that objects might perform differently for different people? Rather than following one way which hinders multiplicity, a democratic system of knowledge would enhance our understanding of the past, bringing in different dimensions to the performance of what we call archeology. This might help in terms of preservation. I might not identify or agree with your performance. But, nevertheless, other performances that differ from our own can help us look after the same object. Building and sustaining resilience is key and takes place through co-production and co-use. They take us away from the pitfalls of having unilateral or one-sided philosophies and ways of doing things.

HH: In a previous conversation you mentioned that magic is also an integral part of heritage performance.² Considering this, how can the preservation of heritage, and of performance, incorporate the inclusion of magic?

SC: Magic and ritual are about practice. And then, there are tangible remains, like nails and onions, which can be found in the Pitt Rivers Museum.³ The practice of magic and the material remains are two sides of a spectrum. When people stopped their practices of making nails, this is when the performance stopped. What is left are mute objects which can only be enlivened through interpretation. So again, the moment the practice stops, is the moment when the heritage dies.

HH: Could the use of these objects by a museum not be considered as a form of heritage performance?

SC: The museums kill heritage, because, in the museums, we seal heritage objects in glass vitrines, wear white gloves and follow rules, "Do this, do that." We freeze heritage. But that's not what the druids do—they are creative, they reenact, they perform. Heritage is not meant to be kept in a cabinet. Whether in Pitt Rivers or elsewhere, the museums have now commenced to connect with communities, "Please can you come and engage with these objects? Can you

come and perform your rituals, can you do your magic?" Again, heritage is performance, heritage is use. Otherwise, it is dead.

HH: This is a wonderful conclusion to our conversation. Thank you so much.

This conversation was conducted in January 2022. Questions contributed by Jules Pelta Feldman and Emilie Magnin. Editorial assistance from Emilie Magnin.

Notes

- 1 Shadreck Chirikure, "Heritage in Our Language: 'Universal Concepts,' Local Performativity and the Freezing of Discourse and Practice at World Heritage Places in Africa," presentation at the conference Heritage, Participation, Performativity, Care, Centre for Critical Heritage, UCL London, March 12, 2021.
- 2 Chirikure, "Heritage in Our Language."
- 3 The Pitt Rivers Museum, located in Oxford, England, displays anthropological and archeological objects of the University of Oxford. Founded in 1884, it encompasses more than 500,000 objects, manuscripts and photographs, many of which are of ritual significance in the cultures that created them. The display of the museum is arranged by type of objects rather than by chronology or geographic belonging. The onion amulet mentioned here carries the inventory number 1917.53.776.

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