

Astronomical Heritage and Aboriginal People: Conflicts and Possibilities

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Abstract. In this presentation we address issues relating to the astronomical heritage of contemporary aboriginal groups and other minorities. We deal specially with intangible astronomical heritage and its particularities. Also, we study (from ethnographic experience with Aboriginal groups, Creoles and Europeans in the Argentine Chaco) the conflicts referring to the different ways in which the natives' knowledge and practice are categorized by the natives themselves, by scientists, state politicians, professional artists and NGOs. Furthermore, we address several cases that illustrate these kinds of conflicts. We aim to analyze the complexities of patrimonial policies when they are applied to practices and representations of contemporary communities involved in power relations with national states and the global system. The essentialization of identities, the folklorization of representations and practices, and the fossilization of aboriginal peoples are some of the risks of applying the label "cultural heritage" without a careful consideration of each specific case.

In particular we suggest possible ways in which the international scientific community could collaborate to improve the agenda of national states instead of reproducing colonial prejudices. In this way, we aim to contribute to the promotion of respect for ethnic and religious minorities.

Keywords. Intangible astronomical heritage, aboriginal people, conflicts

1. Heritage as a language

Today, heritage is an increasingly broad concept. It has a great impact in many crucial areas: public politics, NGOs' politics, public opinion, and aboriginal communities' strategies. The focus of the heritage concept is the idea of "culture" as a value to protect. In particular, at present we can see an increasing valorization of non-western achievements. But the concept of heritage has strong links with a specific western juridical language and property conceptions. For this reason, some of their key characteristics are: the demand for "authenticity"; the necessity for a clear "definition" of the boundaries of every specific heritage item; and the "preservation" of the integrity of the heritage. The use of the heritage concept has a tendency to privilege tangible aspects, the spectacularity, and the uniqueness of the proposed heritage. This "western" bias has the consequence of and implicit hierarchization of the different conceptions of humankind involved. The Western concepts have a very strong tendency to prevail in the international definition of what is heritage and what is not. Also, we can see a strong tendency to use the concept of "culture" to refer to the diversity of human forms of life but hiding the power relations between different societies, while making claims of political "neutrality".

At the present time, claims about world heritage are, in many cases, claims about ownership and rights, but in the case of aboriginal communities the conflicts involved are also conflicts about different ways of thinking about definitions of things, people and humankind; the idea of territory; ownership; history, change, and identity. Heritage—as

ecology—is now a new language or arena for the display of the complex conflicts between societies, specially nation-states and the minorities within them.

2. Essentialization and folklorization

The ideas of “traditional” and “authentic” are conceptions frequently applied to aboriginal populations. Usually they are grounded in the idea that those kinds of society do not change (and if they change they lose their authenticity). They are thought of as societies that only enter history and change after the impact of the colonization processes. This implies the conception of ethnic identity as linked to some well defined group of features such as dances, clothes, specific ceremonies, or to well defined cosmological systems. This does not fit very well with the ways in which oral, or predominantly oral, societies actually function. An example of this is the need to understand the crucial role in present aboriginal communities in South America of their own forms of Christianity, developed from the complex relations with western missionaries. Many western experts involved in world heritage initiatives are looking for “real aboriginal life” and do not pay attention to crucial cultural manifestations, with deep roots in the aboriginal cultures, because these manifestations are in the contexts of aboriginal forms of Christianity. In many cases these practices are not part of an “acculturation” process: they are not a “mix”. They are real cultural creations of these groups, in the peculiar historical situation that they face. They are truly reinventions of Christianity in terms of aboriginal logics, and are fundamental ways to legitimate, in the context of the national society, important cultural forms, leadership mechanisms, social organization, and conceptions about the relations between human and non-human beings (Altman, 2015).

Another very common idea is that aboriginal people lose their identity if they adopt western technology. But this is not necessarily the case. For example, in the Chaco region in South America, cellphones and computers make possible new versions of the oral culture of past centuries, reinforce old mechanisms of making marriages, and expand the production of texts in aboriginal languages without the control of western teachers or missionaries. In each case it is necessary to study these elements in context.

3. Folklorization and bureaucratization

The incorporation of some aboriginal cultural traditions into the agendas of nation-states or international agendas implies in most cases the bureaucratization of these practices. They are incorporated, for example, to scholarship or state ceremonies that are under the control of white people. This situation tends to result in the enforced unification of practices that have a very broad spectrum of variation, according to the uncentralized character of the societies involved. This usually leads to attempts to define clothes, movements, instruments, meanings, etc. The displeasure with this by non-centralized societies can result in the rejection of “world heritage” nominations, as in the case of the Nguillatún ceremony of the Mapuche people in the southern part of Argentina and Chile (Carlos Massota, personal communication).

As another example of this we should mention that in many parts of South America local and national governments are starting to “recognize” the “new year” celebrations of different aboriginal groups. This process is usually governed by some key factors: the assimilation of the festivities of religious minorities; the imposition of a Western calendrical form of definition; and a time definition based on a single day and a single “sign” in place of local definitions based on a ranking of days and a complex group of signs (birds, flowers, stars, rains). In some cases, such as the promotion of the new year of

the Avá-Guaraní people by the national government of Bolivia (Pereira Quiroga, 2015), we can see the use of this festivity in order to control and domesticate political tensions.

4. Right to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)

The Right to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is a key principle for the relations between aboriginal groups and national governments or international organizations. It is an obligation—for many nations, in fact, a legal obligation—not a gift. This principle is supported by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2006) and the International Labour Organization Convention 169 (1989) ratified by 20 countries. Some of the most important characteristics of the FPIC are that:

- it must be prior to the decisions to be made;
- it must be conducted through institutions representative of indigenous communities, and indigenous people should control the process by which representatives are determined; and
- it must be free of pressures and manipulations—for example pressures using the promises of potential economical and touristic benefits.

In societies of low stratification the decision-making processes usually involve the creation of a consensus, and strong discrepancies between different communities and leaders. In many occasions the western agendas are not minded to tolerate these processes and their timescales. The complex problems concerning the installation of great telescopes on the top of mountains that aboriginal populations consider sacred are good examples of the relevance of these issues.

5. An example of multiple interests in dispute

In Chaco province, Argentina, there exists a very important dispersion of nickel-iron meteorites: Campo del Cielo. This dispersion is very important for the cosmological ideas of Moqoit aboriginal people, and also has strong roots in the history and culture of the local Creole population from colonial times (Giménez Benítez *et al.*, 2004). For aboriginal people the manipulation of these objects is linked with the relations between humans and celestial beings. For these reasons, through texts (Martínez, 2006) and public actions, Juan Carlos Martínez and other young Moqoit leaders have demonstrated the connection that the Moqoit see between their notions about the cosmos and their land and cultural claims (López, 2011). The Moqoit's successful opposition to the attempt to transfer the largest of those meteorites ("El Chaco", with a weight of 37 tonnes) to Germany for an artistic exhibition (dOCUMENTA13, at Kassel), promoted by two artists from Buenos Aires, should be understood in this context. Around this event a very strong public debate arose, with the centrality of the sky icons at its fore. Our research group participated on this debate and many members of the academic astronomical community gave their support to the opposition to this "artistic project", which was eventually cancelled. All this revealed very deep conflicts between the different definitions of the meteorites' function and importance (López, 2015).

6. Final remarks

Heritage, as ecology, has become a new arena and a new language for very complex conflicts. For this reason heritage is a key issue for the relations between indigenous minorities and national states or international organizations. International recognition has the potential to empower aboriginal groups and to protect them against national and

regional abuses. But the western origin of the implicit notions involved in that recognition—identity, authenticity, change, relevance and definition—is a source of risk for aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people are not relics of the past, without history and agency. The symbolic struggle for the definition of the meaning of objects, places, times, ceremonies, etc. is not politically neutral. This struggle is marked by the force of colonial relations. In this context, the right to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) is an obligation when aboriginal communities are involved; not a gift. Aboriginal people are usually misrepresented or underrepresented in national governments and agencies. Colonial logics are inscribed in official bodies and practices, and very strong epistemological vigilance is needed in order to avoid the risk of reproducing colonial looting in the name of science and culture. The example of the conflicts about the installation of great telescopes, as the case of Mauna Kea (Hawai'i), demonstrate the relevance of these issues for the academic astronomical community.

To recognize “Astronomical World heritage” is insufficient. We also need to recognize “Astronomical World heritage in danger” in order to induce local governments to take responsibility in such cases. Maybe the IAU, and especially Division C, could make a list of sites in this situation. Cultural astronomy must play a key role in the articulation of astronomical heritage initiatives involving aboriginal people. We need to be involved with people if we work with people. Science, culture and art must point the way for governmental logics and not vice versa.

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