

Culture - An Extension of Life

Culture has often been hailed as the quality that makes us human. As civilizations, we create, think, innovate and we have a deep appreciation for the artistic contributions of the present and past. By extension, the destruction of these contributions is an obstacle to the forward progression of society. When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) destroyed the Temple of Bel at Palmyra, or the United States bombed public libraries in Romania during the Second World War, knowledge that may not exist anywhere else was lost. For the people whose ancestors created those sites, a place of worship or learning was lost. To acknowledge and prevent such atrocities, international legislation is required. This exists presently with the 1949 Geneva Convention, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, and the 2017 United Nations Security Council resolution 2347, which “condemn the unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, including the destruction of religious sites and artefacts, and the looting and smuggling of cultural property from archaeological sites, museums, libraries, archives, and other sites, notably by terrorist groups”. In addition, the prosecution of Ahmed al-Faqi al-Mahdi for his role in the destruction of nine mausoleums and the door of a mosque in Timbuktu in 2016 served as landmark legislation that established the targeting of cultural sites as a war crime. But not all countries recognize the severity of this crime, a notable example being the United States and the Trump administration. Earlier in 2019, the US formally withdrew its membership in UNESCO and in January this year, Mr. Trump tweeted about his intentions to destroy multiple Iranian heritage sites as a form of retaliation. With the rise of international conflicts, especially in areas rich with cultural and historical artifacts and architecture, it is crucial to recognize the destruction of such sites as a war crime, punishable by the same measures as any other international crime.

Cultural sites, like human lives, have deep value. They are the birthplace of civilizations, religions, and ideas. They are a vault of knowledge, a portal to the past, and for many people, a holy, sacred place. The city of Palmyra, for instance, was the intersection of Greek, Roman, and Persian civilizations. It contained an amalgamation of classical architectural styles and urban designs from the West. A site like Palmyra allowed historians to better understand how civilizations interacted in the past and how society evolved to become the way it is today. Other

cultural sites have not only historic, but also present-day value. Sites like the Tomb of Esther and Mordechai in Iran are important pilgrimage sites for Jews and other religious groups. However, to merely recognize the value of these sites is not enough. Strict measures must be put in place to ensure their protection. It is the severity of the label “war crime” that achieves this protection to the greatest extent.

The importance of cultural sites is universally recognized, yet some express a moral outrage over the fact that the destruction of “mere property” is equated with the loss of human life. There are two problems with this argument: firstly, the destruction of cultural property is often an extension of crimes like genocide, and secondly, justice is rarely ever a zero-sum game. Numerous global organizations have recognized that when a perpetrator attempts to obliterate a group of people, they end by destroying that group’s history, identity, and culture. For many modern terrorists, both the murder of civilians and the destruction of heritage sites serve the same cruel purpose: to eliminate opposing ways of life. If the purpose is the same, why should the punishment be different? Furthermore, it becomes dangerous to ignore the destruction of heritage sites as a gateway to genocide. Global organizations, like UNESCO, recognize that “deliberate attacks on culture have become weapons of war in a global strategy of cultural cleansing seeking to destroy people as well as the monuments bearing their identities, institutions of knowledge and free thought.” Without recognizing the destruction of cultural property as a war crime, we cannot fully comprehend its harmful effects on a group of people, or as effectively prevent the cultural genocide of a population. In essence, the “destruction of cultural heritage is not a second-rate crime. It’s part of an atrocity to erase a people.” (Mark Ellis, 2016). Nor does the recognition of this crime detract from the enforcement of others. Current protections for human life would still be in place and crimes like genocide would still be punished. But this added protection for cultural heritage would help “curb an escalating war on ancient history”. (Eric Gibson, 2015).

To protect monuments of culture is to protect the identity of people, to protect human history, and to protect future progression of all civilization. Indeed, progress has been made with the introduction of various global legislation over the years, and the prosecution of those who committed cultural genocide. This progress must be maintained and pushed forward, especially

amid increasing tensions. Just as we are horrified by the slaughter of innocent civilians, we must also be alarmed by the pillaging of ancient museums and the demolition of sacred cities. We must remember that culture and life are not separate entities, but rather coexist, with the destruction of one undoubtedly affecting the other.

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