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Anne Laura Kraak is a PhD candidate at the Cultural Heritage Centre of Asia and the Pacific at Deakin University, where she researches the intersections of current international debates about heritage conservation, human rights and development. Her project examines the extent to which engagement with human rights can help reconcile the often different agendas of heritage conservation, development and popular religious practice at Bagan in Myanmar.

Ruins and Rituals in Bagan, Myanmar

Paper Abstract

Intangible heritage in the ancient city of Bagan in Myanmar, in the form of festivals and legends, influences the relative use and neglect of over 3000 Buddhist monuments. Appealing legends and myths associated with particular ruins have encouraged extensive renovations and reconstructions as Buddhist merit making projects. Meanwhile, monuments with darker legends did not receive the same attention. Annual pagoda festivals have been held for over 900 years and they have been introduced at some of the newly reconstructed monuments, sometimes attracting thousands of pilgrims. The renovations and reconstructions are controversial because they are considered inappropriate by international standards and were often led by oppressive military generals. However, they can also be seen as Buddhist approaches to conservation and a form of intangible heritage.

Currently, a World Heritage nomination for Bagan is being prepared. The importance of community involvement is emphasised in the Operational Guidelines and various international policy documents recognise alternative approaches to heritage conservation. However, opinions are widely divided on to what extent renovations and reconstructions should be allowed in the future of Bagan as a World Heritage site. The mantra of community engagement does not provide easy answers, since there is no homogenous community. Drawing on recent fieldwork in Bagan, this paper critically examines the complexities and challenges of community involvement at heritage sites where tangible and intangible, archaeological and spiritual values simultaneously conflict with and reinforce each other.