

Chapter 1

**A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE
UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE COMMITTEE**



Saint Petersburg on Sunday, 1 July 2012. After little sleep and a hurried breakfast with a Kenyan delegate, I board a small shuttle bus arranged by the organizers, which takes us to the conference venue across the Neva River. Our large hotel has conserved its socialist heritage rather well in terms of Spartan rooms and intransigent staff. Although by no means cheap, it is still one of the least costly options, so on the bus ride I am surrounded by participants from the not quite so affluent countries such as Cuba, Chile and Slovakia; the Saudi Arabian delegate may just have booked too late for the posher places. On the short ride, I joke with the Kenyan delegate about his own possible inscription on the World Heritage List, given that so much is listed these days, and chat with a South Korean university professor about the lunchtime event her delegation organized yesterday. Participants have dressed formally, with my own suit and tie not standing out.

The driver drops us off at the Tauride Palace, which usually houses the meetings of the members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Passing by the registration tent, we enter the grandiose classicist building through an airport-style security check with metal detectors. The tables lining the walkway to the large foyer are filled with promotional materials about World Heritage sites and candidates, and there are also the TV screens where the Japanese private station TBS Tokyo shows its acclaimed World Heritage documentaries. Special desks have been set up for such purposes as booking excursions and arranging return flights. There is no coffee yet in the foyer, so I walk up the stairs to the meeting hall where the pews are slowly

filling up. I chat with Japanese participants about the upcoming fortieth anniversary celebration of the Convention, which they will organize in the autumn in Kyoto. Delegates of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) complain to me about the new style of decision-making that ignores their expert advice. I install myself in the back rows reserved to ordinary, nonstate observers. On my notebook computer and with the Wifi access offered by the organizers, I see that the deliberate destructions of World Heritage properties in Timbuktu, Mali, which Islamist insurgents have been committing for several days now, are dominating global news headlines. World Heritage is clearly in the limelight.

The Morning Session

Shortly past 10AM and despite the troubling news, chairperson Eleonora Mitrofanova – the Russian Federation’s ‘Permanent Delegate’ (i.e. ambassador) to UNESCO – opens the morning session of the seventh day of the thirty-sixth World Heritage Committee session to routine business. This is the examination of this year’s nominations to the World Heritage List and, continuing with the cultural properties from the previous day, she calls up agenda item 36 COM 8B.37, ‘Schwetzingen: A Prince Elector’s Summer Residence’, a candidate submitted by Germany. As is usual when cultural heritage is concerned, she first hands over to ICOMOS whose representative is also seated on the podium facing the semi-circular pews rising in front of them. Supported by a PowerPoint presentation, this retired French professor of technical history takes a couple of minutes to summarize the evaluation, which has been online for six weeks. He reiterates that the nominated property lacks ‘outstanding universal value’ or ‘OUV’, the precondition for World Heritage listing. Instead, it does not distinguish itself from many other Baroque palaces and parks, so that ICOMOS advises rejection. As everyone is aware, adopting this verdict would seal the fate of the candidate by precluding submission of a revised nomination file in the future. Most states therefore quietly withdraw such bids ahead of the session, thereby avoiding a binding decision. But Germany has already done so in 2009 when Schwetzingen was up the first time and was also deemed unworthy by ICOMOS. Therefore, since extensive revisions of the nomination file have not improved the judgment, the delegation is determined to put up a fight.

Once the presentation is finished, the chair opens the debate, inviting the twenty-one Committee member delegations in the first rows to make their comments. To her right, the Director of the World Heritage Centre (the Convention secretariat) – an Indian nature conservation expert – assists her in giving the floor to the delegations in the order in which they raise their

state name plates, turning them from horizontal to vertical in the groove of a small wooden block on their desks. The chair always calls up the state name, not that of the individual. The delegates then speak into their microphones for up to three minutes, using one of the two official working languages of English and French or the other languages for which treaty states have volunteered to sponsor interpretation (this time Russian, Spanish and Arabic). At the entrance, the several hundred participants in the hall have been equipped with small broadcasting devices with headphones for this purpose.

Colombia speaks first, followed by France, and soon the delegates find themselves embroiled in contention: Germany – itself on the Committee – complains that the ICOMOS evaluation, in addition to missing the full significance of the palace theatre, passes over the eighteenth-century mosque in the palace gardens, the oldest in Western Europe. The ICOMOS expert objects that this is just a small and unremarkable structure reflective of the Orientalist leanings of the time. Yet Qatar, Algeria and the United Arab Emirates declare themselves impressed by this symbol of religious tolerance and even propose immediate World Heritage inscription, a rather extreme turnaround; it looks as if the Germans have asked them for their support. In contrast, Switzerland, France and Senegal are sceptical, insisting on the difference to a real, functioning mosque, and this clearly upsets the German ambassador. Nobody brings up Timbuktu, where a World Heritage-listed mosque in continued usage is being mutilated while the Committee speaks. The Indian ambassador suggests ‘deferring’ consideration of the Schwetzingen property, the one of four customary decision options that allows for the resubmission of a substantially revised nomination file no sooner than two years from now. With other delegations voicing support, a compromise seems in sight. But then, the Swiss ambassador loses his patience and calls for a vote. After some confused back and forth, the legal advisor – a UNESCO official on the podium that the chair consults over procedural matters – clarifies that the Swiss demand is for a vote on the original draft decision, which is the provisional decision text drafted by ICOMOS and the World Heritage Centre that was put online ahead of the session.

The German ambassador hastens to declare that her delegation would be quite happy with the suggested deferral, but this does not prevent the Committee from sinking into rare depths of confusion for the better part of an hour, with participants forgetting their most basic procedural routines. For one thing, the Swiss proposal diverges from the usual practice to vote not on the decision text proper, but on proposed *amendments* to it. As a two-thirds majority is required for decisions regarding World Heritage inscription or noninscription, this ends up turning the numerical advantage against the strict line Switzerland has been demanding, a fact of which the delegation appears mysteriously unaware. When others point out the breach of usual

practice, the legal advisor insists that no amendments to the draft decision have been received from the Committee members, and the usual recipient of such submissions, the rapporteur – a diplomat from member state Mexico, also on the podium, who is tasked with recording the decisions – does not interfere. However, the decision text on the big screens in the hall has an edit marked in blue that foresees inscription for Schwetzingen and gives the aforementioned Arab states as supporters. It is common practice for the typists working in the back of the podium to add such edits in track-changes mode while the Committee is speaking, grasping the delegates' intent even without special prodding. But nobody points out the obvious, namely that these edits are usually treated as amendments by the Committee. And if considered an amendment, the inscription proposal by the Arab states would have to be voted on first, as this is the decision option most removed from the original draft text, which foresaw noninscription. However, unlike almost everyone in the room, the legal advisor cannot see the screen from her seat, as she later tells me.

It is strange to see that many speakers sense that something is unusual, with incredulous laughter rising at times, while nobody manages to put their finger on what exactly is wrong. The chair as the person best placed to do so – as she can speak any time, not just when her turn in the queue comes up – is confused too. She reminds herself belatedly that substantive debate must end after the Swiss call for a vote, forgetting that the motion must first be supported by a second delegation, only to then let the debate continue the very next moment; she leaves some delegates perplexed about exactly on what they are voting; and she claims that after the noninscription of Schwetzingen fails to receive the required two-thirds majority (unusually, no count of the show of hands is announced), the other decision options must be voted too, just to again drop that (incorrect) idea the very next moment. Several times, confused delegates, often signalling a point of order by forming a T with the state name plate and their arm, weigh in, usually only for interventions that reveal their own puzzlement. In the end and after having regained her signature self-assurance, the chair convinces the Committee that the deferral option is now their consensus, dropping her gavel to mark adoption when no objections are raised. The decision thus returns to India's much earlier suggestion and had Germany withdrawn the bid entirely, the practical consequences (major revisions before resubmission) would have been the same. Small wonder then that the chair declares her intention to avoid further such 'difficult and unpleasant situations'.

It is only now that the chair suspends the discussion of nominations and hands over to the Malian Minister of Culture who reads out an emotional – and, in the end, tearful – statement, in which she reports fresh destructions in Timbuktu, denounces them as running counter to the spirit of

Islam, laments her country's plight, pleads for everyone's support, given that such tragedies could happen everywhere and closes with: 'God help Mali!' Long applause follows and the Senegalese ambassador, chair of the Group of Islamic Cooperation within UNESCO, confirms their solidarity. The chair then suggests that she express the grief felt by everyone in the hall rather than having more interventions on the matter, given that 'we have a lot of work ahead'. Somewhat piqued by the chair's suspicion that she might wish to return to Schwetzingen, the German ambassador calls for a moment of silence. 'We have to interrupt our work for this one minute', she insists and the chair obliges, with the hall rising for the brief gesture. It is difficult to say what is more strange – a minute of silence honouring lost heritage rather than lost lives (casualties have not been reported) or the fact that the Committee does not have more than a moment for a World Heritage property under attack while it speaks, with the world watching the destructions on YouTube and the perpetrators giving UNESCO interference as one of their reasons for their actions.

'Street fighting!' is a Dutch delegate's comment on the Schwetzingen scuffle when I leave the room for a quick coffee in the foyer. I return to more orderly proceedings. For the 'Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato' presented by Italy, which is up next, ICOMOS misses clear selection criteria and overall coherence among the nine spatially discrete components of this so-called 'serial' property, proposing a deferral decision. No sustained attempts to amend it are made, indicating Italy's commitment not to lobby for 'upgrades' of Advisory Body judgments, and the deferral is adopted in just 20 minutes' time, not the 90 minutes it took for Schwetzingen. Next, the chair announces several reshuffles of the agenda to accommodate key participants' flight bookings – a new trend of recent sessions – and moves to the 'Mining Sites of Wallonia', Belgium, another serial candidate site. For the first time today, ICOMOS supports inscription of what is also a revised nomination from deferral two years earlier. Citing time pressure, the South African vice-chair – briefly pitching in for Mitrofanova – suggests moving to the decision right away and since he sees no objections, he declares the property inscribed on the World Heritage List and congratulates Belgium. From the rows of the observer States Parties not currently on the Committee, a Belgian delegate offers kudos to the Committee, ICOMOS and the nomination team, emphasizes the importance of coal for Belgian history, and hopes to share the sites and Belgian multiculturalism with visitors from all over the world. All this is expected content in the acceptance speech, for which the concerned states have two minutes. Proceedings move on while delegates walk over to the Belgian delegation to congratulate them in person.

For the 'Decorated Farmhouses of Hälsingland', a Swedish nomination of a series of seven such structures and likewise a revised earlier bid, ICOMOS

misses a joint management body, a more extensive ‘buffer zone’ around one of the houses and better fire protection. It recommends ‘referral’, meaning minor revisions with possible resubmission already by next year, but the Swedes assert that the issues have been resolved in the meantime, with Switzerland and Estonia backing them up. South Africa proposes immediate inscription and in the absence of objections, this is what the chair adopts, to more applause. In his acceptance speech, the Swedish delegate mentions that the residents of six of the houses are sitting next to him. One cannot help wondering whether these would have travelled to Saint Petersburg only to see just another postponement – the Swedish delegation must have counted on the Committee overruling ICOMOS. Yet much as this has become a common occurrence in recent sessions, the Swedes are usually strongly opposed to this practice, as are Switzerland and Estonia, whom they must have asked for their support. This means that even the paragons of virtue within the Committee remain aware of their national advantage.

Obliging a further request for accelerated treatment, the chair turns to ‘Rio de Janeiro, Carioca Landscapes between the Mountain and the Sea’ (Brazil). This is yet another revised nomination, for a cultural landscape embedded in a megacity. Coming just months after the UNESCO General Conference adopted the ‘Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape’, it is a kind of test case for a new approach to urban heritage. However, the Rio property only includes hills, green areas, parks and beaches such as the Corcovado peak with the famous Christ the Redeemer statue, the Copacabana beach and the Sugar Loaf. There is hardly a built structure included – the actual urban fabric of Rio is declared the buffer zone of the nominated components, even though these only become connected through this buffer zone and, of course, take their name from the city. The wish to have the World Heritage title with no conservation strings attached is obvious, practical as this will be in an urban environment preparing for the upcoming FIFA World Cup and Summer Olympics. Accordingly, ICOMOS bases its referral recommendation on the missing specifications as to how the buffer zone will be monitored and protected. Yet when the debate opens, it is the other Committee members from the same UNESCO ‘electoral group’ – Latin America and the Caribbean – which rush to Brazil’s support, with Mexico waxing lyrical about how the property embodies the future course of the World Heritage Convention and the symbiotic dialogue between a city and its surrounding landscape. A Colombian delegate makes an attempt to hasten the decision, but the chair, having been assured that the Brazilian Minister of Culture can stay a bit longer, interrupts proceedings for lunch.

A World Heritage Centre official takes over to make the usual announcement of the meetings and events during the break – the working group on the budget of the Convention, a meeting of African ministers of culture

(meaning that a sufficient number have travelled to Saint Petersburg) and an information event about one of the Centre's 'Thematic Initiatives', the one for prehistoric sites. The chair closes almost exactly on time at 1 PM, and after sorting their belongings and the session documents piling up on their desks, the delegates slowly file out of the hall, most of them engrossed in conversation.

The Lunch Break

After brief exchanges with the legal advisor and a Swiss representative – both of them confident of having made no mistakes – I run into the Dutch delegate again, who shares my impression that the Swiss 'shot themselves in the foot', as he puts it. Crossing the foyer and walking out into the courtyard, I enter a large white tent, one of several places to partake of the lunch buffet. Russia spares no expenses to host us in style and all participants – not just the state representatives – are offered free lunches and invited to splendid receptions. The last one was just the night before, in the garden of the Peter and Paul Fortress on the banks of the Neva, complete with a sumptuous dinner buffet, freely flowing drinks, top-class ballet and somewhat more debatable pop performances, social dancing and shuttle bus services to the location and then back to our hotels. All this comes with endless sunshine on top, now that the famous 'White Nights' have just ended. It is rumoured that the whole session costs Russia to the tune of €10 million or even more, exceeding the annual budget of the World Heritage Fund.

A delegate in the line tells another how cumbersome the confidential negotiations about the old city of Jerusalem are, with Israel and the United States sitting in one room and Jordan and Palestine in the other. As one of the agreed mediators, he is on his knees all the time, he jokes, but a settlement is in sight. With my plate filled, I join several ICOMOS representatives at one of the large round tables. The mosque in the Schwetzingen park was just a last straw, one of them claims, and played hardly any role in the submitted nomination file. They update me about the current state of affairs of an ambitious candidacy of Le Corbusier buildings – twice referred already, but still up for resubmission in a future session – and how the French claim unquestioned leadership in the multinational bid, down to the use of their language rather than English. I also cannot resist walking up to the Swiss ambassador I know from an interview and ask him if his call for a vote was wisely put. He claims that demanding and then losing the vote was strategic, with the deferral decision his real objective. But wasn't the Committee heading there anyway, I wonder; he throws up his hands with a flourish and turns away. A blunder it was, I cannot help thinking, but who could possibly stay alert for days on end?

The Afternoon Session

I am back at my seat when the session resumes shortly after 3 PM with further discussion of the Rio property. More Committee member support for World Heritage inscription follows. While nominating states may only respond to specific questions asked by Committee members and may not engage in advocacy, a young Brazilian diplomat ventures into a long eulogy, which the chair interrupts only in the seventh minute, reminding everyone that two is the maximum for non-Committee states. The rapporteur says she has already received an amendment for immediate inscription from Colombia this morning, a detail that lays bare how minds were made up already before the debate opened. So in the absence of objections, Rio is declared World Heritage, with the 'Statement of OUV' adopted only provisionally, since ICOMOS has had no time yet to talk this mandatory text through with the Brazilian delegation. But they have drafted one, as they do whenever they propose a referral, an option that usually presupposes the presence of OUV. The Brazilian Minister of Culture in her acceptance speech and Colombia and India, which unusually request the floor another time, all stress the pioneer character of this urban site.

The pattern of the Committee 'upgrading' recommended decisions continues through the next agenda items. For the 'Russian Kremlins', ICOMOS misses a satisfactory comparative analysis: it is neither clear how the three kremlins included in that serial property have been chosen nor how they relate to those four kremlins that, as part of other World Heritage properties encompassing larger areas, such as in Moscow and Kazan, are already on the List. Problems of authenticity for reconstructed sections come on top so that the recommendation is for outright rejection, just as with Schwetzingen. Estonia, Colombia and Switzerland are on ICOMOS's side, but the other Committee members put forth counter-arguments, some of them rather tangential: ICOMOS only requested additional information once, not twice as with other candidates; ICOMOS assesses authenticity in too orthodox a way; ICOMOS reduces the kremlins to a purely military function; with 8,000 km between the nominated components, 'a continent in one country' is covered; inscription of the nominated kremlins does not rule out adding further deserving kremlins in the future if these have been missed out on this time, and so on. The time limit is ignored again for the Russian statement and as so often in recent sessions, personal testimony is brought to bear, with the German ambassador asserting the greatness of what she has visited herself in its entirety, as she claims. The decision is for a referral, together with a 'consultative mission'. In this further recent adaptation to nation-state impatience, ICOMOS experts will visit to help improve the nomination file rather than critically assess the property as during the evaluation visit that,

because of the referral decision, cannot take place in this case. But as Russia still wishes for advice, it will invite the experts at its own cost.

For 'Çatalhöyük' in Turkey, the OUV of the famous Neolithic archaeological site and oldest urban settlement is not in doubt, but ICOMOS still proposes a referral, as it misses a solid conservation framework – no dedicated budget, no management plan, and too much dependency on the foreign archaeological teams and their project funding.¹ But Committee members' praise for the site is enthusiastic; the World Heritage List would be incomplete without it, the Indian ambassador contends. Turkish delegates claim that the conservation issues have all been addressed in the meantime, an assurance that must be taken at face value, coming only in the session, not in writing – if the Committee were to follow its own rules, it must therefore be ignored. Still, Çatalhöyük is awarded the World Heritage title, to more applause and congratulations.

The next item is the first today where ICOMOS has its way against the concerned country: the proposal to extend the already listed property 'Kiev: Saint Sophia Cathedral and Related Monastic Buildings, Kiev-Pechersk Lavra' (Ukraine), is deferred, given unclear boundaries and buffer zones, and the absence of construction rules for the surrounding city. While no one points it out, the state of conservation of the very same property has been up earlier in the session, and a decision clause that threatened Danger Listing for the following year because of rampant construction all around the protected zone was only narrowly averted. This might explain why Russia's and Serbia's referral proposal finds no support.² But this is also a mere extension of an already listed site: in such cases, lobbying is not quite as intense as for the new bids with their much higher stakes.

This decision ends the list of cultural candidate properties and the chair moves on to the natural sites. Just like when the discussion of the cultural candidates started two days earlier, the Advisory Body in charge, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), summarizes its evaluation procedure, going over what is familiar terrain for session regulars. The head of IUCN's World Heritage Unit, a British geologist, stresses that 'dialogue' with the States Parties – a key demand of Committee members during the last few days – cannot extend to sharing evaluation results ahead of time and that only the deferral decision option allows for extensive support for the revision of insufficient nomination files while the referral option rules this out (as mentioned above). He also sees a need for further reflection concerning indigenous communities and their rights, something IUCN will also take up at its World Conservation Congress later in the year.

The statement of a civil society representative coming next continues this topic. Infrequent though such interventions are, the chair may give the floor to anyone whom the Committee does not object to. I recognize a German

anthropologist who had been anxious if and when his turn would come. Standing in front of a microphone in the back rows, he introduces himself as representing the seventy nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) united in the ‘International Workgroup for Indigenous Affairs’ and deplores the lack of consideration for indigenous rights in World Heritage processes. Last year, ‘Kenyan Lake System in the Great Rift Valley’ was listed even though indigenous groups had demanded a deferral. This year, he says, affected indigenous groups have been insufficiently consulted about two other candidates, ‘Western Ghats’ and ‘Sangha Trinational’, so he urges the Committee to defer these. Reports of monitoring missions to World Heritage properties and evaluations of candidate sites should be made accessible to indigenous stakeholders. Also, the Committee should make their ‘free, prior and informed consent’ a mandatory prerequisite for World Heritage listing, thus abiding by the requirements of the ‘Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples’ (UNDRIP) adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007. Two days earlier already, the chair herself had raised the topic, reporting receipt of a letter from the same NGO coalition and saying that she had invited representatives of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII) to the session. This means that the indigenous challenge to the nation-state system has reached the World Heritage Committee (cf. also Disko and Tugendhat 2014).

However, nobody requests the floor in response, so the chair moves on to ‘Lakes of Ounianga’ nominated by Chad. This is a unique hydrogeological system where a saline lake in the centre prevents a corona of freshwater lakes from salinization, and this in the driest part of the Sahara where annual rainfall is in the millimetres. IUCN has only minor concerns and sees OUV as proven; also, threats are largely absent and the national commitment to conservation is described as exemplary. The recommended inscription is adopted and the Chadian delegation cheers their first World Heritage property. Among the celebrants, I recognize a former university colleague of mine, a German geologist who is pleased with the success of what, he tells me, he himself had kicked off.

Yet, the activist’s concerns return with the next property, ‘Sangha Trinational’, three adjoining nature reserves straddling the border triangle of Cameroon, the Central African Republic and Congo. IUCN recognizes that many of the issues that made it advise deferral the previous year – upgraded to referral by the Committee – have been addressed in the meantime, so that inscription is now in order. However, the advice to also include the cultural heritage of the BaAka hunter-gatherers has not been taken up and their exclusion from previously used lands within the property is noted, with the hope – but apparently no guarantees – that they can sustain themselves in the buffer zone. Obviously, adding the World Heritage protective layer to a large and relatively undisturbed reserve counts more for IUCN than respect for

indigenous rights, and with no objections raised by the Committee, Sangha Trinational goes on the List.

Nevertheless, the activist's statement does make a difference for the Kenyan ambassador, who is next given the floor, interrupting the nominations agenda item. The allegations about the Rift Valley lakes are unfounded, she says, and she would welcome the critics' visit to show them how intense the cooperation with local communities is. No comments follow and the chair then resumes nominations. The 'Chengjiang Fossil Site in China' is quickly dealt with, as IUCN finds this early Cambrian community of fossils to clearly stand out on a global scale. With inscription decided, there are even two TV cameras in the room, documenting the commotion of well-wishers around the Chinese delegation.

Then finally, 'Western Ghats' in India is up, referred from last year's session. IUCN notes that the selection and boundaries of the no less than thirty-nine components of this serial property are unchanged, even though some of them include settlements, dams and plantations, and about 40 per cent lie outside of nationally protected areas. Sites in this mountain range might well have OUV, their expert says, but this particular collection is questionable and should be deferred. IUCN receives some support, mostly because of the unchanged components. However, Russia – clearly reciprocating India's favour over the kremlins – reminds the experts that they themselves have qualified the Western Ghats as missing on the World Heritage List (which, of course, is no contradiction to what IUCN said). The Indian ambassador insists on the scientific rationale of their national selection process and rules out changes to a bid on which six federal states had to agree. With no clear picture emerging, the chair urges the Committee members to position themselves individually, and only Switzerland and Estonia keep up their opposition, while twelve other members voice support for the inscription proposed by Russia. This is then adopted and at the very last moment, it is again Russia which has the recommended consultation with local indigenous groups expunged from the decision text.

After inscription, the chair unusually gives the floor to an Indian observer, who introduces himself as the representative of a local policy centre. He is full of praise for the dialogue between experts and village communities and for how nature protection, poverty reduction and sustainable development come together here, in the overall quest against climate change and for fulfilling the UN Millennium Development Goals – the statement does indeed tick all the boxes. There is no way for this statement to precede the Indian delegation's acceptance speech without the latter's approval, and clearly it is meant to dispel allegations of government disregard for local rights. Yet including this intervention appears to be the only consequence of the indigenous rights activist's challenge. Instead of the deferrals he demanded, Sangha Trinational

and the Western Ghats end up where their nation states wanted them, on the World Heritage List.

The chair now suggests postponing the last natural site to tomorrow; she must have her reasons, as this is a controversial Russian nomination. Instead, she returns to unfinished agenda item 7B, the state of conservation of the properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger and to the 'Old City of Jerusalem and its Walls'. Since its simultaneous inscription on the World Heritage List and the 'List of World Heritage in Danger' on the initiative of Jordan – in 1981, eighteen years before Israel joined the Convention – this property, due to its contested territorial status, has been a most protracted headache for the Committee. The chair announces that two separate decisions have been negotiated between the concerned states, with draft texts distributed in the room. One decision is for the property in general and one is specific to the Mughrabi ascent, the ramp-like structure with which Israel wants to replace the collapsed pathway to one of the Temple Mount gates, against Jordan's and Palestine's vehement opposition. Stating for the record that Israel disagrees with and further (unmentioned) State Parties wish to dissociate themselves from the first of the two decisions, the chair then quickly drops the gavel for both items, knowing that opening a debate would result in hours of mutual accusations. The decision texts reiterate prior unanswered demands, such as Israel hosting a monitoring mission by the World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS. This means no progress in the subject matter of conservation, but an open confrontation has been avoided.

With the scheduled business finished, the Russian chair finally returns to Timbuktu. She says that she is saddened to report that, as the Malian Minister of Culture informs her, three more of the World Heritage-listed mausoleums have been destroyed, and suggests a fundamental reflection about how to address such challenges in the future. The Minister adds that the insurgents intend to destroy all sixteen components of the World Heritage property (in actual fact, only the mausoleums, holy places and a mosque entrance, not the mosques proper) and is sure they will follow through on their announcement. 'They know that we're in session, they know we're discussing this topic. They want to push us to the brink. But what can we do?', she asks.³ The other African Committee members – Senegal, Algeria and Ethiopia – go first in sharing her exasperation and supporting the emergency fund the Minister proposed, and South Africa – a key source of financial aid for the Timbuktu sites under President Thabo Mbeki's 'African Renaissance' policy (Meskell 2012a: 47) – says it has drafted a resolution. An international appeal is being proposed and the chair points out that the international press, to which it might be read, is assembled. Then, the UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture and former Director of the World Heritage Centre speaks extensively. While he sometimes appears absent-minded when sitting on the

podium, he now delivers a reasoned summary of the situation in the mixture of empathy and realism that appears to be called for. He recalls the precedent of the Taliban blasting the two great stone buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001,⁴ the long years of UNESCO engagement in Timbuktu and the UNESCO Director-General's emergency mission to the capital Bamako earlier this year; however, he also says that the divided political situation on the ground, with several armed groups competing for hegemony, should not lead anyone to expect miracles.⁵

The chair then informs us that after five hours, the interpreters' shift is over. Senegal is last to speak and appeals to the African Union and the UN to do all they can to liberate the north of Mali. The chair announces further discussion of the Timbuktu declaration as soon as a draft statement is ready and then closes the session shortly after 8 PM.

The Reception

I move to the courtyard, where the reception of Côte d'Ivoire celebrating the World Heritage inscription of the 'Historic Town of Grand-Bassam' two days earlier is taking place. A State Party representative greets us, but then the Malian Minister of Culture speaks again, claiming that the destroyers in Timbuktu are foreigners and her compatriots would never contemplate such acts. I chat with a Hungarian delegate, the delegate of the Holy See and a German heritage studies professor. The latter notes that we are the only light-skinned delegates among several dozen people present – most non-African participants of the session do not find the event worth their attention. The Ivorian ambassador tells us about the symbolic importance of inscribing Grand-Bassam, just one year out of their civil war and with different ethnic groups and both blacks and whites collaborating for the bid. Everyone back home was eagerly following the news from Saint Petersburg, she assures me, and certainly the jubilation and flag-waving in the hall the other day were lively.

The Assistant Director-General for Culture joins us and finds this the best-organized session ever. With the circular pews, we can see each other when speaking; 'we're finally a parliament', someone else throws in. The 'ADG Culture' continues to praise the details; food is also better and more plentiful than in previous sessions. Cambodia offers to host the Committee next year, but with the Preah Vihear issue unresolved, this is still uncertain. He himself is all for using the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, just like last year; there at least, everything is in place. Schwetzingen comes up again and how the legal advisor was in the dark.

When boarding the shuttle bus to my hotel, a couple of African delegates wish to be dropped off at a different place. This provokes a spontaneous round

of Committee joking, applying the special lingo to unlikely subjects: a Kenyan delegate suggests to ‘defer’ that other hotel: ‘I’m against the inscription of that site!’ Others respond in kind, with the merriment based on the shared awareness that this banter would be completely lost on ordinary mortals. ‘A memorable day’, a veteran UK delegate confirms, and he too has rarely seen the chaos of the Schwetzingen debate. The Kenyan underlines what the Malian Minister claimed: the Timbuktu insurgents are foreigners and no neighbouring government supports them, afraid as they all are of similar turmoil at home. Back in the hotel, the Kenyans who wanted to go and watch football with me decide to first go for dinner. I therefore find a nearby pub on my own, seeing a brilliant Spanish side take apart Italy and clinch the European Championship. When I finish taping my observations of the day, based on the jottings in my notebook, it is past midnight.

Around the World in a Day

More so even than on other session days, I have the impression that this Sunday has it all. The timeframe of heritage ranges from the Cambrian to twentieth-century industrial facilities and the spatial focus from the Rio megacity to the remotest corners of the Sahara. Palaces are up, but so are peasants’ and miners’ abodes, and topics include high art, but also agriculture, geology and wildlife. Hotspots of political conflict and international concern such as Jerusalem and Timbuktu force themselves on to the agenda. They are approached with all the reticence of an intergovernmental forum of limited weight where everyone is aware that political solutions – if any there are – must be found elsewhere. This reaches a degree that even a conscious and globally reported challenge to Committee authority does not fully register: shielded by its procedural routines and tied down by the inertia these produce, the Committee ends up debating what is properly Islamic over a princely folly in a German Baroque park, not over Timbuktu where World Heritage is being mutilated for *not* being properly Islamic. Time for giving the latter provocation due attention is found only during the very last session hour. All this unfolds in an environment where what is spent on the meeting, not just by the Russian hosts but also by the governments and other organizations that pick up participants’ airfares and hotel bills, is at least double of what the World Heritage system has for conservation.

Expressions of sorrow and exasperation by what happens at some sites appear truly felt, but they are sweetened by free food and reception champagne in securitized spaces. There is high-minded universalism and there are appeals to the international community, invoking the largest possible ‘we’, the pan-human one. But there is also the ease with which nation states brush

aside transnational advisory organizations, subnational challenges such as those by indigenous peoples, and demands from their peer states, modest though the latter have become over recent years. And while processes for expert fact-finding and appraisals are increasingly sophisticated, their results can easily be passed over once diplomats agree that they do not matter for the issue at hand, however improvised their reasons. With the up-and-coming countries such as India being most assertive about fulfilling their wishes and defending national sovereignty, the day also illustrates ongoing geopolitical power shifts. In short, it shows that the World Heritage Committee is very much a mirror of the world we live in, rather than a world apart.

Is this the kind of world the creators of the World Heritage Convention were imagining? In order to answer this, let us next move to the history and rationale of its conception.

Notes

1. For a close-up analysis of the national and local intricacies, cf. Human (2015).
2. Russia's de facto annexation of Crimea and the war in the Donbass region in 2014 were still to follow this display of post-Soviet unity.
3. In her original French: 'Ils savent que nous sommes à reunion, ils savent que nous discutons ce sujet. Ils veulent nous pousser jusqu'au bout. Mais que pouvons-nous faire?'
4. Different from Timbuktu and *pace* Hafstein (2018: 81–82), Bamiyan was not on the World Heritage List at the time.
5. The French-led 'Opération Serval' that recovered Malian governmental control of the north in early 2013 was nowhere in sight at this point.