Commentary
Locating Global Legacies in Tana Toraja, Indonesia

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In 2001, the picturesque Toraja village of Ke’te’ Kesu’ was nominated for candidacy as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Situated in the South Sulawesi highlands in Indonesia, this hamlet is home to rice farmers, wood carvers, tourist vendors, government workers and sporadically-visiting anthropologists. Drawing on long-term anthropological field research in the village, I suggest that while world heritage sites may entail what UNESCO terms ‘genius loci’, they are, rarely the unchanging embodiments of tradition they are imagined to be. The paper illustrates how heritage landscapes such as Ke’te’ Kesu’ are, to some extent, products of local responses and engagements with regional, national and global political, cultural and economic dynamics. Ultimately, I argue that the emergence of UNESCO world heritage sites is not a ‘natural’ process, but rather one borne out of complex exchanges, competitions and collaborations between local groups, as well as national and international entities.

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When I first learned of this nomination I, too, shared in the jubilation of Ke’te’ Kesu’’s inhabitants. In the mid-1980s, while conducting dissertation research on tourism, ethnic and artistic change in Tana Toraja, I resided in this highland village for several years. In subsequent years I have regularly returned to Ke’te’ Kesu’ to visit Toraja friends and update my research. These years of research experience in Ke’te’ Kesu’ have rendered me an emphatic supporter of the hamlet’s inclusion on the list of World Heritage Sites, as it is clearly a striking landscape upon which ancestral memories have been inscribed and enacted. As I deepened my inquiries into the candidacy and its ramifications, however, it became increasingly clear that UNESCO’s underlying notions concerning World Heritage Sites embodied certain assumptions that often contrast markedly with the actualities of the sites in question.

Central to UNESCO language about heritage sites are notions concerning preservation and assumptions that these ‘traditional’ sites are at risk of being assaulted by contemporary influences. Drawing on the case of Ke’te’ Kesu’ as illustration, I argue that the so-called ‘heritage landscapes’ UNESCO strives to preserve from transformative external forces frequently are products of local responses to and engagements with regional, national, and global political, cultural and economic dynamics. That is, many of UNESCO’s heritage sites are hardly the unchanging embodiments of tradition they are imagined to be. In fact, it may well be that it is precisely this history of (over-looked) discourse with the wider world that enables World Heritage Sites to gain UNESCO attention and pre-eminence. In short, drawing on the case of Ke’te’ Kesu’, I suggest that the
emergence of heritage sites is not a ‘natural’ process, but rather one borne out of complex exchanges, competitions, and collaborations between local groups, as well as national and international entities.

In examining the Toraja case, I wish to underscore that the ancestral houses (known as tongkonan) that comprise the village of Ke’te’ Kesu’ embody an unrivalled richness of indigenous ideas concerning heritage, ancestry, and mythic history (cf. Adams, 1998; Nooy-Palm, 1979, 1986; Waterson, 1995). However, the hamlet itself is also very much a product of the Dutch colonial past. Moreover, in the course of its evolution over the past century, Ke’te’ Kesu’ has been shaped by other processes and institutions that stretch far beyond the local. While local actors and rivalries between local elites are salient to understanding Ke’te’ Kesu’’s trajectory to candidacy as a World Heritage site, a more informed analysis requires situating this particular cultural landscape into a larger national and global context.

As I chronicle in a recent article (Adams, 2003), the physical layout of the hamlet of Ke’te’ Kesu’ was born out of the colonial process. At the turn of the last century, the four ancestral houses that comprise the heart of the village were scattered on various peaks, miles from the current site. With the arrival of Dutch colonial forces in 1906, the advantages of concentrating ancestral houses near Dutch colonial headquarters were clear to the aristocratic founder of Ke’te’ Kesu’. By 1927, this founder had relocated these scattered houses to their current site, thereby ensuring the longevity of the Kesu’ name in the new Dutch era. By the mid-20th century, Indonesian national independence threatened to erase the prominence of the Kesu’ name, as local districts were reshaped and renamed by new government bureaucrats. This threat of administrative erasure of the Kesu’ name prompted Kesu’ elites to search for alternative means to ensure the continued prestige of their heritage. International tourism and foreign and domestic social science researchers became avenues for Ke’te’ Kesu’’s survival. In a similar vein, as Kesu’ers gained in experience outside the region, the western institutions of museums and libraries were embraced as supplementary avenues for fortifying Kesu’ heritage (see Adams, 1995). Finally, as the Asian economic crisis reached Tana Toraja and Indonesian political stability eroded in the late 1990s, Kesu’ers explored new non-touristic avenues to promote their economic survival and simultaneously their heritage: through marketing modern utilitarian wooden objects embellished with carved Toraja motifs nationally and internationally, Kesu’ers’ livelihood and involvement in producing traditional symbols was assured. In short, while certainly a ‘genius loci’, Ke’te’ Kesu’ is not the static and unchanging embodiment of tradition imagined by UNESCO.

Rather, Ke’te’ Kesu’ is the product of a long interplay between the local, the national and the global. Likewise, Ke’te’ Kesu’ers are reshaping and rethinking their notions about heritage, as they encounter multiple forces from within, around, and beyond the nation. Examining Ke’te’ Kesu’’s ascendance to candidacy as a World Heritage site offers insights into the process of cultural objectification, as we come to better appreciate the complex roles of local and international players in promoting this dynamic locale. I believe that the Ke’te’ Kesu’’s story is not a unique tale in the annals of UNESCO World Heritage sites. Rather, it would seem that most locales that successfully gain candidacy for UNESCO World Heritage site status are places that have undergone similar
trajectories, where local, national and international forces have conspired, wittingly and unwittingly, to project these ‘endangered’ sites onto the global stage.

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**Notes**

1. This disjuncture is the focus of a longer research paper published in *Indonesia and the Malay World* (Adams, 2003).

**References**


