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Merve Kayikci & Sertac Sehlilikoglu

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# Heritage in the margins: forgetting, remembering, rewriting

Merve Kayikci and Sertac Sehlíkoglu

## ABSTRACT

This special issue is a result of the papers presented at the workshop, and it first explores how heritage can become an apparatus for further marginalisation of already racialised groups.

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The significance of discussing heritage in the margins arose when the two editors of this special issue started separate research projects exploring how heritage had become an essential tool in shaping public perception and collective memory, which then feeds into political imaginaries. Yet still, the way heritage infiltrates into shared imaginaries was not necessarily captured in the traditional definitions of heritage, nor in the way formal institutions package and framed them. Rather, the sort of heritage that had been the most influential in the minds of the public was the sidelined, marginalised, even silenced. This realisation prompted us to contribute to the theoretical framing efforts that could better account for how heritage operates from and within contested margins.

At that moment (2021) when we were exchanging our perspectives, Kayikci had completed her fieldwork for a Horizon 2020 project, Religious Tolerance and Peace (RETOPEA), where she investigated the representation of Islamic heritage in western museums. Her initial findings pointed at the significance of museums in shaping social memory of Islam; a memory that is built on a love–hate relationship, where Islamic art had not only become a signifier of aesthetic magnificence but also of a bygone era and pre-modern tradition. While exhibitions on Islamic art and life had changed considerably over the years, they were still juggling with these binaries and presenting carefully curated narratives. Around the same time, Sehlíkoglu was conducting fieldwork for her ERC-funded project TAKHAYYUL (StG 2019, 853230), examining imaginative forces in the formation of populist religious aspirations in the Balkans, the Middle East and South Asia. Central to this project was understanding how *takhayyul* — a concept rooted in Classical Arab scholarship denoting imagination as a transformative capacity that simultaneously engages worldly conditions while connecting to prophetic truth – shapes contemporary heritage-making practices. Sehlíkoglu suggests that such imaginative attachments to historical narratives provided followers with a wide range of historical references, religious cosmologies, nationalist feelings and other affective and imaginative

**CONTACT** Merve Kayikci  [merve.kayikci@kuleuven.be](mailto:merve.kayikci@kuleuven.be)

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registers that directly inform which elements of heritage are valorised and which are systematically destroyed (see Sehlikoglu 2021, 2025a). Our separate projects clearly indicated the power of historical narratives in mobilising public sentiment and political action and informing social-political discussions (De Cesari 2010; Silva and Mota Santos 2012). Especially in the case of minorities and those communities who have been historically oppressed, history has been used as a tool to further reinforce their oppression. Heritage in the margin refers to the heritage of those populations who have been historically at the margins of their nation, society, lands. Crucially, our research revealed that contemporary imaginative re-writings of history and empire immediately feed into heritage-making practices through what Sehlikoglu theorises as *takhayyul* — imaginative attachments that operate not merely as fantasy but as transformative capacities that materially reconfigure space and determine which heritage survives. These imaginative frameworks create powerful selective mechanisms: heritage elements that align with new political narratives are preserved and celebrated (Moore 2011), while those that complicate or contradict dominant imaginaries become more easily destroyed. In Sehlikoglu's ethnographic work on Istanbul's fetih (conquest) narrative, for instance, imaginative attachments to Ottoman conquest actively facilitate the destruction of ecological and built heritage associated with the city's former non-Muslim inhabitants, while simultaneously creating new forms of 'heritage' aligned with neo-Ottoman political aspirations. This process reveals how heritage in the margins is not simply neglected but actively eliminated when it fails to conform to ascendant imaginative frameworks.

As an example, Kayikci's research uncovered that the presentation of Islamic history in museums has reinforced Muslim communities' otherness in relation to Europe within public opinion (Kayikci et al. 2022). Through her concept of 'decaffeinated Islam', she demonstrates how museums sanitise Islamic heritage into palatable narratives that strip away diversity and complexity, inadvertently reproducing good Muslim/bad Muslim binaries even through well-intentioned community engagement efforts. Her work emphasises the importance of these dynamics in understanding how cultural representations acquire their authority, revealing that heritage institutions actively shape which stories are deemed worthy of preservation.

In this special issue, we conceptualise 'margins' as the contested social, political and spatial peripheries where heritage narratives are contested, suppressed or reimagined by communities whose historical experiences have been excluded from dominant heritage discourses. Importantly, we distinguish 'heritage in the margins' from simply 'alternative heritage' or 'counter-heritage'. While alternative heritage often refers to practices that exist parallel to mainstream institutions, heritage in the margins specifically denotes heritage that emerges from and speaks to conditions of systematic exclusion, oppression or marginalisation. It is heritage that carries the traces of power relations that have relegated certain communities to the peripheries of national, social or territorial belonging.

Following our initial conversation, in 2021 we organised a workshop that brought together scholars conducting research in the area of heritage and marginalised communities. We were careful to initiate geographically and demographically diverse discussions, with contributions spanning from Europe to the Levant, Middle East and

Caucasus. In pursuing this understanding, we moved beyond the museum as the traditional focus of heritage-making to consider the broader landscape of heritage sites and practices, including nature, urban landmarks and intangible cultural heritage.

This broad scope allowed us to examine how heritage intersects with local forces across different cultural and political contexts. Our main concern was to understand how heritage and heritage-making are increasingly recognised as important practices within the development of the nation state and as prominent components in the nation-building process (Anico and Peralta 2008; Crooke 2006; Graham and Howard 2008; Gray 2015; Littler and Naidoo 2005; Peckham 2003, 2; Simpson 2012).

This connection between heritage and nation-state development reveals how heritage functions as a ‘politicisation of culture’ and a means to ensure ‘the mobilization of cultural forms for ideological ends’ (Peckham 2003, 2; see also Bendix 2008). Far from being an objective representation of the past, heritage emerges from deliberate selections of what should be remembered, emphasised and projected as part of national identity – while simultaneously determining what should be forgotten.

This selective process is not neutral; heritage creation requires authority over historical narratives, typically exercised by powerful institutions connected to the nation state (Lidchi 1997; Macdonald 2008). Through this authority, heritage operates on two interconnected levels. On one hand, it imagines and establishes an idea of the *self* in constructing stories about society, nation and the moral norms that bind a collective together. On the other hand, this discursive self-making simultaneously creates its opposite, defining certain collectives as fundamentally *not* like itself.

The politics of this selectivity – whose past matters, which elements are preserved as heritage – reveals much about contemporary society. These choices illuminate not only what is valued in the present, but also what is deemed worthy of preservation for future generations.

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Tunbridge and Ashworth famously quote: ‘All heritage is someone’s heritage and therefore logically not someone else’s: [it] implies the existence of disinheritance and by extension any creation of heritage from the past disinherits someone completely or partially, actively or potentially’ (1996, 21). Taking a structuralist approach, Sharon Macdonald explains the complex dynamics inherent in this scene, ‘heritage [...] is typically viewed as a tool for instituting certain ideological functions (especially creating a sense of common purpose and affinity to collective ideals); and work conducted tends to focus upon the invented elements of heritage, and on the processes of “othering” or silencing of certain aspects of history that may be involved’ (Macdonald 2008). Consequently, mainstream heritage institutions such as museums try to create (or sometimes re-create in the words of Macdonald) a unified-patriotic national heritage it engages with the process of excluding or at times marginalising others (Macdonald 2008; see also Evans and Boswell 1999). Macdonald further argues that we can trace this trajectory in the very details of identity making where the creation of a (positive) collective self-identity is inextricably bound to the (negative) image creation of the other, insinuating a perception of (‘homogenous and united’) identity (Macdonald 2008).

Museums and other heritage institutions, in turn, become spaces where these identities are performed through objects and visitors' embodied responses to them. Building upon this scholarship, our intervention examines not only how marginalisation occurs through heritage practices, but also how marginalised communities strategically employ heritage as a form of resistance, memory-making and identity affirmation and particularly in contexts where their histories have been systematically erased or silenced.

Minorities, and those forgotten or othered by mainstream heritage, actively construct and maintain their own heritage narratives and historical records. This is especially significant in the formerly colonialist contexts that are today working towards turning this past into a pluralistic value (Gnecco 2015; Harrison and Hughes 2010; Simpson, James and Mack 2011). In these postcolonial contexts, there are an emerging network of community actors who are working to establish a more critical, nuanced and inclusive heritage space (Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009). Heritage formation in such contexts is constituted by different groups who 'seek certainty and guidance in different canons of truth, which only partly overlap and are positioned in a hegemonic order' (van de Port and Meyer 2018, 6). Members of these groups may have different ideas on which part of history is fundamental to their group's formation (van de Port and Meyer 2018, 6). According to Van de Port and Meyer, 'due to such contestations, the givenness of heritage formation is constantly questioned, as claimants seek to highlight that heritage formations are made to serve the interests of some but not of others (6)'. This brings about a constant investment to produce 'alternative forms' of heritage (6).

However, as Sehlikoglu's work demonstrates, these ecological heritage forms become particularly vulnerable to destruction when they conflict with dominant imaginative narratives. The *takhayyul* framework reveals how imaginative attachments to conquest, development or modernisation can systematically eliminate natural heritage that embodies the memories and cosmologies of displaced communities. In some cases, natural landmarks or formations become so deeply intertwined with a community's historical claims to the land that their very existence challenges hegemonic power structures. In such instances, it becomes difficult to speak of a separation between nature and the human (Le Masurier 2025). To the extent that nature comes to embody the memories of generations of communities that have inhabited the land. Uprooting the ecosystem (such as trees) is nearly synonymous to uprooting the people from the soil (Stagni 2024).

The papers in this special issue also explore the contours of alternative heritage, as heritage narratives that have not found a place in canonical heritage and mainstream heritage institutions. This issue, therefore, will interrogate the multiplicity of conflicting processes of heritage narration, the different genres, means and forms in which heritage is manifested through and lived upon (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996). Alternative heritage practices thus emerge not merely as responses to exclusion, but as active, creative processes that challenge the authority of dominant heritage institutions to define what constitutes legitimate historical memory.

This examination of heritage in the margins is particularly timely amid global reckonings with colonial pasts, rising nationalist movements and increasing demands for pluralistic representations of history that acknowledge previously silenced narratives. The five papers focus on case studies from diverse European contexts, Turkey and North Africa.

Two papers examine how violent historical entanglements have been strategically sanitised in European memory politics, revealing the selective mechanisms by which certain histories are preserved, while others are actively forgotten. Oancă (2024) investigates the troubling reframing of colonialism as ‘shared history’ within European heritage diplomacy, contrasting how colonial violence has been consciously disremembered, while other atrocities like the Holocaust remain prominent in European memory. Through comparative analysis of heritage practices in Brussels and Casablanca, her work exposes how European cultural diplomacy promotes colonial architectural heritage to middle and upper classes while further marginalising already racialised groups – demonstrating that heritage diplomacy can become an apparatus for continued exclusion rather than reconciliation. Kayikci et al. (2024) reveals parallel processes of sanitisation in museum representations of Islamic heritage, showing how European institutions respond to multicultural demographics through ‘decaffeinated Islam’ – presentations that emphasise aesthetic magnificence while avoiding contentious historical realities of migration, cultural exchange and contemporary Muslim experiences. Her ethnographic analysis demonstrates that even efforts towards community engagement and democratisation can inadvertently reproduce hierarchical distinctions between ‘acceptable’ and ‘problematic’ forms of Muslim identity, ultimately reinforcing rather than challenging processes of othering.

Extending these processes of selective heritage destruction beyond institutional spaces, Sehlikoglu (2025b) draws our attention to ecological agents, fig trees in the city of Istanbul, in the middle of heritage battles. She shares her ethnographic research on urban ecological heritage in Istanbul’s historically Jewish and Greek neighbourhoods (Fener and Balat), examining how the notion of *fetih* (conquest) functions as a form of *takhayyul* that shapes destructive relationships with the area. Drawing on her theoretical framework of *takhayyul* as terrestrial yet prophetic imagination, she demonstrates how imaginative attachments to conquest narratives operate as transformative capacities that materially reconfigure space, enabling new residents to claim historical legitimacy while simultaneously justifying the destruction of pre-existing heritage forms. Her analysis reveals how these imaginative attachments create ‘inheritance without heritage’ – where communities can claim belonging through conquest narratives while systematically eliminating the cultural and ecological knowledge systems that preceded them. This work illuminates how competing cosmological frameworks become embedded in everyday ecological violence and resistance practices.

Finally, Saglam (2024) traces how the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was followed with societal violence in the early 20th century. He analyzes how this violence transformed the socio-political parameters of contemporary Turkey, by ousting the country’s minorities. In his case study, Saglam focuses on the uprooting of the Greek community and the erasure of Greek heritage from their remaining few monuments. Nelli Sargsyan and Tamar Shirinian (2024) offer a provocative rethinking of Armenian heritage discourses in ‘Life-sustaining transboundary survival: rethinking Armenian struggles for heritage’. Writing in the wake of the Second and Third Karabakh Wars (in 2020 and 2023, consecutively), they challenge dominant ethnonationalist framings of heritage that prioritise what they term ‘national survival’ – a mode of cultural preservation that necessitates restrictive gender roles and the sacrifice of young lives in warfare. Against this necropolitical logic, the authors propose an alternative conceptualisation of ‘life-

sustaining transboundary survival' that draws on shared inheritance of interconnected culture, knowledge and water across ethnic and national boundaries. Through a critical examination of the Armenian Apostolic Church as the paradigmatic heritage object, they expose how traditional heritage discourses can reproduce social inequalities while obscuring alternative histories of intercultural coexistence. Their analysis extends from the symbolic politics of church construction in post-Soviet Armenia to the material realities of transboundary water scarcity, ultimately calling for a reorientation towards forms of heritage that affirm life rather than demand death. By invoking figures like filmmaker Sergei Parajanov – whose multiethnic, multireligious artistic vision transcended national boundaries – Sargsyan and Shirinian advocate for understanding heritage as a dynamic, collaborative inheritance that can sustain diverse forms of flourishing rather than singular ethnic survival. Their contribution demonstrates how heritage in the margins can transcend nationalist frameworks to imagine more inclusive forms of cultural continuity and survival. These parallel investigations reveal how heritage operates simultaneously as a tool of exclusion and as a resource for counter-narrative formation, particularly in contexts where nationalist agendas shape public memory.

Methodologies and structures in which heritage is narrated would therefore be another point of inquiry focused in this special issue. In post-Enlightenment Europe, written records, images and material culture are essential in validating heritage narratives. Yet, other cultures and communities rely on relatively embodied and performative heritage practices such as oral history, nature, bodily inscriptions and performances to keep their heritage alive. These methodological differences are not merely technical but reflect deeper epistemological distinctions about what constitutes valid knowledge and legitimate forms of cultural transmission. By examining these diverse methodological approaches, the papers in this volume reveal how marginalised communities often develop innovative archival and memory practices that challenge Western, document-centric models of heritage validation (Altınay 2021, 2024). In this vein, by delving into multiple genres of heritage-making, the papers in this volume simultaneously interrogate alternative archive-making processes are adopted. The papers in this section employ diverse methodological approaches – including ethnography, discourse analysis and comparative case studies – to capture both the structural constraints and agentic possibilities that shape heritage formation in marginal contexts.

Archives provide the historical records necessary for heritage groups to validate their stories and their knowledge of their selves. Power permeates archiving, and alternative archives show how power operates by providing authority to a dominant group or institution in defining the identities of people who are not in power (Flinn 2007). This leads to feelings of 'erasure', and community heritage networks turn to creating their own archives with the desire to 'represent themselves' and 'learn about themselves' (Caswell et al. 2017). By doing so, it indirectly (and sometimes directly) challenges the authority of mainstream heritage institutions over history and social memory (Harrison 2013), with the aim to balance the power imbalance.

The concept of *takhayyul* that emerges from this collection reveals how imagination is not merely representational but constitutive of heritage practices. Contemporary political imaginaries actively shape which heritage forms survive and which are eliminated, often through processes that appear natural or inevitable but are in fact deeply political. Understanding



heritage in the margins therefore requires attention not only to exclusion but also to the imaginative frameworks that make such exclusion possible and even desirable.

Collectively, these contributions demonstrate that heritage is never politically neutral but always implicated in contested power relations that determine which histories are preserved and celebrated. By attending to heritage in the margins, this special issue not only illuminates processes of exclusion but also reveals the creative and resistant practices through which marginalised communities reclaim their historical presence and challenge dominant narratives. Future research might further our understanding on the ways in which digital technologies and transnational networks create new possibilities for marginalised heritage to circulate beyond institutional control.

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## Notes on contributors

*Merve Kayıkcı* is an anthropologist and a Postdoctoral Researcher at Radboud University, affiliated with the Gender and Diversity Research Group. Her research explores human subjectivity in relation to religious ethics, belonging, and identity in pluralistic contexts, with a focus on cultural heritage formation and the everyday lives of Muslims in Europe. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork across the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and France. She has co-edited multiple volumes on the everyday practices of Muslims, including topics such as digital culture, intimacy, and activism.

*Sertaç Sehlíkoglu* is an anthropologist and an Associate Professor at University College London, Institute for Global Prosperity. Her research explores intangible aspects of human subjectivity—such as intimacy, desire, agency, and political imaginaries—that drive social transformation. She has conducted ethnographic fieldwork across Turkey, Lebanon, and the Balkans. Sehlíkoglu leads the ERC-funded “Imaginative Landscapes of Islamist Politics” (TAKHAYYUL) project and authored “Working Our Desire: Women, Sport and Self-Making in Istanbul” (2021). She has co-edited multiple special journal issues on intimacy, critique, ethics, and imagination and serves as Reviews Section Editor for the Journal of Middle East Women's Studies and the Editor-in-Chief of Contemporary Islam.



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