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EXPRESSING IT AS IT SHOULD BE: WELCOME ABOARD

DAWSON MUNJERI

“A living tradition continues to provide a framework for design and construction”, so posits Jukka Jokiletho (1). It is a statement that Giovanni Antongini and Tito Spini validate in the context of the Lobi people of Burkina Faso where lessons learned from nature and parallels between the spiritual world and reality influence the shapes of buildings and how in this way architectural problems are solved. The baobab tree where hunters once sheltered, now a home, is “a shell from the holy river in which it is said White people (spirits) live” (2). Indeed as Mervyn Claxton aptly puts it, “architecture more than any other form of art expresses the cultural values of a community and has been one of the main outlets for a community’s creative energy”. True indeed the built heritage is a principal form of cultural expression reflecting a people’s technical solutions to the problems of shelter as well as their artistic sensitivities, aesthetic values and religious beliefs (3). Full cycle the Lobi context is verified in universal terms by the said Claxton observation. Architecture then becomes a reflection of the people’s concept of the use of space, forms of social life and social organisation.

Using the idiom of architectural heritage, this paper seeks to address issues of heritage presentation and interpretation in the overall context of values and norms that help foster conservation. As will be illustrated, through this form of physical heritage relationships involving society (i.e. systems of interaction connecting people) norms and values (i.e. ideas and belief systems) are synchronized. Elsewhere, I have submitted that there is a “smart partnership when these three elements (society, values and norms) are operating harmoniously i.e. when they are fully synchronized(4). Physical heritage only attains its true significance when it sheds light on the underlying values and norms (ideas, belief systems etc) which are intangible. Conversely, as Mounir Bouchenaki observes, “the intangible must be made incarnate in tangible manifestations, in visible signs, if it is to be conserved” [my emphasis] (5). Where this is not so i.e. when the intangible heritage is not seen and understood as the larger framework within which the tangible heritage

takes its shape and significance, then the resultant discordance has adverse and serious implications for sustainability of both cultural and natural heritage. The paper seeks to demonstrate again, the plausibility of such an assertion with respect to issues of interpretation and conservation. In this respect, perhaps the poetic contribution of Carmen Anon Felieu is worth noting, “Beauty has more to do with the look given to the things than with things themselves. *It is the feeling that creates beauty*”(6). For that “given”, to be veritable and to be as close to the real as possible becomes a factor of distance and experience. Values and norms are equally a factor of relative intimacy, familiarity but ultimately an issue of identity.

In extenso the foregoing premises demand “a vision of heritage held by a people or community based on an emotional response to place and history”, Sharon Sullivan appropriately notes. It thus becomes a question of the linkage between a people and its heritage, with the former animating the latter. “But animation and love is often subtle [because of the intangible dimension of values and norms] and difficult to categorise or recognize by outsiders and sometimes does not reside in the formal values of our [professional, foreign] heritage system” (7). Expressing it as it should be, is thus also an issue of ownership and not just one of intellectual rigour although the two need not be antagonistic or exclusive. This ownership notion should center the generators (past, present and future) of that which is subject to interpretation and conservation. Until that approach is adopted or as the adage goes, “until lions have their historians, the story of hunting will always be about the exploits of the hunter”. The consequences of that are reflected in the fishermen’s tales, “The one that got away”!! Regrettably as the paper again demonstrates, that continues to be the norm rather than the exception in the heritage field.

From time immemorial, the Shona people of Zimbabwe have steeped their architecture in metaphor of norms and practices. The circular is an expression of their view of the totality and completeness of their universe where all are one: the dead and the living; the animate and the inanimate; the sacred and the profane. The circular symbolizes embracement of all values. [By coincidence, the UNESCO World Heritage emblem seeks to reflect some of these notions].

Even though now in part influenced by other cultures the traditional *hut* (rondavel) continues to bear this message. [The *Oxford Dictionary English*, 2nd ed. (2003) describes rondavel as a South African term for a traditional circular, dwelling with a conical thatched roof building with a conical roof. [It is the nearest description of the hut.]

Constructed of *daga* (adobe), hardened mud (sometimes moulded as bricks,) to provide the walling which is capped by grass thatch supported by wooden poles, the hut is circular for reasons outlined above.

Spatial arrangements in the hut are at the core of the values that the hut embraces. In side it, on the left side sit the women, on the floor. On the right, on a long semi-circular earthen bench, built into the wall, sit the men.

In the middle is the hearth, the interface between the cosmic and profane worlds. Here, in normal circumstances, this is a cooking place but on ceremonial occasions, it becomes a place of ritual atonement.

On the left, i.e. the women's side, when death occurs, the deceased is laid overnight before burial, excluded from the rest by a "curtain". It is the left that symbolizes the umbilical cord that binds the child to the mother at birth. At death, that cord is not severed but is in fact tightened.

At the very back of the hut and directly apposite the door is the *chikuva*, a raised earthen platform on which are a series of pots. During rituals, offerings and atonements take place. It is the *sanctum sanctorum* of the household. [In some Shona traditions e.g. in Mrehwa district, the deceased is laid here before burial].

When ancestral spirits take possession of the their spirit mediums during ritual, the whole hut becomes "a temple", transmitting messages which determine fate of the whole family, clan and depending on the status of the spirit in the spiritual hierarchy, it may determine the fate of the whole tribe and if it is a major spirit (*mhondoro*), a whole nation.

Encoded in that small hut are messages of agnate and cognate geneology; human relationships (female/ male; hierarchies) human –spiritual relationships etc. past-present and future relationships. Employment opportunities, harvests, famine and health issues are all determined in this humble rondavel. These underlining messages all illustrate the fact that only lions can tell their story.

“Household heritage”, as Alain Sinou says, serves as mnemonic reservoir of social and cultural history. It is a situation that Sinou observes as applying to city of Ouidah in Benin. Here a large portion of housing is directed, not at the living but to the dead.. a house empty is not necessarily so “...many of these buildings are sanctuaries rather than dwellings in which the dead often outnumber the living” (8). The import of all the foregoing can be illustrated through a number of cases. Beginning with the last case, that of Ouidah, presentation and conservation of such heritage would be way off the mark if for example it focused on what is seemingly important, at least aesthetically.

Seemingly abandoned houses are “not abandoned; on the contrary they remind all the members of the family line of the original unity [which is] resuscitated by voodoo ceremonies, presentation and rehabilitation projects must take this dimension into account.” [Sinou: 295] A fundamental point is that it is the originators of such household heritage that should take the lead in carrying out such presentation and rehabilitation. The alternative is regrettably too ghastly to contemplate as the following case will illustrate.

Arthur Pedersen, using Great Zimbabwe as a case study of local community involvement in tourism, refers to the Great Zimbabwe living museum project. The authorities responsible for the Great Zimbabwe world heritage site came up with a project that was designed to add value to the site, particularly to enable visitors to have an idea of what life at Great Zimbabwe would have been like in its heyday as well as to illustrate the customs and traditions of the indigenous community. To do so, they conceived a “Shona Village”, which according to the site manager was, “a condensed ethnographic recreation of a village, enacting Zimbabwe. The village tenants perform activities enacting Zimbabwe rural life and experiences,” says the site manager (9). It was a project that was also meant to yield material benefits to the surrounding local communities. The “villagers” would perform income-generating activities in which they were the sole beneficiaries e.g. making handicrafts, wooden and stone carvings, clay pots etc for sale to the visitors as well as performing dances etc. Pederson however observed that the local community’s reaction was the very opposite. “The creation of a living museum to bring in more visitors met with criticism and indifference. Local people thought the living museum misrepresented the site, was inappropriate and reduces the site’s *historical and cultural* importance to just another attraction with little reference to the peoples real

identity” (10). Material considerations *per se* were immaterial if it was at the expense of the real values as ascribed by the communities. Testimony indeed to the truthness of Sayed Nacqvi’s statement made at the opening of the 14th General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) General Conference in 1983, “Where there is not bread how can we say : let them have museums [cultural heritage] instead! But you will retort with reason, that this a false alternative, that our cultures themselves are an infinite richness, whatever the level of economic development”.(11) Indeed this is what the local communities were saying at Great Zimbabwe. In the case of Great Zimbabwe what were these values? The very replication of a huts “Shona village” comprising a series of, was an affront to the real meaning of these huts and this household heritage. That in itself was a devaluation of a people’s identity.

Similar “Shona villages” have been constructed elsewhere in Zimbabwe, albeit as commercial concerns. They did not however draw the same level of criticism and a sense of revulsion. This particular reaction at Great Zimbabwe was viewed as an outrage because it undermined the very essence of a *people’s history* and *identity* as Pedersen cites. Great Zimbabwe was equivalent to “the cradle of mankind” for the people of Zimbabwe as a whole [hence the naming of the country after this site]. In the first instance it is pertinent to note that the very architecture of Great Zimbabwe is an embodiment of the architectural traditions of the Shona. For all its grandeur reflected in dry stone walls, Great Zimbabwe is a replication of the Shona circular hut; for all its aesthetical manifestations the entire site can be interpreted in simple terms of the spatial arrangements of the hut; for all its seemingly complex functions it can, like the hut, be simply divided into the dichotomy of the human/ spiritual; the sacred and the profane; male/ female; agnate and cognate ; junior/senior relationships. Just as the hut embodies all the virtues, opportunities, threats for the family, clan, tribe etc and is a source of health, harvests etc. so too does Great Zimbabwe. Testimony to this was a letter addressed to this author [at that time responsible for management of sites and monuments in Zimbabwe]. Dated 27 September 1991 and signed by all the traditional leaders led by their Chief [the late Zephania Charumbira], they wrote, “we feel it is necessary to tell you what pains us most with regard to the keeping of traditional customs with respect to Great Zimbabwe. Every month, every season and every year customs and traditions were practiced

culminating in one major sacred gathering at Great Zimbabwe. This was stopped by the White Governments. When independence came and we Africans took control, the traditional leaders celebrated because we felt we could now practice our own customs and traditions, But we soon discovered that our new Government was preventing traditional customs from being practised. Our ancestral spirits are not happy”. Indeed when Carl Mauch, the first European to visit Great Zimbabwe in 1871 went to the site, he observed ritual ceremonies taking place. Of course he erroneously concluded that these were a result of the influence of Judeo-Christianity. In his diary he recorded, after watching the ceremony by “Berebebe” who he referred to as the “priest”, “Today I can proclaim that the Queen of Sheba is the Queen of Simbase [sic] mentioned in Psalm 72 v 10”. This was the beginning of the myth about the non-African origins of Great Zimbabwe.[The genealogical relationship between contemporary African architecture, steeped in the series of daga (adope)/ thatch huts that have been dated to the 10th century and the stone architecture of Great Zimbabwe proves the African authorship of Great Zimbabwe].

In their reaction to the “living museum”, the communities were indeed defending at all cost this long established heritage now threatened by the interpretation of “scholars” and “curators” at Great Zimbabwe. In their reaction the same communities were unequivocally saying any interpretation must be locally-conceptualised and executed. Regrettably as Webber Ngoro noted, presentation has tended to be directed at the foreign tourist thus alienating the local community from its own cultural heritage (12).

Such an approach regrettably has negative consequences when it also comes to the protection and conservation of that heritage. Because these communities are convinced, rightly or wrongly that appointed national and site authorities are a threat to their heritage they see ghosts in every wardrobe and react accordingly, to exorcise these heritage places. Such was the case at Great Zimbabwe in 1994. A well-intended conservation programme drew the following reaction which unfortunately appeared in the “Letters to the Editor” column of a national Daily, *The Herald* on 24 June. Signed, “Very Concerned”, in part the letter read thus, “We are concerned at the state of affairs at Great Zimbabwe. The decision by the Government to engage the French to rebuild the ruins was stupid and ill-advised. They should have consulted the elders of the area but we were treated as mere

outsiders. What do the French know about Great Zimbabwe or even what do National Museums people [responsible for the site administration] know? Absolutely nothing.....I understand that one wall which they had rebuilt with cement collapsed thus showing the supernatural power of the spirits. If something meaningful is to be done to reconstruct [and show] the ruins the elders have to do it-after brewing appeasement beer.” In his response this writer [at the time, Executive Director of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe] of course pointed out that the premise of the story, namely, French involvement was as remote a prospect as “receiving the Martians” at the site. The truth however as was relayed in the response was that with the support of Donor Community and UNESCO, a team of Zimbabwean archeologists, monuments conservators, photogrammetrists, surveyors and stone masons were scientifically[guided by ICOMOS, ICCROM principles] reconstructing sections of walls.

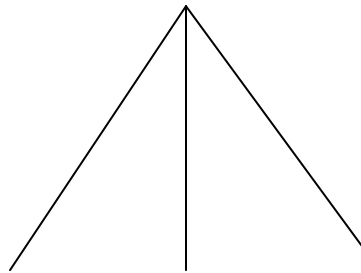
That truth nevertheless failed to acknowledge and accept the central point of the “Very concerned’s”, argument, namely the consultation and involvement of the elders. That truth did not acknowledge with thanks the genuine concern that foreign material (cement) and foreign expertise (French) if it were used would destroy not only the authenticity of the site but also a people’s identity. That truth did not address the issue of ownership (elders *vis-à-vis* National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe). That truth did not answer the critical question: What do National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe know about Great Zimbabwe? In essence, implicit in that question was the issue of indigenous knowledge systems of conservation, preservation and presentation. It is these fundamental questions and issues that must be answered by WELCOMING THEM ABOARD.

Welcoming them aboard means answering these issues squarely and honestly. In the travel column of the *International Herald Tribune* of 14 April 2005 [page 20] is a small article, titled, “Round up at Angkor Wat”. In it the Commissioner of Police, Col Tan Chayi boasts of clean up operation at this famous world heritage site. “I have ordered my police to catch the buffalos and cows roaming in the Anghor Wat heritage zone. Then we will ask their owners to pay a fine. *The area needs to be kept as a nice place for tourists.* Whose heritage? For who? Who determines and presents what is nice? Have these buffaloes and cows not always been part of this heritage and should they not be part

of the show? It becomes an issue of aesthetics and meeting the demands of the tourists at the expense of the generators of the heritage. It is an issue which in the already cited paper, Sharon Sullivan appropriately refers to as one where natural and cultural heritage professionals strive for “perfection of materiality”. In so doing she rightly concludes, we harvest “polarity” because in our heritage practices “*we see heritage places one dimensionally* (my emphasis), to put them in boxes, to split them up and dissect them”

Not a strong subject of mine I must confess, but from my early childhood art teacher (David Sherwood), I learnt about “the three dimensions of line”.

Graphically put it looks thus:-



Simply put, every picture has to fall within a three-line reference framework; this is regardless of its size. It is a big and realistic picture when taken from the nearest point to the viewer and progressively narrows until it tapers into the final point. This reinforces the point made earlier on that it becomes an issue of “given” and a factor of distance and values. However, here the point to stress is the fact that it is more than one dimension of line.

The point to also underscore is that there are three parameters “dimensions” that must guide our pictorial and mental perspective. That is the reality of the World in which we live. Yet as has just been noted, according to Sullivan, we see it differently: ONE DIMENSIONALLY!! To follow just one line will not produce a full picture. It cannot be a real World. The two personal experiences drawn from South Africa serve to illustrate this point.

On the first occasion I had the privilege to undertake an ICOMOS evaluation mission of the Robben Island: that symbol of human oppression. Between 1652 and 1990, people were incarcerated in inhuman conditions in order to break their resolve for freedom and justice. These conditions climaxed in the Apartheid era (1948 to 1993) after which democratic South Africa came into being. From the 1960's onwards political prisoners were housed in prison complexes on this Island. The first prison complex was built in 1960's and the second was built in the 1970's. To the architects of the Apartheid system who were now under increasing international attention, this latter prison "the New Complex" was meant to show the "humane side" of the Apartheid system.

After the 1970's the Old Complex was abandoned altogether and so to many people, the face of Robben Island is reflected in the New Complex which has become a thriving tourist destination. It is here where the famous "B" Block where Nelson Mandela spent a good part of his life is located. The Old Complex (at least during the time of the evaluation and many years later after inscription on World Heritage List in 1999) was abandoned and totally neglected. It became the dumping site for garbage and a breeding ground for thousands of penguins.

A former inmate who was now a trained guide took me through the New Complex then to the famous limestone quarries where prisoners carried out the hard chores. He guided me through the cemetery and lastly led me to this neglected and forgotten Old Complex. Here he passionately narrated the horrors of the place. His last words were, "This is the real Robben Island: this is where people really suffered". As if to add to the drama and in the process also demonstrating the real Statement of Significance of Robben Island, which in part reads [According to the Nomination Dossier on the World Heritage status] "the miracle of the triumph of the human spirit over enormous hardships and adversity", the former inmate concluded, "This is where they [inmates] triumphed". One could not but see that from the perspective and experience of those on the centre stage, those it concerned most ["Very Concerned"] rather than those to whom it may concern, the true values of Robben Island were carved in the Old Complex. In reality this was the three dimension perspective: this is the big picture taken from the best vantage point. However, for those entrusted with managing the site the true values were in the high-profile areas like the B-Block: a narrow point indeed taken by those distanced from

the events and therefore from one dimension and from the worst vantage point. From that narrow perspective as illustrated in the case of the Great Zimbabwe “living museum” or in the case of the Angkor Wat, the goal becomes, keeping “a nice place for tourists”. The presentation of Robben Island: its focus and message was determined by these considerations and not by the true meaning of the heritage. The state of neglect of the Old Complex *vis-à-vis*, the impeccable condition of the New Complex speaks volumes of the intrinsic links between conservation and presentation: between the lion and the hunter.

Conservation and presentation are however the middle and last processes in the heritage cycle; the identification of such heritage is the beginning of that cycle. Involvement of those it concerns most at that initial stage of necessity determines the latter processes. Involving them at the tail end seldom resolves the initial problems and contradictions attendant to that marginalisation or exclusion. The second personal experience will be used to illustrate this point.

In September 2004 the author visited the Taung Skull Site. Its significance is based on the fossilised remains of the facial skeleton skull of a juvenile ape-man (*Australopithecus africanus*) recovered from the site in the North-West Province of South Africa. Through the work of Professor Raymond Dart, a new genus and species of hominid was discovered in 1925 which ushered-in a series of new fields of scientific endeavour, in particular in African palaeontology. The Skull, embedded in limestone tufas would have been undiscovered had it not been for commercial limestone mining operations that exposed it in 1924. If this point was lost to all, it was not lost to Abram Sefadi a one-time limestone miner at Taung site. Typically focused on establishing the universal significance of the Taung site in terms of its palae-anthropology emphasis has always been on this one dimension of line. When all else had been said and done, and in the same fashion as the Robben Island former inmate, Abram Sefadi took me to a different point to show me the wider picture. We visited the Mining Compound which had housed the limestone miners. He emotionally narrated the hard conditions they endured in the limestone mines and in the mining compound. Now abandoned but still structurally sound, it was easy to see that fuller picture from that mining compound: a picture clearly pointing to interconnectedness of the palaeo-anthropology and the history of mining and

the central role of the local people in it all. Sefadi needn't have said it but he said it all the same: "Please do not forget that without our sweat the Skull would not have been found. Without this compound which is now neglected there would have been no Skull." As Dr. Judy Maguire, the palaeoanthropologist who has worked on the site for many years indeed confirmed, "Unfortunately, after mining operations stopped there was total removal of the narrow gauge railway track as well as everything else....The result is that little sense can be made of the remnant...and the visitor will gain little insight into it all... However [she acknowledges] the entire history of the Skull find is tied up with the story of lime exploitation and the visitor needs to understand this if the fact that the find itself is not there any more is to be accepted and understood" (13). That cannot be totally correct. Those closest to the heritage, the simple old miners are still there to provide the answers; the storyline is still there; sense can still be made out of the site and the visitor can still be made to know the full picture, if we only asked "Very Concerned". That three-dimension picture may not be dramatic, it may not be in forms that are obvious nor always as tangible like the railway tracks, the kilns, the ore presses that have been victim to "metal harvesting". The picture takes the inaudible form of the oral history of old miners; it takes the form of the mining compound which though removed from the "centre" [the centre named "Dart Pinnacle", is site of the skull] is in fact central to the holistic picture. It is indeed at this initial stage before all else is cast in stone that the Sefadis should be made to Come on Board: they are ready to jump on board.

The picture emerging in all the cited cases is that of the force of the inaudible voice. This is in a form of and as strong as passive resistance and like the latter it is packed with humble words of wisdom. It is almost like saying to those who have ears: whatever your success, these may be Pyrrhic victories. As armament there is on the one side what an anonymous writer calls "politics of intellectual discourse" and on the other side "the politics of cultural" (13). In such situations a battle of the magnitude of Armageddon is possible. Yet there is an alternative win-win situation such as one presented by Sullivan where we accept that we have to give up some notions of ownership, intellectual rigour and expertise. This way we make a compromise with this politics of the cultural. That may not be a tall order, although that is far from saying it is by no means easy. It is an issue of *Stooping to Conquer*.

In the case of Great Zimbabwe, this is the route that was ultimately followed. The site authorities opened dialogue with the two local communities, the Nemanwa and Mugabe clans who it must be admitted had not only contested the authority and ownership of the site in relation to National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (representing the Government) but over centuries had among themselves been locked in the struggle for supremacy over the site. In the changed circumstances, faced with a common “enemy” the two realised the need to bury their differences to present a united front. A front which led to the formation of a co-management body of traditional leaders and their teams on the one hand, and the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) on the other. Key concessions made by the latter included opening the site for traditional rituals including the rehabilitation of the sacred fountain which according to traditional authorities had been desecrated by the erection of a concrete structure in 1960’s. As part of the “new deal”, NMMZ sponsors one major ritual ceremony annually. [Matenga :119].

In the case of the living museum, the desirability of such a facility was finally accepted by both parties, particularly as a tourist feature that would benefit all. However, the siting, the content, the researchers, data collectors, data collection methods, the constructors: all those were a negotiated outcome. The original site of the village was on sacred ground that was too close to a sacred pond. Traditional custodians of knowledge were brought into the process working hand in hand with ethnographers, archaeologists, anthropologists etc. Suffice it to say even the methodologies were changed to suit the new demands. Both the construction materials and the constructors were determined by the new partnership arrangements. Thus for example in choice of materials, a balance had to be struck involving what tree grass species and earth to use. Whereas for example, modern day traditional clay used in construction was simply a mixture of clayey soils and water, archaeological evidence showed that the *daga* (adobe) used during the heyday of Great Zimbabwe was a clayey soil which was peddled and mixed with weathered gravel aggregate. When dry the mixture formed a durable cement-type material which was then used to construct substantive round house walls and floors. This is the type of material that was used for the living museum: evidence of “politics of intellectual discourse” fine-tuned to “the politics of cultural”, *par excellence*.

The builders too were a product of the same transformation. Traditionally, there was a gender balance in the construction of houses: women being involved in constructing the walls and men in thatching. These traditional norms and practices found their way back into the “living museum” project. Collections and the exhibition of these were equally founded on the same principles and so too were the principal players in the museum. Rituals accompanied all the stages of the project and finally in keeping with the original intentions of the NMMZ authorities, the local communities became the financial beneficiaries of the project: this time, not compromising their cultural heritage (norms and values).

This is indeed a model advocated by the *UNESCO Medium-Term Strategy 1996-2001*, in 1995. Indeed as that *Strategy* stresses, preservation of heritage is a vast undertaking that “in the long run can only be successful if there is active participation by local communities...This heritage [as in case of Great Zimbabwe example] should be fully integrated into the economic and social life of the community...” With such an approach tourism is not antagonistic to cultural heritage but is complementary to it. “Growth of cultural tourism of a kind that respects cultural identities and meets the development needs of local communities over the long term” should be encouraged, the *Medium-Term Strategy* underscores. *Stooping to Conquer* is indeed a strategy that will yield sustainable results for THEM and US. At the already cited 1983 ICOM General Assembly, Sayed Nacqvi aptly captured this message, “Our paths will be marked out not in high sounding phrases of pomp and circumstance but in the mundane realities”, that is the message to get them aboard as equal partners for the sake of heritage.

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