

« THE UNKNOWN DIMENSION: AN ISSUE OF VALUES »

Introductory lecture by Dawson MUNJERI, Permanent Delegate of Zimbabwe at UNESCO, Former Vice President of ICOMOS

Your excellency; the President of the Republic of Zimbabwe; Mr. President of the 14th General Assembly, Mr. President of ICOMOS International, the President of ICOMOS International and all protocols observed:

Allow me to congratulate you, President of the 14th General Assembly on your well deserved election to the esteemed office. We are very confident that through you this historic General Assembly and Scientific Symposium will be a success.

In prefacing my introductory remarks on the sub-theme, "Impact of Change and Diverse Perceptions". I draw your attention to what is in the Scientific Symposium Summary in the handout. At the time of its writing the world was expressing shock at the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas Monument at the hands of the Taliban.

History repeats itself because first time no one was listening, so says the English Historian, A. J. P Taylor; only a few years after the horrific iconoclast Act of Bayiman, the world witnessed a repetition of the same tragedy. As my Nigerian colleagues would say, it took "*a shan of the shoil*" (Son of the Soil) to say it. The famous Nigerian Ben Okri, opening an exhibition at the British Museum in June 2003 commented on the looting of the Baghdad Museum and the pillaging of Iraq's cultural heritage and archeological sites in these words, "For all his failures, at least Alexander the Great, the Macedonian Emperor left a lasting legacy on civilization viz: the library in Alexandra (Egypt). What legacy do we leave behind after pillaging or watching the looting of Mesopotamia civilization?"

What I find interesting is that some of the perpetrators of this mass destruction do so out of ignorance. Would some of them have known the priceless value of those cuneiform tablets and their contribution to global civilization. What is one to say of the Taliban retort that the Bamiyan treasures deserved destruction because they were "a creation of a creature; to create a creature is a sin".

What I find perplexing (and that is the central thrust of my presentation) is that it is not this type of one-off perpetrator who is a danger to cultural heritage. We should not be looking out there for the real long-term danger. Purposeful neglect, contempt for other perceptions, lack of conservation strategies pose the greatest danger. This is the message coming through from the papers presented under the sub-theme, "Impact of change and diverse perceptions".

I here point that at the heart of it all is the issue of Values: our understanding of them; what to make of them; what to ascribe to them: all this determines the policies, strategies and practices' that either save or condemn our cultural heritage.

For over 2000 years, the terraced rice fields of the Ifugao in Philippines survived on a dialogue involving humanity's adherence to certain values and norms. The growing of the japonica rice variety; respect for rituals and traditions including sacrifices to the deities; respect for ancestral rights relating to land ownership; respect for the principles of primogeniture enabling the harnessing of the physical strength of the youth at one with harnessing the wisdom of elders; respect for traditional know-how and techniques e.g. the traditional hydraulic engineering technology: all these values served to sustain the Rice Terraces Cordilleras. These values recognized as well at international levels resulted in the site being inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

Does it not sound a familiar text? This time thousands of kilometers away in Nigeria on our own terrain. The World Heritage dossier on Sukur speaks of a cultural landscape built around the spirit and personality of the Hidi. A landscape sustained by a religious system that reinforces the socio-cultural order mirroring the Hidi as Society's wife. Through age grade system the young maintain the ritual paths and agricultural terraces. Spatial distributions and use of space serve as codes that define the roles and obligations of the society, with the young, the elders and the spiritual leader (Hidi) living in a harmonized relationship. *That relationships underwrites the stability of the cultural landscape.* Those values too resulted in the inscription of the site on to the World Heritage List. The same pattern can be read in Kasubi (Uganda) Ambohimanga (Madagascar) and elsewhere. VALUES, NORMS AND SOCIETY intrinsically linked to sustain cultural heritage.

In 2001 the Philippines Cordilleras were inscribed on a different list: the World Heritage-in-Danger-List. The IUCN/ICOMOS reactive monitoring mission noted with regret, indeed sorrow that the partnership of VALUES, NORMS AND SOCIETY had been *seriously undermined by CHANGE*.

At the individual and local levels the increasing propensity to acquire wealth broke all time taboos.

Cutting down trees to sell the firewood threatened the ecosystem as well as the terraces; the socio-cultural fabric caved-in as the principles of primogeniture were challenged by a questioning youth adopting foreign ideologies and practices; by drifting into paid employment in urban areas, the energetic labour force sapped the very foundations of the rice terrace culture. At national level the introduction of pest species e.g. the giant snails for food resulted in the elimination of indigenous species which had sustained the ecosystem. The local institution overseeing the site equally lost its powers to a superstructure divorced from the locals. At international level the avarious drive to introduce hybrid rice species resulted in the increasing unpopularity of the traditional japonica species; market-driven rather than society-driven considerations took sway. "Absolutely bodacious", my favorite cartoon Ninja Turtle would call it. On a more serious note, Joseph Stiglitz the 2001 winner of the Nobel Prize for Economics, in his book, *Globalisation and its discontents*, vividly illustrates how changes brought about by globalisation are undermining the socio-cultural fabric leading to the demise of entire cultural traditions. As a former Chief Economist of the World Bank he is well qualified to say so; the Rice Terraces of Cordilleras are a classic example of how this happens.

The underlying and unequivocal message coming through is that when VALUES and NORMS diminish or are discarded, the whole system disintegrates like a pack of cards. Society is the tangible dimension underpinned by intangible components viz: values and norms. The Kasubi's, the Ambohimangas etc. can only survive when this message is taken seriously.

In the October 2003 issue of British Airways in-flight magazine, *Highlife* Malcolm Macalister Hall describes among other things Nelson Mandela's experiences on Robben Island; "the Alcatraz of apartheid" as he calls it. The same message comes through in Mandela's book, *The Long Walk to Freedom*.

I will narrate my own experience (not as an inmate of course). On one visit, an official guide took me round the beaten paths that include the famous 'B' Block where Mandela and the top African nationalist hierarchy was incarcerated. As we came to the end of this tour and when the official guide left, there came this old man, a former inmate now a guide. He had been following my officially guided tour. He said to me, "Do you have a minute to spare?" I said, "Of course". I had in fact two hours to kill before taking the boat to the mainland. He took me off the beaten path to a horribly dilapidated site. Here were old neglected buildings, home to roosting colonies of penguins. The area was now also the waste dumping ground for the Island. Passionately the inmate went into the history of the site. When in early 1960's the Apartheid regime set up Robben Island as a prison, they had in mind creating a hell on earth. This was it: tiny flea-infested rooms; sleeping on floors watered to make them cold; criminal prisoners brought in to sodomise the political prisoners (at this point the guide broke down in tears because he too was a victim of this and he has never recovered from that).

"THIS MY FRIEND IS THE REAL ROBBER ISLAND'. THAT THERE (pointing to distance new prison block including the famous 'B' Block) WE REFERRED TO AS THE HOTEL". The new section had been built after news reports had revealed the harsh conditions in late 1970's. To him, the real values of Robben Island are reflected in the old section: now a neglected rubbish dumpsite. It is such neglect of the peoples values, which makes us as the official custodians, accessories to the crimes of Bamiyan and elsewhere.

This is the essence of the second part this sub-theme, "Diverse perceptions": The 2001 *UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity* brings that out. It is the intangible heritage which is the critical tool through which communities and societies define their *archive of relationships between cultural values and cultural valuables*. If cultural heritage can be seen as a major vehicle of human aspirations, tangible heritage is its physical shape but intangible is its motor and steering mechanism".

What the Robben Island scenario equally demonstrates is that rather than looking at change subjectively we should look at it objectively. This entails us adopting the worm's eye rather than the bird's eye perspective. The recent adoption by the UNESCO 32ND General Conference of the *Convention of the safeguarding of intangible heritage* behoves upon us to adopt that perspective lest ICOMOS becomes extinct.

To end on a poignant note, by the way have you noticed that in both the *Long Walk to Freedom* and his discourse with Macalister Hall, Nelson Mandela stresses that the "real university of life" was not the 'B' Block or some other visible landmarks; it is the hidden limestone quarries which we seldom recognise in our pecking order. The bottom line of it all therefore is that VALUES have to be FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF OTHERS AND NOT FROM OUR PERSPECTIVE per se.

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