

PLACE – MEMORY – MEANING: PRESERVING INTANGIBLE VALUES IN MONUMENTS AND SITES

**Introductory lecture by
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Dear Colleagues,

As I already said this morning on the occasion of the opening ceremony of our 14th General Assembly, it was high time for ICOMOS to focus once more on the "tangible/intangible" topic at a big conference, and particularly in Africa, in Victoria Falls since our African colleagues have made such valuable contributions to this topic. The ICOMOS symposium comes just at the right time as only a few days ago the UNESCO General Conference in Paris adopted by overwhelming majority the International Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage which completes the organisation's existing legal instruments for the safeguarding of heritage, first the Hague Convention of 1954 with which ICOMOS is connected through the Blue Shield; furthermore the Convention against Illicit Export, Import and Transfer of Cultural Property of 1970, which is of great importance to us not only in connection with the events in Iraq; then the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage of 1972, in the implementation of which we are constantly involved as advisory body to UNESCO; finally the Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage of 2001, to which our Underwater Scientific Committee has made decisive contributions. As Mounir Bouchenaki has already explained in depth, intangible heritage as a source of cultural identity, creativity and diversity includes "customs and oral traditions, music, languages, poetry, dance, festivities, religious ceremonies as well as systems of healing, traditional knowledge systems and skills connected with the material aspects of culture, such as tools and the habitat." All these elements, music and dance, and especially the mastering and passing on of handicraft skills were already presented at the International Colloquium organised by our South American colleagues in Salvador de Bahia in 2002. This colloquium was of great relevance for all further discussion on this topic. Today and tomorrow, however, inspired by the waters of the Victoria Falls, that means with the help of a particularly powerful genius loci, we want to use the three sections of our symposium also for reflections on how we, together with our partners, can contribute to a successful Convention for the Intangible Heritage.

But before I try to consider the consequences of this "tangible/intangible" issue for the future work of ICOMOS, which thanks to the new Convention is of topical interest, I would like to reconsider some of the points I made during another ICOMOS conference important for the development of the Victoria Falls subject, namely Dinu Bumbaru's *Spirit of Sites (Le Génie des Lieux)* in Montreal in 2002.

Besides, it would be important to refer to the Nara Document written almost ten years ago (by the way: Japan in co-operation with UNESCO and ICOMOS is planning another conference next year on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of Nara), whose reflections on the topics of Heritage Values and Authenticity, but also on the important aspect of Cultural Diversity at first glance seem far more differentiated than the sometimes rather banal differentiation between material and immaterial, between tangible as "capable of being touched" and intangible as "something that cannot be touched or grasped" (I am quoting from my Oxford Dictionary).

The most important result of the conference of Nara was a rewriting of the old test of authenticity in design, material and workmanship to also explicitly include the immaterial values of our cultural heritage: "*Depending on the nature of the cultural heritage, its cultural context and its evolution through time,*" the Nara Document states, "*authenticity judgements may be linked to the worth of a great variety of sources of information. Aspects of these sources may include form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, and spirit and feeling, and other internal and external factors.*" In this sense when we direct our attention to the spiritual message of our cultural heritage, we can refer to the first sentence of the founding document of ICOMOS, the Venice Charter, preferably in the French version: "*Chargées d'un message spirituel du passé, les oeuvres monumentales des peuples demeurent dans la vie présente le témoignage vivant de leurs traditions séculaires.*" Behind these words lies a very broad concept of monuments and sites, distinguishing also article 1 of the World Heritage Convention of 1972: Monuments as an archive of authentic sources for cultural history, social history, industrial history, etc. are evidence created by man that, already according to the definition in a late classical commentary on Cicero, "should evoke remembrance of something" (*omnia monumenta sunt, quae faciunt alicuius rei recordationem*) - by the way this is also a suitable definition of the theme of our symposium "Place, Memory, Meaning". The material from which the monument as an object of remembrance is made can thus be just as variable as the degree of "materialisation" of the spiritual message that the monument represents - from the traces of a prehistoric settlement detectable now only in the dark-coloured negative form of potholes, to the immense stone blocks of an "immortal" pyramid created as it were for eternity. As an idea that took on shape, the monument is in any case more than a tangible "object" consisting of a certain material. There are even monuments whose materials are so ephemeral that they are in need of renewal again and again; indeed even the mere replica of a monument that no longer exists materially could still "evoke remembrance of something."

If we adhere to such ideas of "monument" that have existed since the antiquity, the concept of cultural heritage continually broadened in the course of the past 30 years of World Heritage Convention and including the concepts of cultural routes and cultural landscapes (in article 1 of the Convention already named as "works of nature and man") has always been there and comprises an incredible diversity of cultural manifestations. Seen from this perspective the distinction occasionally made between a "more tangible monumental heritage" as in Europe and a "more intangible" and therefore "non-monumental" heritage, for instance in Africa, does not make much sense. If we look, for instance, at such an exemplary monument as one of the French cathedrals: for some colleagues it might be a classical example of "tangible heritage"; however, in reality it is an image of heaven, a place of worship that has been used for centuries, a site of important historic events, therefore all in all it has a mostly intangible dimension. Furthermore, the upkeep of the material tangible substance constantly requires traditional handicraft skills and thus the mastering of that "traditional craftsmanship", which is meant to be protected by the new UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Without wanting to bother you with the still useful system of commemorative and present-day values, developed 100 years ago in Alois Riegl's *Modern Cult of Monuments* and going far beyond the question of material / immaterial and tangible / intangible, I would at least like to recall the words of Walter Benjamin on works of art, who speaks of a spiritual message that is expressed in every monument's and every site's own "trace" and its "aura". Trace is also understood here as the meaning of the history of the building, which comes to expression in traces of age, the "scars of time". Aura refers not only to the aura of the famous original but also to the aura of the modest historic monument, an aura that is present "in situ", on the place, even when the monument is no longer existing or is hardly comprehensible as "historic fabric". So the true and authentic spirit of monuments and sites normally only finds expression in combination with a particular place, a space which encompasses a certain environment, or what we have defined as a cultural landscape or cultural route. In conjunction with such a space, time as a historical dimension becomes comprehensible: time that has passed at this place, a process that has left many traces since the creation of an object, which has perhaps become a monument, an object of remembrance, only in the course of centuries, a monument in the sense of the Roman definition quoted above; time that is also present in the form of the "Zeitgeist" that the monument embodies, a hard-to-translate German word suggesting the spirit of the times in which the way of life and the "style" of a particular period or epoch are reflected. Space and time can even become one in the spiritual message of the monument -- the apparently paradoxical but quite tangible presence of the past. For example the decaying remnants of a castle ruin evoke generations of knights that lived and fought there, or the stones on the floor of a cloister, worn down over the centuries from footsteps, recall the monument's function as a place of prayer.

Finally, in addition to the spirit of monuments and sites that is conceivable in space, in time, and as evidence of the "Zeitgeist", another essential element is the use of a monument, the function that in some circumstances may have continued in its original or modified form into the present and that also has a special social dimension; for example the old house that is still occupied, in which generations of inhabitants have already left their traces. These traces contribute not only to the historic value but also to the "feeling value" of such a building.

Without going into more detail here concerning the values that are of course very closely bound to the - intangible - spirit of monuments and sites, I would like to emphasise that there is no monument that does not have a corresponding spiritual dimension, which is perhaps more, perhaps less, palpable in the still extant historic fabric, thus appearing more or less tangible or intangible. In any case, in our context of monuments and sites tangible and intangible are only two sides of the same medallion. In this respect the Convention of 1972 already deals with the whole wealth not only of material/physical but also immaterial/spiritual cultural heritage. The development of criterion VI, which I cannot describe here in detail but which I'm sure you all know, fits into this quite well. It is a criterion for outstanding universal value in the operational guidelines, which now plays a central role - and which, of course, could have been applied more broadly in the past.

Apart from that, the more or less exclusively intangible heritage, which is meant to be saved by the new Convention of 2003 - that is oral traditions, languages, music, dance etc, partly within the framework of festivities or religious ceremonies themselves closely linked to historic places and monuments and sites - can only be preserved under the present circumstances if it is at least recorded in writing and pictures. If it were then so-to-speak "frozen" by protective regulations, certain contradictions to the development of living cultures, which cannot be simply "preserved", could arise.

Dear Colleagues, in spite of our enjoyment of song and dance, which hopefully we will still be able to experience here in Victoria Falls, the main focuses of ICOMOS' work within the framework of the Convention for the Intangible Heritage will for obvious reasons be those "traditional knowledge systems and skills connected with material aspects of culture", that is craftsmen's skills to repair historic buildings again and again or to renew them with traditional techniques and materials, continually passing on these techniques to future generations. This is embodied in craftsmen as "living monuments", who in Japan have the honourable obligation to pass on their knowledge to the next generation. Moreover, there are even traditions of monument conservation, which in the sense of the new Convention could be considered intangible heritage just as much as the traditional imparting of knowledge in general. In any case, with the passing of certain traditions and techniques of repair, also of reconstruction after catastrophes, once again we deal with the centuries-old origins of monument conservation, which was a matter of course.

In connection with the aims of the new convention the field of the so-called vernacular architecture will have to be regarded as a special focus of our future work, vernacular architecture being a category of cultural heritage which is highly threatened world-wide and hardly protected in State legislations, therefore being on the World Heritage List only in exceptional cases. The preservation of craftsmen's skills is in fact often a question of survival for many of our most precious cultural landscapes.

In this context of cultural landscapes the new Convention can also remind us of the concern for the intangible values of parts of our natural environment, for example holy trees or holy mountains and of course all that was already characterised as "natural monument" in the conservation theory of around 1900; natural wonders mentioned in criterion VII of the revised operational guidelines as areas *containing superlative natural phenomena or areas of exceptional natural beauty and aesthetic importance*. In the meantime in the operational guidelines for the outstanding value of the cultural and natural heritage there is a list of criteria which are no longer so strictly separated, and our colleagues from IUCN increasingly refer to certain intangible values connected with human interference. This is reflected in the new definition of an IUCN Taskforce on Non-material Values: "The non-material values of protected areas are those that enrich the intellectual, psychological, emotional, spiritual, cultural and/or creative aspects of human existence and well-being. While the material resources of protected areas contribute to the physical standard of living, the non-material values contribute to the quality of life". In view of the limited opportunities to preserve untouched natural sites this means a new openness towards the inclusion of local communities and indigenous peoples with their traditional protection systems and management mechanisms - a tendency which in the sense of preserving intangible values also applies to the area of cultural heritage.

Within the framework of the two UNESCO Conventions of 1972 and 2003 we are once more called upon not to forget the intangible values in our efforts for an adequate "management" - an abundance of examples can surely be found in the section C of our symposium (Conservation and management of intangible heritage). In this context I would just like to point out one of many aspects, which should be valid for all conservationists involved: the respect, even the reverence for cultural properties which are far more than tangible objects. For even the best modern standards of investigation and documentation, conservation and restoration sometimes lead to a dead end, if they are one-sidedly concentrated on the care of historic fabric, tangible material, while the intangible values, the authentic messages of monuments and sites, are no longer understood. Even perfect management plans cannot replace the understanding for the authentic spirit of monuments and sites. We should also keep in mind that especially the authentic use of cultural heritage can be more important than a management with the tendency to concentrate on the material value of objects and to turn them into mere "museum objects".

Fortunately, our colleagues from ICOM are also giving increasing attention to the topic of "intangible cultural heritage", and a year ago at the 7th Asia Pacific Regional Assembly in Shanghai they even recommended "to establish inter-disciplinary and cross-sectorial approaches that bring together the movable and immovable, tangible and intangible, natural and cultural heritage" and "to develop documentation tools and standards in establishing holistic museum and heritage practices." An enormous holistic approach on intangible heritage will then be attempted at ICOM's next General Assembly in Seoul in October 2004. Thanks to UNESCO's new initiative therefore not only ICOMOS and IUCN but also our sister organisation ICOM is now dealing with questions of intangible heritage. For that reason I discussed some weeks ago at the World Heritage Conference in Røros the possibilities of a scientific committee on intangible heritage uniting all three NGOs. A few days ago I received ready agreement for this idea from our Executive Committee. In such a scientific committee we will develop joint initiatives, for which the new UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage offers enough space on a national and international level. In this connection article IX of the Convention is relevant: "Le Comité inter-gouvernemental de sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel propose à l'Assemblée générale l'accréditation d'organisations non-gouvernementales possédant des compétences avérées dans le domaine du patrimoine culturel immatériel. Ces organisations auront des fonctions consultatives auprès du Comité". ICOMOS believes to have this competence as it has been active for decades as advisory body to the World Heritage Convention.

As a contribution to the increasing recognition of the deep inter-relation between or, I would even say, to the identity of tangible and intangible heritage, today's and tomorrow's symposium here in Victoria Falls will lead us back to the roots of our conservation work. As I tried to point out at the beginning, strictly speaking our tangible/intangible subject is not really new, but actually very old; however, it can give strong new impulses to our work. The preoccupation with what we try to define as intangible heritage may also contribute to a broader emotional basis of conservation practice, which can help us in the daily fight against the progressive world-wide destruction and decay of our cultural heritage.

Thank you for your attention.