The Meaning of Cultural Conservation in Muslim Societies*

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In "The Meaning of Cultural Conservation in Muslim Societies" Professor Arkoun points to an important psychological and intellectual difference in the way Muslims regard cultural conservation, the Muslim's perspective being theological and mythical, the European's historical, based on the evidence of written or material documents. There is an urgent need for new conceptual tools to address correctly the question of conservation in Muslim Societies and to elaborate an adequate terminology in the perspective of cultural semiology. Conservation is a radical endeavour to re-think the historical process of semiological disintegration and the necessary conditions of re-integration in the new context created by material and intellectual modernity. Politically, it is essential to conceive and to present conservation as a vital part of social and cultural development, and not as a luxurious exercise for tourists or rich amateurs.

Cultural conservation in Muslim societies is related to nationalist movements, just as it is in western societies. Each society is proud of its past and seeks to show off the glorious performances of its ancestors. The display is not limited to architectural monuments, but includes all cultural legacies like manuscripts, furniture, jewellery, poetry, painting, musical instruments, and weaving.

In European western societies, the concern for cultural rehabilitation, restoration and conservation is based on a historical methodology dating from the 16th Century when the humanist movement looked back to Greek and Roman legacies. Architecture, urban planning, sculpture, painting, law, philosophy, sciences, literature — all Greco-Roman civilisation became the object of learning, imitation and conservation.

Muslim societies, however, started to look back to the past immediately after the death of the Prophet. The companions of the Prophet Mohammed were the living memories of the Quranic revelation and his teachings of Mohammad (the future *hadith*). The Caliphates in Medina and Damascus wanted to run the new Muslim state according to the rules give in the Quran and the practical behaviour of the Prophet during his mission. This means that conservation has been since the very beginning of Islamic history, the primary concern of successive generations. Continuous endeavour led to the conservation of the Quran, the biography of the Prophet (*Sira*), his teachings, and the teachings of the companions (*Sahaba*). Thus historiography became an important literary activity: to write down all the facts related to the inauguration of the new religion became important not only for Muslims, but for all human kind, from the perspective of religious salvation.

There is a big difference between the Muslim concern for the religious past and the European humanists' interest in the Greco-Roman legacy: in the first case the perspective is theological and mainly mythical, in the second case, it is historical, based on the evidence of written or material documents.

This is an important psychological and intellectual difference. Historical methodology has been developed in Europe in the scientific spirit to form our modern conceptions about the past. This positive historical knowledge has affected more and more the process of identification, restoration, and conservation of ancient monuments or cultural legacies. The museum culture is the result of this evolution; Western culture came to generate what André Malraux called 'le musée imaginaire'. The romantic movement in the 19th Century increased interest in discovery and conservation not only of the western cultural legacy, but also that of other civilisations. In 1800, Napoleon went to Egypt with soldiers, archaeologists and scientists; Egyptology soon became a scientific discipline as well as Assyriology and biblical studies.

On the Muslim side, the evolution of the interest for the past has been, on the contrary, more and more religious, scholasticist and mythological. Even the historical material collected by historians during the first three centuries of Hijra (7th-9th C.) has been forgotten, or lost, because the conservation of manuscripts had not yet been carefully developed. The discovery of Muslim classical heritage and the efforts for its conservation started to be a scientific enterprise only during the 19th Century with the development of orientalism in the larger contexts of the romantic movement and colonial domination.

It is important to have in mind all these historical facts if we want to approach all the problems of conservation in contemporary Muslim societies with an objective, scientific attitude. It is not an easy task. Many precious parts of the vast cultural patrimony in the Muslim world have been damaged, lost, or dispersed, and a large part of our architectural legacy has deteriorated or been destroyed, especially in the last forty years under the impact of the modern economy and its technology.

For all these reasons, we need new conceptual tools to address correctly the question of conservation in Muslim societies. Before considering restoration and conservation in its technical or historical aspects, we need to elaborate an adequate terminology in the perspective of cultural *semiology* [the science dealing with signs as fundamental elements of all cultural systems]. In cultural history, working concepts, carefully defined and used, are as important as slides are to architects visualising space. We have to visualise mental space as well if we want to understand all the delicate mental mechanisms and collective forces operating in conservation as a cultural activity.

A semiological approach

Semiology is not yet well established as a discipline, although it touches the three basic tools of any cultural expression. Semiology deals with *signs*, but also *symbols* and *signals*. The main system of signs is language[1].

Words in language do not refer directly to objects or to the substance of beings; they are signs heard (sounds) or seen (written units); each sign refers to a mental image related to physical objects in our environment, or to concepts shaping our representations. Signs are thus flexible, not rigid; they convey various images according to our experience and training in different levels of language. Without actually seeing the mountain, the sea, the elephant, we have mental images with various colorations, or connotations of the physically existing referees; we can never see God or the angels, we shall never see again Abraham, Nebuchadnezzar or Harûn-al-Rashîd ... but we have through these names (signs) an unlimited range of representations.

The same mental operations are generated by all other semiological systems — music, dance, cooking, painting, rituals, buildings, and gardens. Signs always refer to many possible meanings. Symbols used in these semiological systems are richer than signs; symbols are persons, events, or physical objects currently used in social communication to convey high spiritual, ethical, or aesthetic values shared by the social group whose identity is precisely structured by all the values projected in the symbols. Abraham, for example, is represented in the Quran not as an historical individualised agent, but as the symbolic religious figure of the ideal relation between God, the creator, and man, the creature.

Creating links between material beings and mental representations is a permanent dynamic function of humankind who generate meanings through signs and symbols. The new cognitive attitude introduced by semiology is that symbols and signs are never intangible, static tools referring to permanent, and substantial meanings; they are subject to change, because the human mind is itself continuously exposed to new experiences. Symbols and signs can be deteriorated, weakened, or rigidified to become mere *signals*. A signal has only one interpretation, such as the green and red lights in a traffic light conveying only one meaning in that context; however, colours (like green for Muslims, red for communist revolutions) can be used as symbols, signs or signals.

The general disintegration of traditional cultural systems which played an important role in cultural integration prior to the industrial revolution is expressed in the substitution of a *populist* sub-culture for *popular* culture, which has differentiated itself over a long period of time from the written *learned culture*. These three levels of culture are to be found in all contemporary third world societies. In Muslim areas, we have to focus particularly on the growth of *populist* culture.

Sociologically, a populist culture is produced by several combined factors, the most important being the tremendous, unprecedented rate of demographic increase. Around 60% of the population of Muslim societies is less than 20 years old. In many counties, agricultural polities and industrialisation have uprooted the peasants and the nomadic population, obliging them to move to traditional urban centres where written learned culture and classical architecture are concentrated.

When we discuss Islamic culture and civilisation, we aim at this urban elite who wrote and thought in the Arabic language, and who created the urban cities during the classical ages (1st-6th and 7th-12th C.). The division between written learned culture and oral popular culture has long been expressed in the opposition of the Arabic words *Khâssa* and /*Âmma* : the elite and the masses. Actually, the Quran itself introduced this division with the opposition between pagan ignorant society (*Jahiliyya*) and illuminated learned community (*'ilm*) or believers. Although oral cultures with their vernacular architecture have been marginalised by official, learned culture, they remain alive with a strong integrative function as long as the rural populations have not been uprooted. The nationalist state, the generalisation of elementary school training, the deterioration of craft guilds, and the industrial system of production are the main new forces which have transformed popular culture into fragmented, scattered, uprooted populist culture.

Populist culture is characterised by the predominance of signals, and the concurrent inability to read or use the

symbols and signs which have been invested in all traditional forms of culture. If we study the mosques built during the last thirty years in Muslim societies, the theology taught in schools, the individual and collective behaviours, the aesthetic values in furniture, clothes, and natural environment, the political relation to the state and the authorities, the roles played by the *'ulama*, we discover in each level the disintegration of symbols and signs into signals, slogans, and rigid aggressive expressions cut off from traditional legacies. The semiological universe is invaded by plastic objects, by deteriorated gadgets and machines, and by meaningless expressions that make little sense as far as poor, marginalised social groups are concerned: rich bourgeois elites are also cut off from this universe and are dominated by western models of culture.

The built environment reflects perfectly this new semiological, cultural structure in all Muslim societies: Californian villas, modern buildings, business centres, low cost housing, and slums translate the semiological divorce and the disintegrative forces at work. Cities are mostly artificial, conformist, rigid reproductions of a conventional, desymbolised environment, instead of the rich, integrated ,functional surroundings in the classical Muslim City.

This is the semiological context in which restoration and conservation are to be undertaken, not a specialised activity of learned archaeologists or historians for the pleasure of an elite, but essentially as a complex activity aiming at revitalisation, reuse, and reinsertion in the general development of the society. Conservation is a radical enterprise to *rethink* the whole historical process of semiological disintegration and the required conditions of reintegration in the new context created by material and intellectual modernity. In this perspective, one has to ask if the semiological disaster already reached in many societies leaves any chance for conservation as a holistic process for development.

Conservation as a developmental issue

Conservation is a cultural enterprise which needs to be evaluated in the perspective of: (i) a given cultural tradition; (ii) a given society expressing itself as a nation or a community; (iii) a universal concern for aesthetic messages delivered by monuments, masterpieces, or landscapes which are part of the world's patrimony. Beauty has an emotional, metaphysical, and spiritual function; it enhances the transcendental experience described as poetic, religious, absolute, divine, or sacred. It is a permanent force for the emancipation of the human condition from its limitation.

Conserving a monument — or any piece of artistic creation — is a part of this universal aspiration to reach all expressions of beauty, to participate in the various forms, styles, and inspirations used in different cultures to produce artistic masterpieces.

In this perspective, conservation cannot be only a national responsibility; that is why UNESCO initiated in 1972 a convention for the protection of world patrimony.[2] Linked to UNESCO, the International Council for Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Centre for Restoration and Conservation of Monuments (ICCROM) were also founded.

The Aga Khan Award for Architecture founded in 1976 and more recently, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (1998) have the same universal goals, although they consider only Muslim cultural spaces to empower a Muslim modern humanism.

The main result achieved by these international organisations is the awareness of the rapid deterioration of the cultural patrimony in all societies and consequently, the necessity to rethink the problems of cultural development on a world scale. We are beyond the romantic and nationalist interest for exotic cultural expressions, or interest in political glory such as that shown by the Shah of Iran when he decided to restore Persepolis.

The universal approach to conservation as a developmental process is particularly needed in Muslim societies for two major reasons — material and ideological.

In any Muslim society, the architectural legacy is very rich and diversified; at the same time, as I have indicated above, the semiological degradation is so rapid and radical that interventions for restoration and conservation are more urgent than elsewhere. But these operations are very expensive and cannot be achieved with local resources. Restoring one monument located in a populist area — as is very often the case — is nonsense, if it is not prepared by a social, economic, and cultural upgrading of the whole quarter. Many examples can be seen in Cairo, Lahore, Dhaka, Fez, and Aleppo. Nothing on this scale can be done without an active international solidarity. Unfortunately, we know that lack of local assistance, underground speculation, and corruption can end the good will of international organisations. The Casbah in Algiers and the Medina in Fez are illuminating examples of the obstacles and even the impossibilities related to the conservation of whole urban tissues.

The ideological reason for conservation is no less important. All Muslim states emerging from colonial wars have stressed the priority of the Muslim heritage; this means that other heritages, like the Roman in North Africa, and the Hindu, Buddhist, Malaysian, and Indonesian heritages going back long before Islam came, may be neglected from a strict nationalist viewpoint. The debate is stronger since "Islam" became the unique political reference for the state seeking legitimacy, or for an opposition arguing for a "true" Islamic regime. The universal perspective opened by UNESCO and other international organisations seems to be the best approach, stressing the ultimate meaning of any cultural conservation for the national personality as well as for the world community.

An example is presented in Bangladesh by Painam Village near Dhaka. The village was built in the 19th Century by rich Hindu merchants; the architecture is totally dependent on British models during the colonial period. From an ideological viewpoint, this now very deteriorated village would not deserve any consideration for rehabilitation and reuse. But young architects trained in Dhaka rightly objected that very original solutions had been found by the architects who designed the village and the houses and that these solutions are still valid for the environment; while

recent buildings and houses built in Bangladesh are pure imported models, not adapted to the needs of the population and the ecological necessities.

Other examples can be found in Zanzibar, Tanzania, and Kenya, along the East African coast long occupied by rich Arab merchants who practised the slave trade. After the independence of these countries, many Arabs had to leave their sumptuous houses.

What should one do with this legacy, symbolically linked to the slave economy? A monument, a house, a public building, an urban design cannot be separated from the social and cultural context in which it has been created to fulfil specific functions. The restoration and the conservation of such buildings or urban areas will depend on the integration of the past by the collective contemporary conscious. This brings up the difficult and central problem of teaching history in formerly colonized countries in general, whoever the colonist, whatever the period.

For the moment, history is almost exclusively an ideological nationalist tool; it is constantly and systematically manipulated to justify the official will for national unity. National pride may help save some monuments which are declared relevant to national glory; but others will be destroyed for this same reason. This has happened and is happening.

Michael Parent, a former President of ICOMOS, has a nice formula: We need to 'sacralise the essential'. But how to identify the *essential* in each national heritage? And if we succeed in identifying it, how to persuade Muslims that there is some aspect *essential* in a Buddhist temple or a Christian church? Or how to persuade a Sikh, a Buddhist, or a Christian to respect buildings which are not relevant to their faith?

This is the mission of history as a central cultural discipline. In Muslim countries the history of arts is taught badly, wrongly, or not at all. In western schools and universities the history of Islamic arts has a very marginal place. This situation is not going to improve very soon, because few specialists are trained and departments of history are not willing to rethink the whole curriculum of historical studies. The history of religions given in an open, *anthropological* perspective would certainly help to create a new spirit for the conservation of the essential in all cultural traditions. But this discipline is as badly taught and represented as is the history of arts. I do not deny the existence of great scholars in both disciplines; I want to make the point that these two disciplines must have a higher place in historical studies.

One need not await the establishment of such teaching to look for urgent cases of sites, monuments, urban quarters, and palaces which deserve to be saved. The conservation of the built environment is not only intended to save cultural messages from the past; it is a social and economic *integrating* activity because it involves skills, knowledge, crafts, techniques, and materials which would otherwise disappear totally. This means that our present is connected to our past in very concrete, active, living ways, in the involvement of experts and workers on all levels. Thus,

conservation cannot be conservatism or a luxurious exercise for tourists or rich amateurs.

In third world countries, there are so many competing demands on very scarce or wrongly used resources. Politically, it is essential to conceive and to present conservation as a vital part of social and cultural development. This is not yet the case, because many levels of society are not motivated to participate in or even to understand operations decided by officials for ideological purposes, not to mention the populist phenomenon which is the most dangerous threat to each Muslim country's cultural tradition. Populist pressure has already imposed a style of mosques dominated by the seeking of prestige, responding to demagogic demands, using stereotyped, dead tradition, ignoring totally the need for resymbolisation in a desymbolised environment. Similarly, there is a conformist international so-called Muslim style imposed on public buildings, private houses, and urban design, disregarding the lessons which could be taken from the authentic, integrating operation of conservation as we described it.

This is the most important function of conservation in the present historical situation of all Muslim societies. 'Islam', as we know, is largely, overwhelmingly used as a political, demagogic weapon. It is and it will be for a while the one ideological resource adapted to the spreading populist "Culture"; it is going to be over-used by all social forces competing for power and for the control of what sociologists call the symbolic capital. Social and political scientists are not yet intellectually or scientifically equipped to deconstruct the complex socio-cultural-political process leading to the total disintegration of Islam as a spiritual, *symbolic capital*, transformed into a pure ideological, contingent, precarious tool. This process does not affect only ideals and beliefs; it is concretely written in the built environment, in the way of life, in the broken social solidarities, in the destroyed links to the land, in the general desymbolisation depersonalisation, and deculturation of daily existence.

This is not a pessimistic view of the present evolution in Muslim societies; rather it is a pressing invitation to self-criticism, an urgent awareness about the human price we are paying for a wrong, dangerous so-called development. Approaching these problems through architecture, urbanism, and conservation gives a better insight, and a more relevant diagnosis of all the social diseases and all the cultural and semantic disorder in which we are embroiled.

Let us dream for a while: would it be possible that the many architects, experts, historians, artists, writers, scholars in all fields of research; the amount of knowledge and cultural resources accumulated in each country; the powerful technology available for improving human existence; the rich range of human experience and skills; the huge demographic capital at our disposal ... would it be possible that all these values be invested to produce a shared, mastered, emancipating history for humankind?

This would be an integrating, dynamic cultural conservation of human patrimony in the perspective of a richer, continued creativity.

[1]   *Language is a system of signs, according to the definition given by F. de Saussure and further developed by other linguists*

[2]   *"A Patrimony for All", in Le Courrier de l'Unesco,* *August1998.*

[3]   *This important concept (capital symbolique) is used in anthropological analysis of cultural values as P. Bourdieu did in Le sens pratique, ed. Minuit 1980.*