The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and New Perspectives for the Museum

by Sid Ahmed Baghli

The notion of intangible cultural heritage covers a vast field:

- issues of semantics and scope (minorities, indigenous and aboriginal peoples, communities etc.),
- oral traditions and expressions, including language as a means of transmission of cultural heritage,
- social practices, rituals and festive events,
- knowledge and practices relating to nature and the universe,
- traditional crafts.

This issue is strategically important for museology and museography specialists, who have the task of including, giving visible form to and presenting intangible heritage.

Each State is responsible for identifying elements of intangible heritage, and for drawing up a national inventory of heritage to be safeguarded. An Intergovernmental Committee appointed by States Parties to the Convention is responsible for establishing a “representative list” of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity and a list of those elements that require urgent safeguarding. The selection will be made on the basis of criteria established by the Committee and approved by the General Assembly of the States Parties to the Convention. There was much debate concerning the scope of the Convention. Should it cover the whole of a heritage or be restricted to Treasures and elements of exceptional value? A majority of States were in favour of an inclusive approach. Let us remind ourselves of the major differences between the 1972 Convention and the 2003 Convention. In the 1972 Convention, the material heritage is fixed and is located in a time and space which can be circumscribed. “Exceptional universal value” justifies its conservation. In the second, the intangible heritage is closely linked to life; it is mobile.
and evolves in time and space. Its value is intrinsic, since to establish a cultural hierarchy of living and diverse heritages would be a risky endeavour.

Given the distinctive nature of these two types of heritage, the notion of a “list” of intangible heritage needs to be defined. Although identifying and inventorying elements of intangible heritage makes it possible to compile an exhaustive list of heritage “to be safeguarded”, the advantages of lists of intangible heritage at risk should be stressed. Lists of this type can be of more strategic use in:

- preserving human creations at risk of disappearing completely;
- providing for national and worldwide recognition;
- facilitating international cooperation and assistance.

Now that the October 2003 Convention on Intangible Heritage has been adopted, UNESCO is preparing a Convention on Cultural Diversity to complement it. A vast field of collaboration in the task of safeguarding intangible heritage now offers itself to us as museum professionals.

The challenges of heritage and the new remit of museums

Rethinking the role of museums has become strategic in the battle to safeguard and valorise our increasingly numerous, valuable and fragile cultural assets. The very definition of the museum (ICOM Statutes, Art. 2) needs to be reviewed and its scope widened. Things have changed since the 1950s, and the raison d’être of our institutions is no longer simply to collect, study, conserve and present material evidence of people and their environment. Our former President Alpha Oumar Konaré did not hesitate to challenge the monopoly of the Western model of the museum. African, Asian and Latin American museum specialists often have quite different concerns, given the nature of their heritage and cultural identity.

It will inevitably become increasingly difficult to preserve collections indefinitely, or even for long periods. We are increasingly confronted with huge problems of conservation, restoration, storage, and so forth. We may even collapse and perish beneath the burden of quantity as well as of years. Prophets of doom predict that, during this millennium, millions of objects will succumb to the inevitable process of ageing, and that it is only a question of time before we witness the death of the museum. The reality is less gloomy, and those who believe in our museums and their remit understand the importance and the rules of biological cycles. Analysing such cycles of successive growth and degrowth, Professor Patrick J. Boylan has given a demonstration of the constant oscillation between ascent and decline, in which he assert that our museums can survive and develop. While remaining “faithful to their mission and sensitive to their public”, they constantly adapt and discover new horizons. We now need to pursue our efforts to remove the sacred aura surrounding the “real thing” and the hoarding of treasures. André Malraux’s “imaginary museum” went a long way in challenging the predominance and ubiquity of “originals” in museums. Ethnographic collections have directly or indirectly drawn attention to a whole new dimension of the ubiquity of “originals” in museums. Ethnographic collections have periodically been redecorated, enamelled and varnished. The replica of a thousand-year-old statue in Orissa is venerated and replaced every 12 years. Is it still the same object? What lengths should we go to in perpetuating traditions that, although living, are threatened with disappearance, alterations and all manner of distortions? How can we safeguard the artefacts and representative collections upon which these expressions depend? And above all, how should we present and raise public awareness of this type of heritage? How can we make the intangible touchable? These issues are both germane and difficult: the more cautious among us are afraid lest, in questioning the principle or the primacy of material evidence, we go too far in the direction of exploration of a vast impalpable universe. Our Code of Ethics would itself be seriously undermined by the advent of new, “fungible”, more or less abstract elements to be “made perennial”. As François Dagognet said, “The object is located not so much in front of us as inside us and through us.”

Signs, symbols and spiritual messages, which initially seemed impossible to present and exhibit, are increasingly being accepted as cultural property in the same way as the anonymous pair of chairs in the Lyons Museum of Decorative Arts, or the hamburgers in the New York and Bilbao Museums of Modern Art. To give concrete expression and representation to this intangible, abstract or immaterial heritage, we must, of course, study its value and find its “substantial margin”, to borrow a phrase from Rabelais. How can we represent imaginings, emotions, spiritual messages?

What are the significant traces of a bygone culture that continues to survive? How can we express the memory and consciousness of society? All these issues can be resolved, notably with the aid of the impressive means offered by new media and powerful communication tools. Even if a cultural asset has been lost or destroyed, there may be means of restoring it to life. It is unthinkable that the two statues of Buddha at Bamiyan, which bear witness to the encounter of the great civilisations, should be effaced from human memory. Museums will surely help to find a specific means of representing them all over the world. In this context, as a means of transmitting message and image, globalisation reveals itself to be a terrific facilitator of memory and collective consciousness.

From the tangible to the intangible: a single heritage to be safeguarded

In May 2000, the World Heritage Committee and the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe organised a meeting of African experts on the relative values of “authenticity and integrity” as applied to tangible and intangible heritage. Participants at the meeting reaffirmed the Nara Declaration, stating that “cultural heritage can exist in spiritual forms in its own right, with the absence of any tangible evidence. The originality and value of such heritage is precisely in its survival through use, customs, oral tradition, etc.”

A total revolution has already begun, with museums attempting to include the representation of signs, symbols, rituals and a “whole spiritual world” which is often abstract — elements which are difficult to transpose and exhibit in the museum context. Objects are neither immutable, nor are they an indivisible whole: many small Buddhist statues have periodically been redecorated, enamelled and varnished. The replica of a thousand-year-old statue in Orissa is venerated and replaced every 12 years. Is it still the same object? What lengths should we go to in perpetuating traditions that, although living, are threatened with disappearance, alterations and all manner of distortions? How can we safeguard the artefacts and representative collections upon which these expressions depend? And above all, how should we present and raise public awareness of this type of heritage? How can we make the intangible touchable? These issues are both germane and difficult: the more cautious among us are afraid lest, in questioning the principle or the primacy of material evidence, we go too far in the direction of exploration of a vast impalpable universe. Our Code of Ethics would itself be seriously undermined by the advent of new, “fungible”, more or less abstract elements to be “made perennial”. As François Dagognet said, “The object is located not so much in front of us as inside us and through us.”

Signs, symbols and spiritual messages, which initially seemed impossible to present and exhibit, are increasingly being accepted as cultural property in the same way as the anonymous pair of chairs in the Lyons Museum of Decorative Arts, or the hamburgers in the New York and Bilbao Museums of Modern Art. To give concrete expression and representation to this intangible, abstract or immaterial heritage, we must, of course, study its value and find its “substantial margin”, to borrow a phrase from Rabelais. How can we represent imaginings, emotions, spiritual messages?

What are the significant traces of a bygone culture that continues to survive? How can we express the memory and consciousness of society? All these issues can be resolved, notably with the aid of the impressive means offered by new media and powerful communication tools. Even if a cultural asset has been lost or destroyed, there may be means of restoring it to life. It is unthinkable that the two statues of Buddha at Bamiyan, which bear witness to the encounter of the great civilisations, should be effaced from human memory. Museums will surely help to find a specific means of representing them all over the world. In this context, as a means of transmitting message and image, globalisation reveals itself to be a terrific facilitator of memory and collective consciousness.
Preserving the magic: a new museum strategy

In the words of Dr Richard Kurin, Director of the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, Washington D.C., “[Intangible heritage] is mostly the living, oral tradition of a people. It is not culture under glass!” It is precisely this issue that must be clarified. As a member of the Jury of “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity”, Dr Kurin concedes that he was “impressed” with UNESCO’s selection of the first nineteen “masterpieces”. Material and natural heritage were easy to bring into museums: collecting, exhibiting and interpreting examples of intangible heritage is a far more difficult task, seemingly fraught with paradox. In fact, we have been pondering this new aspect of our remit since the 2001 ICOM General Assembly in Barcelona. A major clarification had already been achieved at the 7th Regional Assembly of ICOM ASPAC (Asia-Pacific), held in Shanghai, China, in October 2001. Working Groups there stressed the role of museums in the new era of globalisation, with all its attendant risks of homogenisation, erosion or even annihilation of most of our fabulous yet fragile cultural diversity. The Shanghai Charter makes fourteen recommendations for action designed to enable museums to help safeguard the intangible cultural heritage. These recommendations deserve to be widely disseminated and discussed.

In ICOM News No. 4, 2003, Professor Galla explains the importance of interdisciplinary cooperation, illustrating it with the experience of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, “a unique new museum centred on the theme of freedom and the history of slavery in the U.S.A.”

The polysemic nature of the museum and its purpose means that museum specialists can now broaden their remit as custodians of the works of man and nature. A new and vitally important task is to integrate and disseminate intangible heritage, to further our understanding of its cognitive and emotional value. This is now possible with the aid of new audiovisual tools but we must not hesitate to use real or virtual objects as cultural tools in the service of society. In this era of globalisation and promotion of cultural diversity, it is high time we involved our institutions in this museological strategy for intangible cultural heritage.

I have one final remark to make: I in no way advocate attempting to stand in the way of the globalisation we are currently experiencing, for good and for ill. I personally have nothing against the famous Bilbao hamburger, nor against Coca Cola, which has also been introduced into our collections. But I also want to safeguard traditional couscous and mint tea, or Korea’s delicious Kimchi and excellent Soju. That is the very meaning and essence of cultural and museum diversity.

“What lengths should we go to in perpetuating traditions? How can we safeguard the artefacts and representative collections upon which these expressions depend? How should we present and raise public awareness of this type of heritage? How can we make the intangible touchable?”
