Tangible and Intangible Heritage: from difference to convergence

by Dawson Munjeri

Dawson Munjeri, currently Deputy Permanent Delegate of Zimbabwe to UNESCO was until 2002, the Executive Director of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe. He was previously the Oral Historian of the National Archives of Zimbabwe, a position he held following degree programmes at the University of Zimbabwe and the University of Wales. He has served on the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and on the Executive Committee and Bureau of the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). As well as being a member of the group of experts that drafted the UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, he has served as a member of expert groups concerned with the implementation of the Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

As the group of experts drawing up the draft Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage delved into their assignment and Member States of UNESCO through their representatives discussed the draft, one could not but conjure up images of the mortal battle portrayed in Armageddon between the forces of good and evil. Indeed as Alpha Oumar Konare had predicted in one of his remarks, ‘the protection of intangible heritage is a long struggle’,¹ this proved to be so. Yet on that historic day of 17 October 2003, the General Conference of UNESCO, at its thirty-second session, unanimously approved the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Thirty-one years earlier on 16 November 1972, the General Conference of UNESCO, at its sixteenth session, had adopted an equivalent standard-setting instrument, the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.
Understanding differences

This discrepancy between protection of the tangible cultural heritage and that of the intangible, heavily weighted in favour of the former, was well captured in the 1994 Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, *Our Cultural Diversity*, ‘the intangible had for long been an ignored heritage. Ways of life have been ignored because they are in simple formats’. This anomalous situation can be largely attributed to the mentality of what Professor Ralph Pettman calls, ‘thing-flying the world – defining a concept of [heritage] as a place, as a thing with other things in it and consequently centred on the creation of a ‘world museum’; a world in which that which is visible, concrete takes precedence over that which is immaterial. The Taj Mahal (India), the Pyramids, the Mona Lisa, etc., because they are highly symbolic objects take centre stage at the expense of popular forms of cultural expression or of historical truth. Central to all is the issue of values and valorization: what qualified as cultural heritage was deemed to be stable, and static and having ‘intrinsic values’ as well as qualities of ‘authenticity’. It is a scenario described as one where ‘etic’ meaning is lost to ‘emic’ meaning. From the writings of Aloïs Riegl to the policies of the *Burra Charter*, these values have been ordered in categories such as aesthetic, political, i.e. typologies that represent a reductionist approach to examining the complex issue of what constitutes cultural heritage. Even more restrictive were notions of ‘authenticity’ attached to such heritage. Thus the *Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* through its Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, based on the Venice Charter, defined authenticity as restricted to four components i.e.: ‘authenticity in materials’ based on physical values or fidelity to the object; ‘authenticity in workmanship’, this consistent with the notion that physical products entail creative genius; ‘authenticity in design’, values based on the creator’s (architect, engineer, etc.) original intention and ‘authenticity in setting’ or fidelity to context, i.e. values contingent upon locus and spatial considerations. In essence the issue of cultural heritage became intrinsically linked to issues of values and such values highly profiled the physical attributes. The import of this is well captured in the said Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, ‘defining a building as being of historical and cultural value meant placing it at a certain distance from everyday life’. More pertinent and certainly poignant, the Report adds ‘it is this distance which leads to the decay of the physical and social context in which value was found.’ Cases abound where sites and monuments have been vandalized or neglected through failure to make people associate themselves with such physical manifestations. In a real world, *ceteris paribus* the cart does not pull the horse. Cultural heritage should speak through the values that people give it and not the other way round. Objects, collections, buildings, etc. become recognized as heritage when they express the value of *society* and so the tangible can only be understood and interpreted through the intangible. *Society and values* are thus intrinsically linked.

Inscribed in 2000 on the UNESCO World Heritage List is a house, the Rietveld Schröderhuis in Utrecht in the Netherlands. Designed by the famous architect, Gerrit Thomas Rietveld and built...
in 1924, the physical fabric is in fact a manifesto of the De Stijl movement. This was an influential group of architects who through their periodical, *De Stijl*, became an influential voice of the ideals of modern art and architecture. Through abstraction, precision and geometry and studying the laws of nature, the movement sought to achieve artistic purity and austerity. The Schroeder House was the first declaration of these ideas on a large scale thus becoming the architectural manifestation of the movement. The House is therefore an icon of the modern movement in architecture; a masterpiece not in terms of the tangible expression but as a philosophy. Yet when the World Heritage Committee inscribed the site on the list it did not accept the inclusion of cultural criterion (vi) of the Operational Guidelines which relates to cultural heritage ‘directly or tangibly associated with events, living traditions, with ideas or with beliefs, with artistic and literary works of outstanding universal significance’.

Among ‘indigenous and living cultures’ as the meeting of ICOMOS Africa Region held in Zimbabwe in 1995 expressed, ‘*For Africa* the spirit of site takes precedence over the substance’. To the 160,000 Lobi people of south-west Burkina Faso, the imagery of the village is more important than the physical fabric. The centre of the village is the *dithil* or earthen altar whose authority defines the territorial unit. Lessons learnt from nature, and parallels between the spiritual world and reality influence the architecture of the buildings. An iron rod on the roof picks up alarm signals and passes them in turn to the ancestral objects in the living area. The ancestors in turn alert the altars outside. The entire system is directed to the earthen altar which is the supreme guarantor of the community as represented by a tree under which a heap of stones symbolically embodies all evil that could befall the inhabitants. It is a picture that is aptly captured by Ardalan and Bakhthiar, ‘*There is nothing more timely than the truth which is timeless; this is the message that comes from tradition and is relevant now because it has been relevant at all [times]. Such a message belongs to a now which has been, is and will ever be present*’. It is this *truth* which was missing among the proponents of the par excellence tangible heritage. Herb Stovel speaks of authenticity as a measure of the ability to perceive *truthfulness*, the genuineness, the completeness of the values carried by our heritage as expressed through its attributes. If that be so, the Lobi and the Riet Schroeder House are testimony that the real truth lay in intangible heritage.

The road to that truth was opened up by those involved in the conservation of the tangible heritage. How tangible was the tangible heritage? This is a question that constantly confronted conservators when dealing with material heritage. If cultural heritage was to be passed on to posterity (as indeed the World Heritage Convention stipulated), what values were to be transmitted to future generations? If values were in the physical property *per se*, what message was being passed on and why? The dilemma raised by the definition of ‘authenticity’ was to open a Pandora’s box. This ultimately led to a conference on authenticity held in Nara, Japan in 1994.

Conservation policies were supposed to be based on a critical process starting with ‘intrinsic cultural resources and values’ related to it. What
were these intrinsic values? All along they were considered to be four i.e.: ‘material’, ‘workmanship’, ‘design’ and ‘setting’. The primary aim of conservation was to ‘safeguard the quality and values of the resource, protect material substance and ensure integrity for posterity’. But could that be all?

In the town of Ise (Japan) is a shrine, the Grand Shrine of Ise. Constructed out of wood and thatch, the shrine dates back a thousand years. As early as 690 A.D., a decree was issued by the Empress of Japan that the shrine should be renewed every twenty years in a custom known as shikinen zotai. This entailed constructing afresh the whole building using new materials. The shrine furniture, decorations and more than a thousand sacred treasures and garments are produced and installed. Because all this is done by traditionally trained craftsmen and the techniques are properly passed on from one generation to the next, in terms of authenticity there is 100 per cent originality in design and techniques. The forest that supplies the timber remains the same and there is a work plan that looks several hundred years into the future. Notwithstanding, the shrine has zero per cent originality in terms of material although again having 100 per cent originality in setting because the site has remained the same for over 1,000 years. While the shrine inherits and transmits everlasting wisdom, the fact remains it lacks material authenticity. In fact it retains spiritual purity because the material is almost always new and therefore suitable for the divine powers. ‘The Ise shrine is not a tangible cultural property but a unique example of a living tradition of a building whose value is not defined by the criteria of the material’.

If the Ise shrine illustrates that materiality is not a prerequisite of authenticity provided all the other criteria are met (‘workmanship’, ‘design’ and ‘setting’), the empirical evidence from elsewhere suggests that this is a non sequitur.

Alain Sinou points out that the ancient town of Ouidah in Benin is also ‘the cradle of voodoo cultures’. The voodoo temples are the most immediate physical expressions of traditional practices and their number testifies to the strength of the cults while serving as ‘reservoirs of social and cultural history’. However, Ouidah’s most important worship practices do not take place in temples of impressive size and spectacular architecture. This is because of the secrecy of the voodoo practices. Regularly rebuilt the buildings do not possess original forms. Sensitive to modern trends, voodoo priests use contemporary materials including cement and sheet metal to house the fetishes. With respect to voodoo symbols and representations, altars composed of assemblage of metal parts e.g. automobile carburettors and old sewing machines are used to represent the voodoo of metal or of war. This is clear testimony to the dynamism of culture based on principles of continuity and change but it defies all the tenets of ‘authenticity’, as narrowly defined in the four elements.

The ‘authenticity of setting’ is equally challenged because the location of the voodoo temple has no spatial rules. Many temples have shifted several times depending on circumstances, e.g. at the appointment of a new priest. All these issues as Sinou appropriately notes raise the fundamental question of the value placed on tangible heritage in such societies. It certainly
demolishes the notion of ‘intrinsic values’ that are the essence of authenticity of ‘material’, ‘workmanship’, ‘setting’ and ‘design’. These are the issues that faced the prophets of tangible heritage. These are the issues that accelerated the move towards a reconciliation with the intangible heritage.

Towards convergence

By the time of the Nara Conference the tide had shifted firmly in the direction of a broader appreciation of other values and noticeably anchoring those values on society. It was quite clear that values could only be culturally determined by understanding the sources (or generations) of those values. A sine qua non to that comprehension process was therefore an understanding of the cultural contexts of societies and a recognition that these differed from culture to culture and from society to society. Standard practices such as enunciated in established texts and practices11 were brought into question. The outcome was the ‘Nara Declaration on Authenticity’ which called inter alia for a widening of the framework of ‘authenticity’ to include traditions, techniques, spirit, feeling, historic and social dimensions of cultural heritage. The fundamental point is that the Nara document accepted the fact that ‘all cultures and societies are rooted in particular forms and means of both the tangible and the intangible’.12 This was a major breakthrough on the paths to the discovery of the truth. According to this new concept, values of cultural property would be judged on the basis of an interactive matrix of both cultural and physical properties with local, national and regional cultural differences on one axis and property differences on the other. Values and society were now central. By extension, norms which are the rules of behaviour, and which reflect or embody a culture’s values had joined the duo. Sociology principles underscore that values and norms work together to shape how members of a society behave.

Albeit for different reasons, these messages were not lost to the bastion of tangible heritage, that is, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee which is responsible for implementing the World Heritage Convention. One of the ways in which the World Heritage Committee implements the Convention is by inscribing sites and properties of ‘outstanding universal significance’ on a World Heritage List. By the early 1990s, it was evident that this list had become increasingly non-representative. For example, Europe’s cultural heritage was over-represented in relation to the rest of the world; historic towns and religious buildings (cathedrals, etc.) were over-represented; the architecture was ‘elitist’ (castles, palaces etc), ‘in general terms all living cultures especially traditional ones with their depth, their wealth, their complexity and their diverse relationships figured very little on the list’, noted the meeting of experts that met in June 1994 at UNESCO Headquarters. Tangible heritage had thus enmeshed itself into a very tight corner. An analysis of the problem revealed that just as ‘authenticity’ had been narrowly defined on the basis of a Western notion of masterpieces, etc, equally ‘From its inception the World Heritage List had been based on an exclusively ‘monumental’ concept of the cultural heritage … the idea of cultural heritage had been embodied in and confined to architectural monuments … A static view of human cultures’. As such living cultures were totally ignored.
The crucial message from the meeting was the acceptance that ‘the history of art and architecture, archaeology, anthropology and ethnology was no longer concentrated on single monuments in isolation but rather on considering cultural groupings that were complex and multidimensional, which demonstrated in spatial terms the social structures, ways of life, beliefs, systems of knowledge, representations of different past and present cultures in the entire world. Each individual piece of evidence should therefore be considered not in isolation but within its whole context with an understanding of the multiple reciprocal relationship that it had with its physical (i.e. tangible) and non-physical (i.e. intangible) environment’.14 It is worth quoting that observation in full if only to underscore that its only historical equivalent was the fall of the Bastille in 1789! With the adoption of the experts’ meeting report and its recommendations, the eighth session of the World Heritage Committee had indeed created a revolution. The intangible heritage was now taken on board. Henceforth society and values would determine the course of events because to determine what to put on the World Heritage List required involvement of all stakeholders who know ‘ways of life beliefs, systems of knowledge’, etc. and these would be so restrictive outside the

2. The complex of Huế monuments, Vietnam, inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, with nha nhac musicians. A full understanding of heritage can only be achieved through the study of the multiple reciprocal relationships between tangible and intangible elements.
parameters of ‘intrinsic values’. None other than the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), a guru on monumental heritage had this to say, ‘The distinction between physical heritage is now seen as artificial. Physical heritage can only attain its true significance when it sheds light on its underlying values. Conversely, intangible heritage must be made incarnate in tangible manifestations.’ That ICOMOS took this to heart is borne out by the fact that its fourteenth General Conference and Scientific Symposium held in Zimbabwe in October 2003 had as its theme, ‘Place–Memory–Meaning: Preserving intangible values in monuments and sites’. The Rubicon had been crossed, as Julius Caesar would have said. In a parallel path proactive measures were taken by UNESCO in 1993 when the Living Human Treasures system and in 1998 when The Proclamation of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity initiatives were launched. That the latter was purveyor to the Convention for the Safeguarding of Cultural Intangible Heritage is reflected by the fact that the Convention provides for the incorporation of these masterpieces into a world heritage list of intangible heritage. In 1999, the General Conference, at its thirty-first session, approved the move to draw such a standard-setting instrument which was adopted by the General Conference at its thirty-second session in 2003. What began as a battle between foes at Armageddon ended in a marriage of the two – the tangible and the intangible.

It may have taken a long time for the marriage to be consummated but it was inevitable that it would have to take place at some point in time. Intangible heritage provided the larger framework within which tangible heritage could take its shape and significance. In that framework as Arjun Appadurai states, ‘intangible heritage because of its very nature as a map through which humanity interprets, selects, reproduces and disseminates cultural heritage was an important partner of tangible heritage. More important it is a tool through which the tangible heritage could be defined and expressed [thus] transforming inert landscapes of objects and monuments turning them into living archives of cultural values.’ More importantly, it is the critical tool through which societies define their relations and norms between cultural values and cultural variables. The recurrent theme remains that societies, norms and values are at the core of it all.

An arduous route was followed before the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage saw the light of day. This was because of failure to accept this simple but crucial fact. Elsewhere I suggest that these three pillars (societies, norms and values) are in an equilateral triangle relationship to form a smart partnership that sustains cultural heritage. However, they work within a larger equilateral triangle of natural heritage, cultural heritage and spiritual heritage. One day perhaps, this new convention will be amplified to recognize the intangible natural heritage.

NOTES


12 Fielden and Jokiletho. op. cit.


3. The Andean cosmovision of the Kallawaya culture, Bolivia, proclaimed by UNESCO as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity in 2003.