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The sacred in an interconnected world

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Editorial

The Sacred in an Interconnected World

The notion of sacred traditionally refers to a particular quality attributed to objects, sites or more abstract entities in a given society. In the domain of cultural heritage, this quality usually results from the religious and spiritual dimension of the objects themselves. From objects of worship, or sacred art, to objects which are protected because of their extreme rarity, the sphere of the sacred was, for museums and institutions of heritage, until recently, fairly precisely circumscribed. The functions of these institutions, *vis-à-vis* the notion of sacred, consisted for a long time of managing the processes of designating as sacred or profane, objects which entered into their field of research, transforming religious objects into objects of knowledge and endowing the rarest and the most precious of these, with a quasi-religious quality.

But are these functions still the same today and what does 'being sacred' mean in an interconnected world?

New objects of heritage have, over the last ten years, been added to the traditional categories used within cultural institutions: cultural landscapes, oral and intangible heritage, sacred sites and industrial heritage are some of these. Furthermore, the concept of cultural diversity has gone beyond the field of anthropology and research and become an active component of policy-making ; a component which has become standardized with the adoption, in November 2001, by the General Conference of UNESCO, of a Declaration specifically dedicated to its protection and its promotion. We thought it would be interesting to discover whether the changes which had occurred in our understanding of culture and heritage had modified our relationship with the sacred in cultural heritage, and how we could use the notion of 'sacred' in order to envisage new models for the protection and safeguarding of national heritage.

In order to respond to these questions, we have sought to enlarge the traditional comprehension of the notion of sacred as it is applied to objects of heritage, by demonstrating the realities described by the term and clarifying the meanings of the uses of the term. Several contributions, including those of Jesus Peralta, Anne-Gaël Bilhaut and Michel Côté, show how the term can be used in the process of negotiation and the

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acknowledgement of identities and knowledge on the scientific and political level. Other contributions, on the Centre for Jewish Art and the Australian Sacred Landscape, demonstrate the material conditions of the identification, study and preservation that this designation implies.

We have also sought, by drawing a comparison with environmental studies on natural heritage and biodiversity, to understand the possible functional role of the notion of the sacred in the study and protection of cultural diversity. Because the introduction of the notion of cultural diversity in the protection and the preservation of cultural heritage is not without consequences; and this even more so, considering that the diversity in this field cannot be summarized by the identification of categories of heritage (which are constantly evolving on the level of identification and interpretation, as the contribution of Oleg Grabar shows) and ensuring their representation within national and international organizations.

We know that natural sacred sites play an essential role in maintaining biodiversity. However, and even though we acknowledge the close relationship between biological and cultural diversity, or cultural and natural heritage, the notion of the sacred cultural site has not yet led to advanced studies on the role of the sacred in the preservation of the cultural diversity of heritage. The study of the relationship between the sacred and biodiversity teaches us, however, that social interactions are essential in the identification of the sacred and the preservation of sacred places because they allow the ritualization of sociocultural customs and the safeguarding of value systems.

This last point, if it is more or less accepted theoretically, remains none the less difficult to implement practically when it comes to cultural heritage, which separates itself naturally from social custom to become an object of heritage. It must therefore be rethought of in light of new social customs in order to ensure its preservation. Several contributions underline both the difficulties of safeguarding social interactions because of the nature of the objects themselves, as shown by Salam Diakite's article on sacred languages, or because of attitudes which have become standardized through scientific approaches, as the contribution of Jean-Hubert Martin demonstrates. On the contrary, as expressed by Azedine Beschaouch, it appears that some permanent uses of sacred sites are not sufficiently recognized as functional for the preservation of cultural diversity, despite the historical knowledge that we have to this effect.

These observations, as well as the general organization of this issue, were determined by the participation of environmental science specialists in order to

complete, and at the same time broaden, our contemplation of the notion of the sacred. The contributions of P. S. Ramakrishnan and David Harmon, as well as the references that they provide, will allow readers to pursue an exploration that is outlined here.

Enriched by the lessons provided by environmental studies, we would like to return, by way of conclusion, to the consequences of introducing the notion of cultural diversity to the models of heritage protection on an international level. Borrowing models which emerge from the study of the sacred on biodiversity should allow the initiation of programmes for the preservation of cultural heritage beginning with the concept of cultural diversity, by encouraging the reorganization of the priorities and the methods of preservation according to criteria other than those established by the history of art and history. It also allows introducing the notion of cultural integrity, as David Harmon reminds us, and shifting the attention given to the tangibility of heritage towards the safeguarding of social mechanisms that ensure its perpetuation. The new categories of heritage, promoted to the international level through the work of UNESCO in the preparation of a Convention on intangible national heritage, indicate that this shift is taking place. The notion of the sacred in heritage should, within this framework, find the most significant field of its functional role in maintaining and enriching cultural diversity.

The advice and the help of several specialists has allowed us to successfully complete this issue of *MUSEUM International*. We would like to especially thank Bernice Murphy, Vice-President of ICOM and Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (Australia), who has been of great assistance from the beginning of the preparation of this issue, and who, through her knowledge of the subject, has allowed us to avoid numerous pitfalls throughout its production.

Isabelle Vinson

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The Sacred Ganga River-based Cultural Landscape

by P. S. Ramakrishnan

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Natural landscapes have often been viewed as biophysical units divorced from humans, as though these are 'pristine', untouched by human civilization. The shift in the ecological paradigm occurred when perturbation was more and more recognized as an integral component of the ecosystem. On the other hand, the term 'cultural landscape' is often viewed as one physically transformed by human action, these impacts being measured by the stage of human evolution on the landscape, ranging from hunter-gatherers through shifting agriculturists leading to intensively managed land-use systems of the industrial societies.[1]

With the increasing impact of industrialized humans on earth-system-related processes and the challenges that it poses to human survival, there is a further shift in the ecological paradigm. In the context of a variety of uncertainties caused by 'global change' as an ecological phenomenon and 'globalization' as an economic one, there has been a renewed interest in looking at cultural landscapes with their multiplicity of dimensions, ecological, economic, social, cultural and spiritual. The existing separation between natural and cultural landscapes is being challenged, leading to the recognition of cultures as a product of social practices that take

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place in historically contingent and geographically specific contexts. It is in this context that the following discussion on the 'Ganga river-based landscape system, as a sacred landscape' becomes significant.

Concept of the 'sacred'

This discussion on the Ganga river system-based cultural landscape cannot be put in the right perspective without a brief consideration of the concept of the 'sacred', from a socio-ecological system perspective. The concept of the 'sacred' has a spatial dimension, ranging at one extreme from the landscape going down through an ecosystem type to the level of the species. Relating to this spatial scale is important for any meaningful consideration of the concept of a 'cultural landscape'.

In the context of natural resource management, the social institutions defining the 'sacred' are often linked to religious myths and a sociocultural belief system. Such a concept of the 'sacred' has spatial dimensions and specificities. One could conceptualize a broad hierarchy of social institutions or sacred/cultural entities, i.e. *'spatially diffused sacred landscape'* (a landscape in an

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1. Along the Ganga river course, Varanasi (India) is one of the holy cities that sanctify the landscape from the Garhwal mountain to the Indo-Gangetic alluvial plains.

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ecological sense is a set of closely interacting ecosystems), *'spatially defined sacred landscape'*, *'sacred groves'* and *'sacred species'*.

The highest in this hierarchy has institutions that have least specificity – fewer prescriptions and prohibitions in terms of practising cultural norms – but has the greatest zone of influence (e.g. the Ganga river-based sacred landscape). Next in this hierarchy would be spatially defined landscapes with well-defined institutional norms. Often such sacred landscapes are important watersheds, and form the basis for afforestation efforts through community participation and forest conservation in the catchment area, as in northern Thailand. One such sacred/cultural landscape, with elaborate institutional arrangements is the Tibetan Buddhism-based sacred landscape in the west Sikkim Himalaya, based on the Buddhist philosophy of non-violence and kindness to all living beings. The area below the snow-clad Mount Khangchendzonga going through alpine meadows and rhododendron scrub jungle, passing through conifer and mixed evergreen temperate forests and finally the sub-tropical rainforest systems down to the sub-tropical rainforest in the West Sikkim, referred to as '*Demojong*', is the core of the sacred land of Sikkim State in the Central Himalaya. Padmasambhava, who is highly revered and worshipped by the Sikkimese Buddhists, is considered to have blessed this land when he came to enlighten the people here. A number of glacial lakes exist in the alpine zone; the Rathong Chu river runs all across the landscape. The local communities of diverse cultural backgrounds, who inhabit this mega-watershed, have a variety of land-use systems. The soil, the water, the biota, the visible water bodies, the river and the less obvious notional lakes on the river bed, along with a variety of monasteries and temples are all sacred. Among the important religious festivals, 'Bum Chu' exalts the sacredness of the river, while 'Pang-Lhabsol' performed through Sikkim is to propitiate the ruling deities of Khangchendzong. There are very clearly defined institutional arrangements about what is permissible and what is not within the landscape, thereby making a clear distinction between small-scale permissible perturbations and large-scale prohibited perturbations, regulated by the religious institution of Lamas (Buddhist priests). No wonder the State Government had to abandon a hydro-electric project on the Rathong-Chu in the face of a popular uprising.

Next in the hierarchy of sacred entities, and widely distributed all over the world are the '*sacred groves*' (sacred ecosystems), maintained under very diverse socio-ecological situations. They could remain embedded within a sacred landscape, though they may stand on their own. The institutional mechanisms that govern these groves could differ widely – e.g. village councils, temple management committees, private ownership rights, etc. Often, these sacred ecosystems may stand as islands of biodiversity in a highly desertified landscape, as is the case in one of the highest rainfall spots of Cherrapunji in north-eastern India (Khiewtam and Ramakrishnan, 1989, 1993).

The lowest level in the hierarchical organization of the concept of sacred are the '*sacred species*', a concept evolved with a mixture of conscious and unconscious decisions for its latent value. Sacred species stand, as a class apart, though there may or may not be restrictions on their

harvest from the wild and its usage. These culturally valued species may exist as part of the cultural landscape, or may remain outside of it too. Sacred basil, locally called *Tulsi* in India, became sacred as part of a conscious decision linked to its tangible value for its multipurpose medicinal properties. On the other hand, a fig species became sacred and has intangible benefits of supporting animal biodiversity and is valued by many religious belief systems – animists in Africa, Hindus and Buddhists in south and south-east Asia, Muslims in Central Asia, etc., for varied reasons. Indeed many such species that are culturally valued are of ecologically significant keystone value to the ecosystem, through their contribution to ecosystem integrity.

From an evolutionary perspective, since the sacred groves are often linked with the most traditional among the forest dwellers, this could be viewed as the lowest in the social evolutionary scale. However, many traditional societies also view many awe-inspiring features such as sharp mountain formations also as sacred. In any case, social evolution could be viewed as moving in two different directions from the 'sacred grove' concept – towards further elaboration, namely the 'sacred landscape', or towards a reductionistic viewpoint of the 'sacred species'. This conceptual framework forms an appropriate setting for a discussion on the sacred Ganga river-based landscape discussed below.

Ganga river-based landscape

In this spatially *diffused landscape*, there are many sets of interacting ecosystem types, with humans an integral component (Ramakrishnan, 1996). The landscape has three major components: (a) the Garhwal mountain landscape, with extreme altitudinal complexity, with many nature reserves, and a highly diversified socio-ecological system, placed in a wide range of ecosystems and a range of multi-species complex agro-ecosystems; (b) the flat Indo-Gangetic alluvial plains below, with a more uniform intensely managed monocultural landscape of a rice-wheat rotational agricultural system, densely populated by a Hindi/Bengali-speaking population, but with many spoken dialects; and (c) the coastal Sunderban mangrove ecosystem, a biosphere reserve formed by the estuarine phase of the Ganga-Brahmaputra river system along the coast of the Bay of Bengal, with a trans-boundary component of it in adjoining Bangladesh. One of the guiding principles in demarcating the boundary for such a sacred landscape lies in the identification of the 'zones of influence', for not only the local people but also for the vast majority in the Indian sub-continental region.

The landscape along the river course is sanctified through holy cities with ancient temples at Gangotri, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Rishikesh, Haridwar, along the Himalayan zone, Varanasi and Allahabad in the Indo-Gangetic plain. As an ensemble, these represent a set of interconnected ecological systems, bound together by the sacred river itself, as part of a mega-watershed. With intense highland-lowland interaction through flooding and silt deposition, the interconnected ecosystems are in a sense controlled by the course of the sacred river Ganga and its tributaries.

Here, diffused institutional arrangements linked to the people include a holy dip in the sacred Ganga for the believers; special festivals such

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as the 'Kumbh' (ceremonial holy bath), held every twelve years when millions of devotees collect at sacred sites for elaborate religious ceremonies and celebrations; yearly visits to the sacred temples spread all along the course of the Ganga river system starting from Gaumukh, the high point in the Himalaya where the river originates, and extending right down to the Bay of Bengal. The diffused nature of the zone of influence could be exemplified using the location-specific spiritually linked often self-imposed rules and restrictions of pilgrims, which also implies institutions that are location-specific and culture-specific. In the context of the '*diffused landscape*', unlike in the case of the '*specified landscape'*, the argument of ecological prudence often attributed to sacredness becomes attenuated, when we see intense exploitation of natural resources from within and from outside; furthermore, rituals of burning and dumping human corpses in the Ganga go against environmental ethics, albeit justified by religious traditions.

The Garhwal cultural landscape

Providing a detailed description of all the interconnected ecosystems covering several thousand kilometres along the entire course of the river Ganga is certainly a major task. Therefore, this analysis will be limited to the Garhwal mountain landscape system, which is interesting in the sense that it is highly heterogeneous and much more complex than the rest, for reasons that are ecological, social and cultural.

Since ancient times, many ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups have come into the Garhwal landscape region from outside, prominent among them being Kols, Kirats and Khasa, corresponding to the Doms, Bhotias and Khasas of today. Subsequently, migration of people from the plains of India drastically changed the societal structure, the free-living tribal character of the societies becoming organized on a well-defined caste basis. With the focal point on Shiva, as the main deity with his abode in the snow-clad peaks, a variety of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are worshipped; the rivers too are worshipped, with the prime position given to the goddess Ganga and Yamuna taking pride of place.

Known as the 'Dev Bhumi' (the land of the gods), the Garhwal landscape is a storehouse of myths, legends, and places of pilgrimage for spiritual fulfilment. With a rich tapestry of cultural heritage, acting as a melting pot where people from all over the subcontinent come together to seek spirituality, this cultural landscape has maintained its own identity and yet is continually evolving and adapting, in both space and time. Soaked in a variety of myths and beliefs, each village centred around its own natural setting – temples, rivulets, natural springs and hill features – has a sacred story to narrate. Often, many of these myths and beliefs find expression through fairs and festivals, all the year round. Indeed, this rich calendar of activities is often linked with the change of seasons, indicative of the emotional bond of the people with nature and natural forces, and focused around temples located in the area.

In the Garhwal landscape, a whole variety of natural and human-managed ecosystems are placed in a highly heterogeneous eco-sociological landscape, undergoing a myriad of changes, in both space and time. Many of the natural forest systems

are now secondary successional types. Yet the livelihood of the highly heterogeneous mountain societies is directly or indirectly dependent on these forests' resources, either directly for their non-timber needs, or indirectly for sustaining a variety of multi-species complex agro-ecosystems, according to a scale of intensity ranging from various traditional agro-forestry systems at higher elevations, to modern high-energy input systems in the foothills.

This cultural landscape abounds in a rich variety of plant and animal species, many of which are on the endangered list. Both the Corbett and Rajaji national parks in the foothills and Govind Pashu Vihar between 1,400 and 6,300 m have rich faunal diversity including tigers, leopards, elephants, snow leopards, etc. The Valley of Flowers National Park, at an altitude of 3,000–6,500 m, has a fascinating carpet of flowering herbs from mid-June to mid-August. Many medicinal and aromatic herbs are to be found here, linked to *sanjivani booti* (the life-giving plant) mentioned in the great Indian epic of Ramayana. The Kedarnath Musk Deer Sanctuary provides protection for the endangered musk deer, as the name of the reserve suggests. Gangotri National Park is protected for spiritual reasons, being located at the source of Ganga river – Gaumukh. Mussoourie Wildlife Sanctuary located in the outer Himalaya, is now protected against damage arising from the growing tourist flow.

Special mention must be made of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, with spectacular mountain formations, glaciers, alpine meadows, richly forested hill slopes, rivers and waterfalls, etc. Indeed, for its scenic beauty and unique biodiversity, with rich medicinal plant wealth, the Nanda Devi basin, a component of the biosphere reserve, was recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage site in 1988. The Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve is under consideration by UNESCO for its inclusion on the world list. In the buffer zone of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve, non-timber forest products have become a valuable economic activity for local people, as elsewhere outside the reserve. Tourism and the expedition-related involvement of local communities have traditionally been another source of income offering opportunities for further development.

The rich medicinal plant wealth available in this land of the gods (*Dev Bhumi*), with its rich ethno-biological knowledge, forms an important basis for the ancient Ayurveda system of medicine known to the ancient sages of the country. However, this traditional knowledge is currently being rapidly eroded by the over-exploitation of natural resources. There is an urgent need to devise strategies for the sustainable management of this rich biodiversity and the knowledge linked to it, a field which has only recently been given attention.

Religious tourism, with people coming from all over the subcontinent is an activity where ecology, economics and culture meet. With a great mix of cultures that has happened in the past, which is still an on-going process, there is much scope for improving tourism for aesthetic and spiritual reasons and for relaxation and adventure-related activities (Bagri and Gupta, 2001); eco-tourism organized on a more sustainable basis is the answer.

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Cultural landscapes within the cultural landscape

It is not uncommon to find smaller sacred landscapes embedded within the larger Garhwal sacred landscape, which are location-specific for a given village cluster and for propitiating the local patron god, 'Bhumiyal'. Participation by all in religious festivals contributes to social solidarity, with a therapeutic effect on the people under a charged religious atmosphere. One such landscape is the Hariyali landscape, a small village cluster at an altitude of 1,500–2,800 m, with a variety of natural and human-managed agro-ecosystems. The following integrated analysis of this socio-ecological system is indicative of the complexities of the Garhwal landscape.

A strictly protected oak-dominated broad-leaved forest, which is relatively undisturbed, a moderately human-impacted mixed pine-oak forest and completely altered early successional pine forests are the three major natural ecosystem types, governed by traditional institutional arrangements, whether codified or not. Within the functional boundary of the village are two additional forest types that are exploited by the local communities for meeting many of their fodder and fuelwood needs, and for cattle grazing. These are: (a) the *Panchayat forest*, where villagers determine its use on a collective basis; and (b) the *Civil forest*, for which villagers have use entitlements, though under the control of the Forestry Department. The *Reserve forest*, strictly protected by the Forestry Department, outside the functional village and not part of the cultural landscape, may be subject to illegal exploitation.

All around the forested areas are a variety of multi-species and highly complex agro-ecosystems. These traditional agroforestry systems are rain-fed terraced systems or valley-based irrigated systems. *Rainfed systems* follow the complex rotational practice of crops spread over a two-year period. A given family divides the available land into three compartments, and follows a rotation. The winter crop is always wheat, except when the land is left uncultivated, following a crop of finger millet harvested in the summer. Summer season crops may exist as a monoculture of upland rice or barnyard millet; finger millet, when grown as a major crop during the summer, is usually mixed with a few pulses. Normally, after a crop of finger millet grown during the summer, the land is left fallow during the following winter. *Irrigated systems*, on the other hand, are relatively simpler, with rice grown as a summer crop (locally called *kharif*) and wheat grown as a winter crop (locally called *rabi*), mixed with mustard on an yearly basis.

The agricultural systems are linked to forests through their organic residue inputs. Depending on the availability of a given forest ecosystem type, the quality of recycled organic residues may vary. Where oak litter is available, agricultural systems are more productive with richer crop diversity, operating under improved soil fertility conditions, and therefore sustainable on a long-term basis. On the other hand, pine litter-based systems are less sustainable due to the poorer quality of the organic matter. What is evident from this analysis is that people operating under diverse socio-ecological conditions attempt to optimize production on the one hand, and try to cope with environmental uncertainties on the other, through diversification of cropping procedures based upon resource availability.

The spiritual basis for the cultural landscape

The temple located on the Hariyali hilltop is a place of worship for the people living within the landscape, who are stratified on a caste basis. The influence of the Hariyali landscape extends well beyond the landscape boundary, into the relatively inaccessible region around it. These traditional institutions provide much needed social support for the scattered village communities. Different castes within the complex societal structure have clearly defined roles during festivals and ceremonies, which ensures wider community participation, keeping the institutions vibrant; however, the notion of participation is debatable in the context of taboos that restrict participation by lower caste people and women.

A variety of myths and beliefs associated with the Hariyali landscape, however, bind all of them together.[2] A variety of festivals are spread over the year, the most important of which are: (a) during *Rakshabandhan*, in August, milk products are offered to the goddess Hariyali Devi, located in the temple on the hilltop; (b) a village fair with festivities is organized on *Janmasthami* (the birthday of the god Krishna) in August–September; (c) *Deepawali* (the light festival), in October–November, with villagers assembling in the precincts of the oak-dominated forest, and taking a procession to the hilltop with the statue of the goddess, Hariyali Devi.

Ecology, economics and culture

Mountains rich in biodiversity have always been the abode of gods for many traditional societies which sanctified various mountain landscapes.[3] However, attempts to link ecology, economics and culture together into an integrated whole have been rare. As discussed above, such a link may operate at an ecosystem/landscape level.

An interesting linkage between ecology, economics and culture is illustrated by the culturally valued oak-dominated forest in Garhwal Himalaya, with many of the folk stories, music and dance forms and literature, exalting these species locally called 'Bhanj'. This species has not only economic value for fodder and fuel wood, but also determines ecosystem processes through soil fertility support and soil water retention for their agriculture, and by determining hydrological processes, with implications for sustainable development. The conversion of oak forests into pine forests was perceived by the local communities, and rightly so, as detrimental to their well-being. People associated the disappearance of oak from the region with the drying up of underground springs and small streams and the conversion of small rivers from perennial to seasonal status. No wonder then that the large-scale conversion of mixed oak forests to pine plantations by foresters over the last 100 years, in the medium altitude ranges of the Central Himalayas, formed a major causal factor for the now famous 'Chipko' (hugging the tree) movement; the immediate cause being a reaction against timber extraction by forestry contractors. The message that comes out loud and clear is that these species that are socially valued by the community could play a key role in the rehabilitation of degraded systems, with local participation.

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Conclusion

We are going through a transitional phase. On the science and technology front, the rapid decline in the availability accessibility of fossil fuels will certainly mark a major transition from non-renewable to renewable energy sources, with profound consequences on global ecology and on how we manage nature and natural resources. The increasing realization that human development depends upon the totality of the human system with strong mind-body interconnections opens new vistas in the area of holistic human perspectives to nature and natural resource conservation. This will have major consequences to ecology linked to cultural values. The emerging indications reflecting current thinking on the link between ecology and economics, and between natural and social sciences as a whole, suggest possibilities of developing new conceptual models and paradigms that link ecology with 'sustainable development'.

On a spiritual dimension, a gradual change in the value system and cultural values, though slow, has already begun. Traditional wisdom, embedded in the concept of the sacred species, ecosystems and landscapes, and its revival in the contemporary context of biodiversity conservation is a move in that direction. Rather than merely taking a mechanistic view of the earth processes, where humans are continually struggling for unlimited material progress through economic growth, mediated by technological innovations, a greater appreciation of the interconnectedness leading to an organic and ecological world view, akin to the views of the ancient seers – the sages and mystics – is emerging. The Chinese call it the '*Tao*', talks about the cyclical patterns, with polar opposites, the '*Yin*' (feminine aspects) and the '*Yang*' (masculine aspects), the two poles that set the limits for the cycles of change, the external manifestations of the '*Tao*' being determined by the dynamic interplay between the two extremes. The concept of depicting the Hindu deity, Shiva as '*Ardhanarishwara*' (half-male and half-female), in the Indian mythological writings, is symbolic once again of finding harmony between polar opposites, the cyclical changes within oneself, which when extended covers the global environment, and the universe itself.

| NOTES

1 An important bibliography is associated to this article. It is available upon request at clt.museum@unesco.org.

2 Myths related to Hariyali Devi in the Hariyali sacred landscape:

- According to the *Bhagwat Puran*, an ancient Hindu scripture, Yogmaya was the sister of Lord Krishna, the former replacing Krishna in the cell where he was born and his parents were imprisoned by Kansa. When Kansa in rage, threw Yogmaya against a wall, she turned into lightning and came to '*Hari Parvat*', now Hariyali, to make her abode there. 'Hariyali Devi' thus became the ruling deity of 'Hariyali'.
- Three other gods (locally called '*Hits*'), guarding Hariyali Devi, are located in the temples in the sacred landscape, at Jasholi, Kodima and pine forest.
- The presence of 'Hariyali Devi' in the sacred landscape was perceived by local communities, when a cow from Pavo village would not lactate in the evening for any valid reason, and would strangely disappear from the cow-shed at night. When this was traced by the owner, he found the cow lactating over a stone on the hilltop in the Oak dominated broad-leaved forest. Arising from this, a temple for worshipping Hariyali Devi was constructed around this stone.
- With rituals being dictated to the local people (the priestly Brahmin community of Jasholi) through a dream, a tradition of worship is thought to have developed.

Rituals, taboos and folklores:

* Women are strictly prohibited from entering the sacred forest due to the belief that they are 'impure' (the menstrual cycle being the most commonly cited cause).

* The lower caste people are not allowed to go beyond Kodima village, being restricted to the pine-mixed broad-leaved forest in the foothills.
* Fetching fodder or fuelwood from the oak-dominated broad-leaved forest is strictly prohibited. It is believed that the use of tools in any form (knife, sickle, etc). on the plants or animals will hurt the sentiments of Hariyali Devi and forest fairies will render the person handicapped in one form or another, ultimately leading to disaster for the family concerned.
* The pilgrimage has to be curtailed if a snake is encountered, restarting the process a week later after propitiating the 'Hit'.
* Strict discipline is to be maintained before starting the pilgrimage, by avoiding food containing meat, onion and garlic.
* Milk offered to Hariyali Devi has to be from a healthy cow, fed on clean food.

3 Examples of sacred mountain landscapes around the world:

- Worshipped by the Hindus and Buddhists of the Asian region and tucked away in the folds of the Himalaya, the symmetrical Mount Kailas rises above the Tibetan plateau, and is the legendary Mount Meru or Sumeru, the 'Mandala' of the Buddhists (the cosmic axis around which the axis of the Universe is organized for both Buddhists and Hindus). This mythological interconnectedness belief system has even penetrated into the belief system of the distant Balinese of the Indonesian archipelago. As the origin of all the major sacred rivers of Hindu mythology and these river systems is the basis for human civilization in this part of the world, it plays a pivotal role; conservation of natural resources linked to the Himalayan mountain region could be linked to these belief and value systems.
- The Buddhist Dai (T'ai) tribe of Xishuangbanna in Yunnan Province in south-west China have many holy hills, 'Nong Ban' and 'Nong Meng', belonging to a village or a cluster of villages, spread over a large area, forming hundreds of small or large forested reserves, with human-managed ecosystems and village systems interspersed throughout the region. Another good example of a cultural landscape.
- For the Maoris of New Zealand, the mountains are sacred. Maori mythology holds that all life forms came from the sky and the earth, and humans are linked to the mountains. The sacred mountains of Tongariro, Ruapehu and Ngauruhoe, were donated to the government by the indigenous community in 1887, to be protected as a National Park.
- According to the local belief of the Kikuyu tribe, Ngai, the creator of all things dwells on Kirinyaga, a high peak on Mount Kenya. It is believed that humans were created at the summit of the mountain. East Africans traditionally bury their dead facing sacred peaks like Kilimanjaro and Mount Kenya.
- Though the sacredness of Mount Olympus in Greece is no longer derived from the myths and divinities associated with it in the past, it stands out as a symbol of the cultural heritage of the Greeks. In the face of repeated threats from modern influences to this landscape, it stands as a transnational cultural symbol for Europeans.
- For many traditional societies, mountains represent supernatural beings. Mount Fuji as the 'God Mysterious' in Japan, Kilauea representing the physical body of the Goddess Pele in Hawaii, Bear Bute-High ridge used by American Indians of South Dakota, USA for vision quests, could be viewed in this category.
- The sacred forests in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in northern Colombia make up a sacred landscape for the indigenous Kogi, Arhuaco and Wiwa cultures. Rich in biodiversity, they believe that there exists an equilibrium which might easily be disturbed by irresponsible human induced impacts on natural resources; through an elaborate code of conduct considered to be in harmony with biological cycles, astral movements, climatic phenomena and the sacred geography of the land, they have traditionally conserved their natural resources.

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2. Located in north-western Wyoming (USA), Devil's Tower is a monolith considered sacred by over twenty Indian tribes. Sun Dance, vision quest, prayer offerings and other religious ceremonies have been performed at this site for centuries.

Local to Global Dimension of the Sacred

by Jesus T. Peralta

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There is a causal relationship between the mundane practices of a people and aspects of their belief system. When this relationship is eroded due to acculturation, the cohesion of an indigenous culture is altered. There are state-co-ordinates that keep societies in a more or less stable equilibrium. It is due to these co-ordinates that traditional societies remain conservative in their ways. The disruption of just one of these stasis-maintaining mechanisms will erode these relationships and create new ones. What results from this are maladjustments in the causal association between practice and the belief system.

Contact between peoples is inevitable and even necessary, in some cases, for viability, hence the axiom that 'a group should marry out or die out'. The exposure of indigenous cultures to external pressures, which may have beneficial effects, can also have negative repercussions. Among the indigenous peoples of the Philippines, the single most effective event that induced global change in traditional cultures was the introduction of the great religions of the West and East. The new religions supplanted indigenous belief systems, and thereby altered, diminished or totally eradicated practices associated with those systems. Only those practices not linked with local religions survive

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only to be beset by other alien factors of change. Hence there are cultural practices that survive in some recognizable form despite the changes, while others are assigned to oblivion if not already precariously on the threshold. Indigenous beliefs are vulnerable due to the fact that the intrusions occur in the intangible aspects of the culture. The effect is such that even the objective correlatives of beliefs become irrelevant to society.

The Ifugao

The Ifugao people of the northern Cordilleras of the island of Luzon, Philippines, are a graphic example of the vulnerability of a traditional society to the pressures of global intrusions. These are the same people who are famous for the incredible rice terraces that they build on mountain sides, which have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The ritual world of these people was dominated by the male before the advent of Christianization. Even before that, the cosmology of the Ifugao was already very complex. The Cordillera environment is highly textured, and this created a number of cultural niches that effectively created both physical and social circumscription. This was compounded by the movement of people into the area from different adjoining areas, including people from various ethno-cultural stock. This intermixture had effects on the belief system of the Ifugao. While

3. The Hudhud Chants of the Philippines are sung by the Ifugao community during the sowing and harvesting of rice. Here, the munhawe, or leading hudhud singer, is the woman dressed in white. Surrounding her are others who join in the chorus (*munabbuy*).

beliefs usually are convergent such that the people will tend to congregate, something different happened to the Ifugao.

One of the postulates explaining the nature of the belief system of the Ifugao people is the movement of populations from the adjoining province of Benguet, located to the west. These people are the Kankanai, again quite a complex people with a convergent kind of religion, traditionally with a religious hierarchy similar to that of a church. This condition prevails in the centralized areas where the people live. On the fringes of this society, however, the reach of the religious structure is rather rarefied. It was from this religiously thinly constituted segment of Kankanai society that populations moved into western Ifugao province, bringing with them an unstructured form of religion that diverged from the core practice. These divergent forms coalesced in each of the environmental niches of the mountainous terrain of the province, resulting in the variegation of practices and rituals within the same general belief system among the various socio-cultural groups.

Another population movement from the east into the north-eastern part of the province resulted in the formation of linguistic groups that segment the Ifugao people: the Tuwali in the west, the Ayangan in the north-east and the Hanglulu in the south-east. The latter is an admixture of Tuwali with another ethno-linguistic group in the southeast, the Kalanguya, which resulted in several dialects in the Asipulo area. The three main groups also constitute an analogous religious ritual composition based on a broadly similar belief system. The practices in each, however, are not interchangeable with the others.

Central to all these differentiated groups of rituals is the religious specialist – the *mumbaki* ('sayer of prayers'). Almost every adult male is a *mumbaki*, which resulted from the divergence of practices when the migrating populations lost contact with the central religion in Benguet among the Kankanai. Separated pockets practised their religion in isolation. Each group had its own ritual specialist who practised the tenets of the religion in accordance with his own individual associations. Each *mumbaki* would have his own personal set of deities that he invoked, such that there exists among the Ifugao a religious pantheon of some 2,000 named deities. Common among all practitioners, however, is the belief in one supreme deity, Maknongan, and the general strain of an indigenous set of beliefs. The character of this segmentation makes the religion of the Ifugao vulnerable to change.

Correlatives of beliefs

The correlatives of traditional Ifugao religious heritage is set out in myths, stories and legends that people vocalize in the form of narratives, songs and chants performed on specific occasions from the mundane to the sacred. The more common forms of oral literature are the *liw-liwa* (short simple songs in verse sung as intermission numbers during the conduct of rituals) and the *Baltung* (a chant characterized by the stamping of feet). The major forms of the oral literature are the *hudhud* and the *alim*. The *alim* and the *hudhud* consist of numerous narratives regarding the Ifugao lifestyle, custom laws, the religious belief system,

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indigenous traditions and practices. What distinguishes one from the other lies in ritual. This difference also explains why one has the potential to survive globalization, while the other in the very near future will be assigned only to frangible memory.

The *alim* can only be chanted in the context of ritual. These are narratives that explain the origins, historical background, the rationalizations and intents in saying the *baki* or prayers. This oral literature is principally found only among the Tuwali Ifugao, although the practice has spread where there are admixtures of Tuwali culture as among the Hanglulu sub-group. It is chanted only on occasions of death and exhumation rituals, and other special occasions like prestige feasts for the members of the élite class – the *kadangyan*. The only prestige ritual where it is not chanted is during the *konong*. The chant is quite lengthy and is sung in a very peculiar and distinctive manner. The chant is led by a principal chanter who is accompanied by a chorus of other *mumbaki*. As it is a prestige ritual chant, not all ritual specialists are allowed to perform it. Only a few *mumbaki* who have attained a certain ranking among the specialists can do the chant, and more so since the performance requires a certain expertise in the text and verbalization. There are some 33 narratives chanted in the *alim*, the chanting of which is started during the evening of the celebration day and lasts until mid-morning of the next day. Since only *mumbaki* can chant the *alim*, this oral form is an exclusive domain of men.

The *hudhud*, on the other hand, has related stories which form a kind of continuity. It is chanted on three occasions. During harvest time, the harvesters sing it to break the monotony of the task. People also sing it during the long vigil for someone who has died a natural death. Thirdly, this is sung during the wake held in the exhumation of the dead (*bogwa*). In both the *alim* and *hudhud*, only mortals are involved and never supernatural beings. Idealized in the narratives are Ifugao romances of praise for their concepts of wealth, love, and marriage. Emphasized are attributes of strength and courage among the men, and the feminine virtues of beauty and diligence. The chant is performed by

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4. Rice fields and harvesters in the Philippines.

a presenter (*munhaw-e*) who sings the narration, and gives the cue to a chorus (*mun-hudhud/mun-abbuy*), that continues the chant while providing commentaries. While the members of the chorus need to be familiar only with a set of recurring phrases, the burden of the chant lies with the *munhaw-e* who has to be familiar with the numerous variants of the narratives. There are said to be 200 myths grouped in some 40 episodes, the chanting of which may take from three to four days. It is not performed on the occasion of a ritual and is therefore not a celebration that would require the services of a *mumbaki*. The *hudhud* stories, while related to the *alim* are sang purely by the laity and predominantly by women.

When the *alim* and the *hudhud* started to be chanted is unknown. The Ifugao state that both have been chanted since time immemorial, with no words to specify whether this is in the hundreds or thousands of years. A study by a scholar of the *hudhud* indicates that this might have pre-dated the construction of the rice terraces. The earliest dated terraces were found in the Bunghalian municipality with a Carbon-14 determination of AD 610, although the earliest human occupation of the municipality of Banaue was between 1545 and 825 BC. Both forms are virtual anthropological documents that orally record through time the changes that took place in Ifugao social organization, structure and tradition. The infusion of modern elements in the text indicates the relative time of change. For instance, the mention of a gun in one of the stories suggests an influence that could only have come from the West, although the fact that the gun caused the conflagration of an entire village indicates the idea of a gun was still a bit confused and was therefore still something novel.

Although the *hudhud* narratives are more entertaining and less sacramental than the *alim*, these contain the myths and legends which are the bases for the stories in the *alim* that deal with the ritual prayers (*baki*). In effect, the women chant the myths and legends that serve as the foundation of the belief systems contained in the *alim*.

Western Influx

When the culture of the West, principally that of the Americans, arrived in the Cordilleras, there were major forms of change. The local forms of leadership, domestic economy, traditional education and indigenous religion were altered by the more dominant alien culture leading into the development of a plural form of society. More apropos to the issue at hand is the introduction of Christianity among the Ifugao.

The concept of monotheism was not difficult to be introduced among the Ifugao due to their traditional belief in a single supreme deity, *maknongan*, in spite of the existence of innumerable deities invoked by the *mumbaki* since Christianity, too, calls upon innumerable saints and angels. The essential parts of Christian ritual were present in the traditional rituals too: offering, sacrifice and communion. There was also an advantage in adapting the religion of the dominant culture. The offshoot is the widespread Christianization of the Ifugao, including the catastrophic effect on indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Even the *mumbaki* became enfolded in the new religion, inhibiting them from indulging in native rituals still

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required by surviving traditional events demanded by society, as in prestige feasts. Some ritual specialists went through the motions of the ritual required but without the legitimizing belief system to support it. Becoming a *mumbaki* was no longer aspired to by men, more so since the training to become one was an onus on top of being under a national education system, and the need to survive in a changing social structure and organization. There was hardly any value in becoming a ritual specialist in a religion that was giving way to the onslaught of Christianity. With the conversion of the *mumbaki,* traditional rituals and practices became relegated to mere theatrical performance. With this came the impending demise of the *alim* as a sacred chant with only a handful of 'Christianized' *mumbaki* remaining with the proper status, and who still know the text. It is now in the process of being relegated as an anthropological nuance in Ifugao literature. In the globalized world, it is losing its functional sacredness.

The *hudhud* has survived the alterations in the indigenous religion of the Ifugao since it is neither sacramental nor does it require the services of the male *mumbaki*. There is also no interconnectedness with the new social order. The myths and legends are still sung by women while they harvest the rice from the terraces, when they congregate during wakes and in other social events. It continues to be a living heritage of the Ifugao. It has been declared by UNESCO to be a 'Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. The women earlier asked why this chant that they use to ease the tediousness of their labour has merited international attention. To them, chanting the *hudhud* was as natural in their culture as breathing. They are not aware that they are holding on to the sacredness of the values of a disappearing culture.

This non-ritual chant is somehow becoming sacramental in the modern world even if not in the indigenous sense, since it is a manner by which aspects of a traditional culture are being maintained through the medium of institutional concern with ethnic diversity. The *hudhud* has been made sacred.

© Kathakali and Kutiyattam Margi School

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5. The Kutiyattam Sanskrit theatre was claimed as a masterpiece of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001. In Kerala (South India), this form of sacred theatre uses fire as a sign of the divine, the sanctification of the stage and the purification of the actors.

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The Zápara Indians: the Consecration of an Endangered People

by Anne-Gaël Bilhaut

Anne-Gaël Bilhaut is doing a Ph.D. in Ethnology at the University of Paris X-Nanterre, and her thesis supervisor is Mr Jacques Galinier. She works in collaboration with EREA/UPR324-CNRS (Research Team in Amerindian Ethnology) and FLASCO (Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences), Quito, Ecuador. In the context of her research work, she has had first-hand experience of the lives of the Zápara of Peru and Ecuador by living among them from September 2000 to February 2003. Her work concerns the construction of history, its representations and use in the process of the ethnic revival of the Zápara.

Two years ago, UNESCO declared the oral heritage and cultural manifestations of the Zápara people of Amazonia a 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. The Zápara thus gained worldwide recognition while remaining completely unrecognized, and even unknown, in their own countries, Peru and Ecuador. Although international public opinion is now showing interest in their fate as a result of the UNESCO distinction, these people, who are threatened with extinction, should be urgently provided with the means of preserving their language and culture which are being increasingly supplanted by the neighbouring Quechua culture.

The Zápara are an Amazonian people who live on both sides of the border between Peru and Ecuador. The confluence of the Pindoyacu and Conambo Rivers (Ecuador) and the Tigre River (Peru) forms the heartland of their territory, although the Zápara can also be found from the Pastaza River as far as Curaray. They are estimated to number some 250[1] in each country and belong

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to a Záparo language cluster comprising the Iquito, the Arabela, the Andoa and the Zápara themselves. They include less than ten speakers of the Zápara Language. All the younger members of the ethnic group speak forest Quechua. This is without doubt one of the reasons for the absence of the Zápara from the ethnic map of Amazonia. They have become confused with their neighbours because of resemblances and their low numbers. In fact, in the mid 1970s, the Zápara were officially declared extinct, and therefore no longer existing, in Ecuador.[2] The Zápara were completely unknown in Peru before 2001. No one had heard about them, although they maintained a mysterious presence on the linguistic map of the country, no doubt a survival from the faraway past when Zápara people were known to live there.

The Zápara, who are threatened with extinction, began to undergo a process of cultural disintegration many decades ago when they drew closer to Quechua culture, either to merge with it or in order to escape other warlike neighbouring groups.

Today, thanks to the worldwide recognition promoted by UNESCO, the Zápara are receiving attention. Given sacred status, as it were, they have become visible and more active than ever in their fight to recover their ancestral lands, language and practice of shamanism, the three aspects which they proclaim as being essential to the reassertion of their identity. The recognition is helping to provide knowledge of Zápara culture and put the people once again on the ethnic map of the region. Caught between two worlds, the West and the forest, they have been consecrated by the 'outside world' and they themselves consider their environment and certain aspects of their culture as sacred.

How the Zápara achieved sacred status (in the eyes of the world)

Having set up their organization in 1997 and ensured their recognition by the confederations of the indigenous regional and national organizations, the Zápara began to appeal to foundations and national and international bodies, which reacted positively to their views and the alarming situation of a people threatened with extinction. The 'smallest nation of equatorial Amazonia' received initial assistance from the Prodepine Project, financed by the World Bank, which initially provided the Zápara with financial support for the administration of the organization and, then, rapidly with a budget to carry out work on the Zápara language, with the collaboration of four Zápara communities and a few mother-tongue speakers who were employed to teach small children the language they had not taught their own children. The Zápara also gained the support of several national institutes, NGOs and foreign foundations[3] which financed activities including health programmes, the first meeting between the Zápara of the two countries after a separation of sixty years (due to the border war that separated them in 1941), as well as the recovery of certain myths in Zápara and Quechua (the main communication language of the Zápara today) in order to 'establish documentation on Zápara culture', all of which was carried out at their request and in order to preserve the Zápara people and their culture.

The House of Ecuadorian Culture and the NGO ICCI (Instituto Cientifico de Culturas Indígenas, Quito, Ecuador), whose director is the indigenous leader Luis Macas,[4] took the joint initiative of submitting the nomination of the Zápara to UNESCO. The nomination was prepared

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by Carlos Andrade, the linguist working with them who informed them of the required procedure.

The Zápara were prompt in showing the greatest enthusiasm and had the highest expectations with regard to a recognition that would be experienced as a victory by a minority people, threatened with extinction, who had begun a process of reviving their language and identity. In fact, they dedicated the recognition to all the peoples of Amazonia, and wished that it would help to bring the world's attention to the minority peoples of the Amazon region and their diversity.

As in the case of the NGOs in charge of the environment and organizations responsible for the protection of nature that have begun to interest themselves in the indigenous peoples, what is at stake is the preservation of specific forms of knowledge and a culture for what they can contribute to humanity as whole.

The distinction accorded by UNESCO to their culture was first of all experienced by the Zápara as a recognition, a response to the appeals they had been launching for many years, reasserting their existence and that of their original culture. 'The recognition gave us the feeling that our elders who had been dead for long years, that they were all coming back to life. That was what we felt. *That was what the whole Zápara nation, all the different communities, felt. Listening to it all was an extremely moving experience*' (Bartolo Ushigua, President of the Zápara Organization).

Although they are still marginalized, and largely unrecognized and unknown in their own countries, they have 'become heritage' in distant lands, among white people, as witnessed by the interest taken in them by the NGOs and foundations, and the messages of support coming from distant nations, from both governments and individuals.

The Zápara people, once declared extinct, have now achieved sacred status. Their renaissance,

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6. In the village of Masaraka (Ecuador), the cultivation of manioc is transmitted by women from generation to generation.

combined with their organizational dynamism, have given them benchmark status in the eyes of certain organizations and institutes which all congratulate them for so much success, the most outstanding of which is the distinction – which some people[5] considered improbable – of 'Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity'. In Ecuador,[6] in particular, they are, at one and the same time, the most unrecognized and, perhaps, one of the most prominent people in the media. The same interest is not taken in them in their country as in the West.

The Zápara and the concept of the sacred

The Zápara use the word 'sacred', in Spanish *sagrado*, when referring to the outside world, to the world of the non-Zápara and, more generally, to the non-indigenous world. In the Quechua language, which is the main language of communication, the term '*sinchi*', which denotes force and power, is what best conveys their conception of the sacred. Thus, the mountains that the Zápara term sacred in Spanish are *sinchi* in Quechua.

Today, the Zápara say that the forest is sacred. Before, this was not an issue. The forest was there, full of meaning and representations that there was no need to name.

The intensive exploitation of the forest and the growing need to ensure its defence and protection led the Zápara to begin to associate it with the idea of sacred. It thus became sacred when it became threatened. '*There are many sacred plants and animals in our land, and what's going to happen if oil companies are going to come in and destroy us? Where shall we go?*' asked Bartolo Ushiga at the National Congress of Ecuador. But this is not the same definition of the sacred as that of the environmentalist movements. Nor that of the biodiversity as defined by westerners in the search for a supposedly 'virgin' or 'pure' nature – which is now known to be false since the work of W. Balée,[7] for example. It is that of social life, the social organization and relations that men and women maintain with the forest, plants and animals. For the Indians, there is no discontinuity, no rupture between nature and culture, between human beings and the non-human animals and plants.

The Zápara believe that certain mountains, certain sites are the loci of a particular history; that certain lagoons are sacred. In their fight against extinction, everything linking them to the past becomes sacred: objects passed down from generation to generation continue in existence and defy the passing of time, they sometimes include material objects (pottery, wooden artefacts, stones). Likewise, objects obtained through the agency of dreams, sometimes from an ancestor, become sacred because of their inherent force.

When the Zápara talk about the 'sacred', what they call sacred identifies them as being Zápara, asserts their belonging to their territory and denotes their inclusion in regional history. In short, they are asserting their historic existence in a present from which they had long been excluded. This is an inclusion in space as well as in time, given that the sacred places and objects in question are to be found in a cultural space to which they also lay claim: '*We all have our territorial as well as cultural space. Each culture has its own way of managing its forest*'.[8] Indeed, the concept of cultural space, combined with the different cultural

manifestations, is at the root of the distinction accorded by UNESCO. The Zápara see the concept as the linchpin of their priority project of reviving their identity: '*We were practically finished as a nation. But, with this declaration [from UNESCO], we are going to work, we have plans, to rescue our culture, our identity, our language, and defend our territory, because they are our life. We function best in our forest.*'

The word 'sacred' has been taken over by everyone, the Zápara, the Westerners, but it is still impossible to define it. Its definition is of little account, however. What is important is the value attributed to the term and the issues raised. Our common definition of the sacred, namely something that is inviolable, intangible and of immeasurable value, is not enough to define the term (what they call *sagrado*) from the point of view of the Zápara. The sacred for them is no doubt that, but it is also something of which they are being increasingly dispossessed, something which is escaping from their control and being lost but which, none the less, defines their Zápara essence. The forest and all that it contains: forces and spirits. Lagoons, mountains, all the different elements that enable them to reassert their identity in a crisis situation.

The process of 'Quechuazation'[9] notwithstanding, they have been able to preserve certain aspects of their culture: fragments of their language, songs the meaning of which is not always clear to non-Zápara speakers, myths, such as those of Tsitsano, Akamaru and Piatsaw, stories dealing with the past, the oral history that is passed down the generations, knowledge of the beings that inhabit the world (both the knowledge of animals taught in the myth of Tsitsano and that acquired when learning to hunt), the knowledge of plants and their most common and most secret uses (the knowledge shamans transmit to their pupils).

The Zápara have thus maintained their 'way of seeing the world', their world-view which they intend to transmit, perhaps seeing in it, given their moribund language, the only way they can continue to exist as a specific people. In fact, it is essentially their language and shamanism, the most accomplished expression of their world-view, that distinguish them from their neighbours.

Their two greatest worries, at the present time, are the loss of their language – with less than ten speakers – and that of their shamanism. Although the recovery of their language is their first priority, they also place great value on the knowledge of the shamans. The Zápara say, though, that they will no longer be able to recover the knowledge of their ancestors, shamans *par excellence*, because of the degradation of their relations with the plants and animals as well as the exploitation of the forest (especially since the arrival of the oil companies in the 1920s).

The interest shown by the West was, perhaps, what led the Zápara people to begin to ascribe a sacred character to their endangered language. This is a recent development, and it started with the contact with the NGOs which showed interest in the Zápara people because they were threatened with extinction. When the Zápara saw that the concern of the Western world (North America and Europe, in particular) was growing in proportion to their progression down the road to extinction,[10] they understood that their threatened extinction gave their language and very existence

greater value and, even, consecrated them in the eyes of the West.

They have now adopted corresponding views, and are defending them as do other endangered peoples who are visited and redefined by the outside world.

* * *

In the days following the proclamation, the Zápara took pleasure in calling one another 'heritage' or 'intangible'. These self-derisive exchanges in Spanish also showed that they were putting the consecration in perspective: a recognition by the outside world, given and prepared from the outside, and which they did not even initiate (at least, not at the initial stage). Although well aware of the importance of the distinction, they have yet to measure all its implications. What are the consequences of this heritage status? How is it all to be explained to the elders? The leaders of the Zápara organization of Ecuador have told them that the entire world now knows that they exist and wishes that they continue to exist as a people, and that they will, therefore, be able to relearn their language and consolidate their status as the Zápara people.

Such is the full import of the distinction accorded by UNESCO: facilitate the continuing existence of the Zápara world-view (knowledge, relations, myths, etc.) and its transmission; this means the continuing existence of forms of knowledge, and of a world-view and praxis which are all unique. What UNESCO has consecrated is the originality of a way of seeing and being in the world that is being lost and of which humanity risks being forever deprived.

| NOTES

1 They comprise the Zápara and their descendants.

2 Piedad and Alfredo Costales, 1975, 'La Familia Etnolingüística Zápara', *Ethos*, 1, 11.

3 They include Ecorae (Ecuador), Pharmacists without Borders (France), Pachamama, Seeds (United States).

4 Luis Macas was one of the founders of CONATE (Confederación Nacional de Nacionalidades Indígenas) and one of its most charismatic presidents. He is also the Vice-Chancellor of the Intercultural University of the Indigenous Peoples of Quito.

5 The Ecuadorian Minister of Education, Roberto Hanze, reacted to the nomination in this way: 'If there were such a recognition, I would see it as stupendous because this is an ethnic group that was on the verge of extinction', *El Universo*, (Guayaquil, Ecuador), 22 May 2001.

6 In Peru, the Zápara have no legal existence which is recognized by the indigenous confederations or a territory in their own name. As recently as 2001, there was no information on the existence of the Zápara of Peru in the Ministry of Education or Aidesep (the Inter-ethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Forest). To date, no announcement has been made about them in Peru.

7 Amazonia, as we know it, is the product of several millennia of occupation. The highest levels of biodiversity are to be found in the garden sites that have remained unoccupied for several decades. Cf. William Balée, 1994, *Footprints of the Forest: Ka'apor Ethnobotany*, New York, Columbia University Press.

8 Bartolo Ushigua, President of ONZAE, Radio Luna, 30 May 2001, Quito.

9 By Quechuazation, we mean the process of the spread of the vehicular Quechua language and culture initially spearheaded by missionaries.

10 For proof of this, one need only read the special press editions on the 'forgotten peoples' or 'custodians of the earth' of certain magazines. For example, in France, *Terre Sauvage*, No. 171, 2002, 'les peuples gardiens de la terre', *Grands Reportages*, No. 227, 2000, 'peuples oubliés: franchiront-ils le siècle?', with '20 voyages pour découvrir les peuples en sursis'.

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7. Vaudu dances and rituals are an important part of traditional culture
in Haiti where they are used as a means to come into contact with the divine.

From Masterpiece to Artefact: the Sacred and the Profane in Museums[1]

by Michel Côté

With a university background in literature, education and business administration, Michel Côté has worked for many years in the field of culture, either as consultant or administrator. He was formerly the Director of programmes at the Ministry of Culture in Quebec, Director of exhibitions at the Museum of Civilization in Quebec and is currently Director of the Museum of Natural History in Lyon and Project Manager for the Museum of Confluents. Michel Côté has been a member of the Executive Board of the International Council of Museums, President of ICOM in Canada and of the Society of Quebec Museums, and a member of the administrative council of the Festival of Scientific Films (Montreal). He has been in charge of organizing numerous international projects for the dissemination of knowledge.

Museums are, of course, diverse (and it is fortunate that this is so…) Museums of art, history, science, technology; regional, university, national museums… the variety reflects a wide range of cultural projects and scientific intentions. However, each museum has to decide on the nature of its collection, the choice of objects, their significance and the policies that determine its development. Why one particular object and not another? Why preservation in a museum? By exhibiting an object, even in a small-scale setting, are we not diverting it from its original purpose? Does a museum render its collection too sacred? Or, on the contrary, does it not alter the sacred meaning of an object by reducing it to an object for contemplation?

In an interview broadcast during the exhibition *Masterpieces, Treasures, and What Else…*, Krzysztof Pomian[2] stated 'We preserve objects in museums for the same reason that we bury the dead, for the same reason that during a long period

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of time, we placed funerary offerings in tombs, or kept treasures in temples … human beings divide everything that exists, let's say for the sake of argument, into the visible and the invisible'. When we speak of museums, the notion of masterpiece and sacred is never far away.

And Pomian quickly shows that an evolution exists, that from criteria of curiosity (rarity, exceptional, extraordinary, spectacular) we have moved on to the ordinary, the standard and everyday, that nowadays there is no object that cannot be exhibited in a museum. Jacques Hainard[3] adds that 'any object can enter the museum as long as it is a subject to be viewed'. The object does not exist in isolation but has been chosen, interpreted, presented, seen and given meaning. By whom and for what reason?

Shaje'a Tshiluila[4] recalls her frustration with the numerous museums of ethnography that reduce African society to a subject of curiosity. At the same time, the author underlines the impact of the colonial period which remains significant today: 'Africa was presented as a curiosity with a lingering touch of disdain left over from the period of history linked to slavery.'

While acknowledging the process of change, and remaining aware of the pitfalls that threaten museums, curators must obviously demonstrate considerable humility before adopting a stance. The complexity and dynamics of societies often have difficulty in being adapted to the surface areas of exhibition premises.

The skill of those who have created and produced artefacts often arouses amazement. 'Evidence of the development of knowledge, sociocultural values, and the skill of human beings in linking creation with imagination, these objects reveal the history of human beings. Discovering these many facets is the first way to view technical objects. The second is one of surprise at discovering that these objects work 'flawlessly'.'[5]

Fascination with the work of artists, craftsmen, and inventors, whose objects become points of reference, inspiring innovation. We are amazed at the beauty of the formula, the inventiveness, the simplicity, and the relevance.

Echoing Bernard Ceysson,[6] for whom the difference between a craft industry masterpiece and an artistic masterpiece became formalized during the eighteenth century, Jean-Hubert Martin[7] adds: 'What I find most striking … is that the transition of an object from anthropological item to work of art is something which fluctuates considerably from one historical period to another. During the course of the twentieth century, viewing objects in essentially aesthetic terms became a common phenomenon…'

Hence the debate on quality criteria. Hence that which enables a group to distinguish the reasons why one object is better or more effective than another. Hence the comparative reference point, hence the seminal object. 'The greater the field of exploration, the more we increase the number of examples, the more we are able to see, evaluate, choose, and compare.'[8]

Moreover, it is obvious that acknowledgement of a work of art as absolute, and its entry into the market system can encourage a

8. The exhibition *Chefs-d'œuvre, trésors et quoi encore* presented at the Museum of Natural History of Lyon (France) intends to show that, when we speak of museums, the notion of masterpiece and sacred is never far away.

9. Museum of Natural History of Lyon (France), the exhibition *Chefs-d'œuvre, trésors et quoi encore*.

trend towards over-exploitation and trivialization. 'Doesn't the over-exploitation of this clichéd image, reduced to the mere decoration of objects, also contribute to the destruction of the notion of masterpiece, not to say the destruction of the masterpiece itself?'[9]

Some objects, however, cannot be reduced to their aesthetic dimension or their usefulness. They are symbols. They provide meaning. According to Denis Cerclet,[10] 'Sacred objects differ from profane objects in that they involve a group rather than a single individual … they can also be considered a treasure because they are buried or hidden and are only visible or handled without danger by a few initiates. In both cases, it is the order of the universe that must be respected and maintained.'

And in this respect, museums often have difficulty communicating and sharing. Especially since we often have a relationship *à la Proust* with objects (Proust's madeleine). Fetish or transgenerational object, our interpretation also depends upon our experience, which is often emotional. Our memory comprises a complexity of facets. There is, of course, our nostalgic memory (the good old days), our requisite memory (museums contribute to this), and our suppressed memory (Are there not subjects that we dare not or cannot explore?).

Museums increasingly play an essential role on this level. Of course they draw on the past and cultural heritage, but they also tackle the present and the future. They bring contemporary debates to

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the forefront. According to Jean Guibal,[11] 'Museums thus play a role as veritable cultural centres: where debates, questions, and, occasionally, confrontations, are expressed as in any society which is seeking its path and needs to ask itself many questions'.

'Why do I think this way, why do I say this, at certain times, in such circumstances?' It is this questioning that makes the museum and collection of interest.[12]

Finally, behind objects, there are men and women; inside the museums, there are individuals who study, try to understand, show and demonstrate relevance. Whom do we speak about and to whom? What do we preserve and why?

The long-standing debate between the museum – temple and the museum – forum is perhaps no longer relevant (oh no?).

If, from the beginning of their history, museums provided meeting places for the public to discover the unexpected, the remote and the exotic, it is obvious that these notions have taken on new dimensions. Interest today focuses perhaps more on new interpretations of the same realities, even everyday ones. And what if the exotic were in our inner selves? And what if the questioning was what matters most?

During the last few years we have seen many museums called to witness on behalf of members of a community or cultural group. The curator was no longer alone in speaking; occasionally he/she granted the floor or started up discussion. Objects took on new dimensions and conveyed new meanings. To the polysemy of objects was added the polyphony of discourse.

At the Museum of Natural History in Lyon, the department in charge of exhibitions invited a group of young people to express their perception of the other. They worked on a concept for several months, with the museum's team providing technical support. The outcome of this experiment was presented on our premises at an exhibition open to the public. It is not a question of a recipe or a new museographic approach. What interested us was to provide a group of individuals with an opportunity to express themselves and to direct the thought process towards the concept of the other. Similarly, with teams on site in a suburb of the city, we have undertaken a project aimed at revealing and highlighting the perceptions and values of members of the various communities.

Furthermore, it would be unjust and unjustifiable for the museum to remain only a forum for the other's discourse. The museum should say: We demand the right to speak (with humility, respect and nuances, etc.) In that regard, we will have understood that the notions of masterpiece and treasure cannot sustain the discourse alone. We will have understood that the sacred defines artefacts that contain a collective symbolic meaning, artefacts that are unique (by their function, aesthetic value and rarity, etc.), but it also defines communities, men and women.

In that sense, museums have an essential role to play; to provide clarity, of course, but also to question; and to ensure that there is a place in our

society where the past, present and future of human beings are set at the heart of its preoccupations.

| NOTES

1 This text refers to the exhibition *Masterpieces, Treasures and What Else…* presented by the Museum of Natural History in Lyon (France) from 14 September 2001 to 24 March 2002 as a prefiguration for the Museum of Confluents.

2 Those people cited were interviewed within the framework of the exhibition. Krzysztof Pomian is Director at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales in Paris.

3 Jacques Hainard is Director of the Museum of Ethnography in Geneva.

4 Shaje'a Tshiluila was President of AFRICOM.

5 Girolamo Rammunni, Professor who occupies the Chair of the History of Science and Technology at the University of Lyon II, is also a member of the Scientific Council for the future Museum of Confluents.

6 Bernard Ceysson was formerly the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Saint-Etienne.

7 Jean-Hubert Martin is Director of the Kunst Palace Museum in Düsseldorf.

8 Jacques Kerchache, an excerpt from 'Au regard des œuvres' in the catalogue *Sculptures Afrique – Asie – Océanie – Amérique*, Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000.

9 Christian Sermet, in charge of exhibition projects, is a preservation attaché at the Museum of Natural History in Lyon.
10 Denis Cerclet is Professor of Ethnology at the Faculty of Anthropology at the University of Lyon II.

11 Jean Guibal is a curator, in charge of the Preservation of Heritage in the IsËre region of France.

12 Jacques Hainard, see above.

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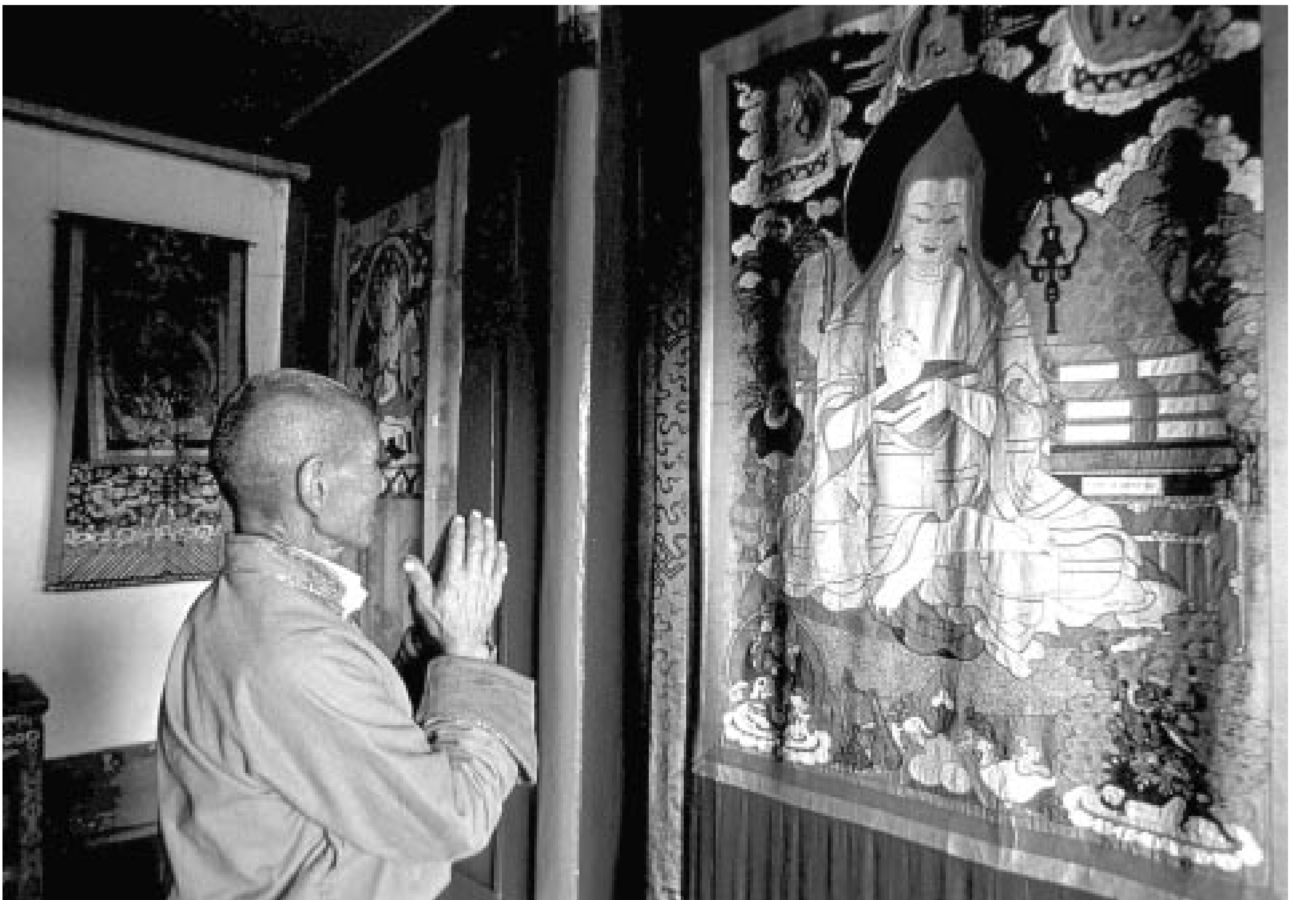

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10. This photo of Buddhist masterpieces, taken in the Erdeni Zuu Museum (Mongolia), shows how the museological aspect is often ignored by visitors who continue to recognize the religious dimension of artefacts.

The World's Altars and the Contemporary Art Museum[1]

by Jean-Hubert Martin

An internationally renowned French museum director and exhibition organizer, Jean-Hubert Martin, has been the General Director of the Kunst Palast Museum in Düsseldorf since January 2000. Before this appointment, Jean-Hubert Martin had won great esteem worldwide, in particular as a result of the Magicians of the Earth *exhibition in 1989 in which he brought together exhibits from every corner of the world and, for the first time, presented non-Western art on equal terms. He has also received worldwide recognition for his work for the Biennales held in Lyon (2000), São Paulo (1996), Johannesburg (1995), Sydney (1993 and 1982), and for a host of other remarkable exhibitions.*

Sacred themes are making an unexpected return to the museum, and doing so in ways that raise numerous questions that run counter to a great many prevailing ideas. Intellectuals usually evolve within a rational framework that excludes the experience of religious faith.

Religion is thought of as nothing but an archaic relic from a bygone age or something rooted in the developing world. The old linear vision of history was based on the contributions of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. At a time when the advance of knowledge gave credence to the conviction that the world could be mastered through the establishment of universal laws, museums were being filled with objects stemming from blind Christian and other beliefs. These vestiges of the use of the 'opium of the people' attracted the attention of the ethnologist or historian of religions on the one hand, and that of the art historian or aesthete on the other.

Starting from the time of the French Revolution, the élites, followed by the Marxists,

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believed in a linear form of history which would lead to the gradual demise of religions and other forms of superstition through the spread of rational thought. The unavoidable conclusion to be drawn from the present, however, is that this well-ordered advance towards a future governed by reason is far from being a reality. On the contrary, the present trend is one of fundamentalism and the revival of religions.

When the museum was first created during the French Revolution, it was encyclopedic and open to the life practices of the entire world, no matter how diverse they were. In the West, the watershed that took place in modern art starting from Gauguin led, on the one hand, to borrowings from so-called 'primitive' art, thus revealing new aesthetic canons, and, on the other, to the segregation of the performing arts of non-Western cultures. European artists made ample use of the formal solutions provided by black art, but refrained from making the least effort to become acquainted with their colleagues.

But the cohesion of the encyclopedic museum was lost and, while avant-garde artists tried to assert themselves *vis-à-vis* the weight of the conventions of the past, non-Western arts suffered as a result. On the basis of judgements concerning taste – an object that is new has never been given the same value in Europe as an object that is worn, aged and bears a sheen – and prejudices concerning the phenomena of acculturation, works were termed false, folkloric and inauthentic by the West, with the result that artists from the South found themselves excluded from the modern art museums. When it came from the past, the art of peoples without a written language gradually won full recognition and came to be thought comparable to that of the societies with a written language which were wrongly reputed to be sophisticated. By contrast, the contemporary art of the former was marginalized in hybrid categories which were termed 'in transition', in all seriousness, by some critics. Such sharp judgements take account neither of the singular nature of original personalities nor of the existence of flesh-and-blood creators transmitting a culture and complex set of ideas. Religious art is valued when ancient, and there is general recognition that it engendered humanity's greatest masterpieces. By contrast, it is suspect when contemporary and never authentic enough in the eyes of the Western experts who cannot rid themselves of the nostalgia for a time before the destructive presence of the white man.

The illogical nature of the museum system is witnessed by the fact that religious art gains full recognition only when it belongs to the past. Of course, a few Christian themes can be found from Picasso to Beuys, in as much as they were produced by famous individuals from the history of art, but there is no place for the other religions in the contemporary art museums. The ethnographic museums represent them sometimes as the spectacular testimonies of the ways of life and modes of thinking of other societies. The *Altäre* exhibition, organized in the Kunst Palast Museum of Düsseldorf in 1999,[2] was the first time ever that the countless artistic expressions engendered by religions were displayed in an artistic context in a contemporary art museum, a display that would happen as a matter of course if such expressions were from an ancient time. One exception stands out, however, the *Face of the Gods* exhibition

organized by the esteemed Robert Farris Thompson at the Museum for African Arts in New York.[3]

The institutions may be more or less rigid, but the artists are constantly on the move both intellectually and physically. Many people believe that the space accorded to Christendom indicates a policy that is too narrow. The increasingly frequent contacts with other cultures, especially in urban and international contexts, lead to the discovery of other kinds of rites, customs and traditions. The dogma of universal modernity is losing ground because of the increasing numbers of artists from the margins who are claiming increasing attention. The most conspicuous signs of this change have come from the African-American sphere which has long been rich in symbolic and plastic-art creations possibly as a result of the oppression to which African Americans were subjected over a long period. Mestre Didi, working in Bahía, has always asserted that his palm-vein figures were as much works of art as liturgical objects. He sees his work as an artist as being analogous to that of a Candomble priest and forming part of a genuine programme of resistance to the dominant culture. The Santeria religion has provided José Bedia, a Cuban living in Florida, with constant inspiration for his sombre and turbulent style of drawing. More recently, the artist Charo Oquet mounted an exhibition in a Florida gallery displaying altars made of veiling, and thus removed the modernist border between religion and aesthetics. The exhibition *Magicians of the Earth* has helped these artists to achieve a degree of visibility.[4]

Consequently, art should no longer be defined solely in Western terms, given that fresh horizons exist in historical, chronological and quasi-evolutionist terms. European ethnocentrism imposed the classification of what are called traditional societies on a scale of values of which it formed the pinnacle, and this led to arbitrary and false comparisons in the phenomenological context. Western thought, which is undeniably unique in having comprehensively gathered knowledge on all the world's cultures, decreed the universality of art. It thus lent support to a general feeling that the formal expressions of the sacred represented the highest human values and could be shared to a certain extent. At the same time, it showed inconsistency by its exclusion of most of the formal productions of the colonial period. The loss of ground of the linear and evolutionist conception of history now obliges us to adopt a spatial rather than a temporal perspective in dealing with art. The resulting impact is inevitably great: What terms are we to use in our appreciation of a Tibetan altar or a mandala of coloured powder?

As an object, it belongs first and foremost to the religious sphere. Fortunately, the object in question belongs to a religion credited by the West with the highest spiritual values and, not being too far removed from a Christian altar in terms of form, is considered with interest. This would not be the case, however, for many other altars, objects and places of worship belonging to other cultures, whatever the value of their formal properties may be. This type of object, which is refused the status of art, is termed ethnic, especially in the English-speaking world. This is a semantic absurdity which underscores the inconsistency of post-colonial taxonomy. An awkward problem also arises with the excessively Eurocentric connotation of the word 'exotic'. *Per se*, a German or French altar is as 'ethnic' as a Tibetan one. This shows the extent to

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which our use of words indicates an enduring refusal of equality. Only geographic and specific categories are valid in as much as the entire entity formed by otherness in relation to the West is defined by exclusion and difference in relation to a unit.

The altar comprises a set of objects used for symbolic and ritual purposes. Each element means something in relation to the entire set which is organized in a specific way. The maintenance of this precise order and the repetition of the acts of worship ensure communication with the afterlife and deities. The altar, as a complete entity, has often been either ignored or dismantled. Christian altars have thus not been displayed whole in museums since they were first created at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Retables, paintings and sculptures, candelabra, chalices and tablecloths were all selected separately for the purposes of historical study and the safeguarding of historical values, and each type of object was kept in a separate section of the major museums. In addition, the buildings themselves (temples, churches and sanctuaries), which can sometimes house several altars, cannot be taken inside museums and can only be shown in the form of images.

'Contextualization' is a frequently used term in museum display, but it breeds misunderstandings and confusion. Many commentators see the difference between the art museum and the ethnological museum as one of the greater contextualization of objects in one type of museum as opposed to the other. The difference is thought to lie in the texts affixed to the objects. Two remarks should, I think, be made on this subject: the very nature of the museum implies that

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11. Victor Bravo Cajusol, Mesa, Shamanic Healing Ceremony (Tucume, Peru)

any object housed in it is *ipso facto* detached from its original context, with the exception of certain works created since the nineteenth century for or within the context of the museum. None the less, as scholarly and intelligent as an explanatory text may be, it can never replace the original context.

Our objective in the *Altäre* exhibition was to exhibit both the sacred objects and their uses. Art was used as the system of reference in the exhibition in order to counter the 'natural' difficulty of museum exhibition. Many artists, of whom Beuys, the shaman of Düsseldorf, is the archetype and leader, have abandoned the exclusive production of objects in order to devote themselves to the creation of installations and settings in which the created or ready-made works are organized in terms of the allotted space. The artist then bears sole responsibility for their arrangement and functioning, in the same way that the priest is the possessor of knowledge who is responsible for the placing and arrangement of ritual objects. Where

altars are concerned, the artist disappears behind the religious aura and the object itself, except in the case of European Christianity in which the signature of a master added rarity and worth to the homage paid to God. The separation between art and religion is now complete, and there are only a very few recognized artists who have the opportunity to make an altar. A large number of altars, which could be called metaphorical objects, are none the less being created for museums and galleries. Such altars were not taken into account in the exhibition and, to avoid confusion, only the altars originating from communities that use them for prayer, worship and offerings were selected.

In most of the cases in this category, it is difficult to equate the creators with artists in the sense in which we understand the word in Europe. So, why insist on displaying such altars in the context of contemporary art? If one accepts the basic assumption that it is not only the West that creates art and that the art created elsewhere is not necessarily created according to the norms of modernity but, rather, according to rules comparable to those which prevailed in former times in Europe, one cannot but agree that religions constitute a primary source of plastic art expression. The *Magicians of the Earth* exhibition insisted on the concept of the creative individual as a common denominator in creative work throughout the world. The justified objection was then made that this risked ignoring or, at least, misrepresenting what distinguishes other cultures from ours, namely communal creation and group work. The main problem therefore lies in the assigning of a category, which is in fact a non-category, to this other. At bottom, all points of view, which are theoretical in essence, can be defended using examples. The *Altäre* exhibition, which brought people and objects together around the incredible invention that are the deities, now as in the past, proposed going beyond the theoretical framework of categories to devote attention to the increasing numbers of symbolic devices aimed at producing meaning through the arrangement of objects in space. In formal and methodological terms, altars and contemporary art installations are comparable. They both concern the arrangement of objects in space in order to produce meaning. The difference lies in the objective, the degree of freedom of the creator and the nature of the target group.

Religion and art are two very different fields, the one distinguishing itself from the other by an emancipation which forms part of natural evolution in the course of history. But although artists may assert their independence, they are not immune from contacts and influences. The success of the performances, happenings and installations can be mostly explained by the way artists have been fascinated by the discovery and study of the ways of life and rites of non-Western societies. From Griaule to Jean Rouch, the descriptions and films of ceremonies, of the Dogons for example, have continued to fuel the artistic imagination. It is therefore legitimate to think that they took particular interest in these forms because they found tangible testimonies in them of a spirituality and transcendence that they lacked in the context of Christianity. Such approaches are not devoid of a certain degree of nostalgia, but, in a world dominated by materialism, they deserve credit for reminding us that human beings need to think about their relationship to the world and the afterlife, bearing in mind that people rarely

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experience matter as being wholly inert. Although contemporary Western art is aimed neither at the gods nor at named spirits and, therefore, seems to be concerned only with humans, it can none the less fulfil a metaphysical role of immaterial transcendence for a given public. Indeed, the world of art has been compared by some to a sect, but such a comparison stops at their spiritual function.

The idea of staging an exhibition on altars had already taken root during the preparation of the *Magicians of the Earth* exhibition in Paris in 1989. One of the proposals made at the time was to devote a part of the exhibition to the sacred arts and plastic art expressions of worship. But, as is usually the case in the preparation of events in which a great number of new and untried ideas are exchanged, some of the proposals were put into effect and others were not. Later, when I was appointed Director of the Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania in Paris in 1995, I was pleasantly surprised when one of my colleagues, Philippe Peltier, proposed the very same theme to me. Despite the great interest shown by a French sponsor, Agnès B., the project was obstructed by the incomprehension and conservatism of the Direction des Musées de France. It was reactivated by the opening of the Kunst Palast Museum of Düsseldorf, and put into effect in record time thanks to the collaboration of fellow travellers Bernhard Lüthi and Aline Luque and the enthusiastic commitment of the museum's new team. The team that designed the exhibition was richly made up of ethnologists, artists and art historians. The artists Loko and Chang actively collaborated by their contributions from their respective West African and Korean cultures. During the preparation there were numerous discussions which were fierce but fascinating because they touched on all the ideas that drive present-day relations between the peoples of the world. Nonetheless, the principal and constant guideline of the preparation was that selection and other criteria should be based, first and foremost, on aesthetics, and although the exhibition was intended to cover the entire world, there was never any claim that it would represent all the different religions. Indeed, this was not its aim. If such had been the case, an impossible system of proportional presentation would have been required.

The exhibition comprised some sixty very varied types of altars. The most archaic ones were made of earth with a streak of rice flour, as in the example of the Hindu 'onatoppan' from Kerala in India. Others were extremely sophisticated and required highly developed manufacturing skills, as in the case of the altars of the dead from Linares in Mexico. The extraordinary capacity to add to the signs that bond communities was demonstrated by the Korean altars, in particular: a pig's head with banknotes in its mouth was enthroned in front of a new Hyundai in a consecration ceremony aimed at warding off accidents. A 'cleaner' and more immaterial version of the same type of ceremony, aimed this time at the inauguration of an office, consisted of the pig's head appearing on a computer screen. These consecration rites, aimed at ensuring prosperity, date back to shamanism. Most of the altars presented at Düsseldorf were installed by artists, priests and officiating clergy of the different religions. Many were consecrated during the ceremonies held at the exhibition which was aimed at portraying real-life activities, rather than empty display.

The modern art museum has become an obstacle to the diffusion of non-Western arts. It abandoned aesthetic criteria a long time ago – an unfailing source of many and varied discussions – in favour of artistic activities that give priority to the relation of meaning and object and a critical attitude towards society. Beauty has stopped being its sole concern. None the less, arguments about good taste are what are regularly advanced against the presentation of non-Western works which often seem to be too 'new' in the eyes of our experts.

Another question concerns the possibilities of exhibiting these objects. Can the museum, which is the sanctuary of lay and republican values, be transformed into a religious sanctuary in the name of human rights? The museum and its systematic approach demonstrate a desire to acquire objects and knowledge that has ensured it its influence. It would be illusory to foresee its demise. None the less, its opening to the practices of religion, and not only its vestiges, can provide it with a novel future as a place for promoting and disseminating minority values. Consequently, a museum of the performing arts, in which the works would be displayed live through the activities of the officiating priests of the different religions, still has to be created. Such an institution can be envisaged on condition that museum evolution is accompanied by a new history of the arts that is relativist and less static and that stops using European art, its evolution and modernity, as the sole criteria of reference.

| NOTES

1 This text was drafted using the following articles: 'Le musée, sanctuaire laïc ou religieux' in the catalogue of the exhibition *La mort n'en saura rien. – Reliques d'Europe et d'Océanie* (Paris, 12 October 1999–24 January 2000) and the introduction to the catalogue 'Altäre', Kunst Palast Museum (Düsseldorf, 2 September 2001–6 January 2002).

2 See the site http://www.museum-kunst-palast.da/eng/sites/s3s2sO.asp

3 The exhibition 'Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas' was held at the New York Museum for African Arts between 24 September 1993 and 7 January 1994. See http://www.africanart.org/html/past exhibitions.htm

4 The exhibition took place at the National Modern Art Museum at the Pompidou Centre (Paris, May–August 1989).

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12. Located in the very heart of Manhattan, St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York,
built in a neogothic style, is an important religious centre of the city, and an example of traditional sacred architecture in a contemporary environment.

From the Icon to Aniconism: Islam and the Image

by Professor Oleg Grabar

Oleg Grabar is Professor at the School of Historical Studies in the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University (USA).

Some time ago, I was invited to give, at the Louvre Museum in Paris, the last lecture in a series dedicated to the icon. I was asked to talk about icons and Islam. My initial reaction was one of surprise. For, in a strict and precise sense, the icon is a creative expression of Christian beliefs and practices, in fact primarily Orthodox and Eastern Christian, with occasional extensions in Western Christianity and other religions as well. This kind of expression had been rejected by Islam, as it was impossible in Judaism. The rejection and the impossibility derive from a doctrine which rejects and condemns all representations and from a liturgical, social, and individual practice of the faith which does not accept any substitute to the divine.

Reality, of course, is not as near or as absolute. From Morocco to Indonesia, Islamic popular piety is full of objects and images or representations which protect or commemorate a person or an event, at times which are even believed to act in the surrounding world. But the existence of these objects does not affect the general conclusion that the very idea of an image representing something holy or sacred and acting in the world is unacceptable and, in fact, heretical, because of a range of opinions derived from the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and from the traditional exegesis of a few passages of the Koran. How could one manage a lecture about something

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that did not exist, could not exist, or was not supposed to exist? Upon reflecting, however, about the history of the Muslim world, especially in its early centuries and then through the vast range of its later social and religious developments, I realized that it was neither possible nor even wise to remain stuck with the negative generalization of a rejection of images and icons, and more generally of a piety associated with visual expressions.

And this for two reasons. One is that Islamic civilization was created and grew in continuous and constant contact with all sorts of cultures which, with the exception of Judaism, cultivated the notion of a sacred by God or by man and perceived through the eyes. There was primarily the Christian world which occupied most of the newly Muslim territories. In Yemen and among many Arabian tribes, images and other religious symbols were common. When Muhammad took Mecca shortly before his death, he found masses of idols inside the Ka'ba, including an image of the Virgin and Child. Zoroastrian western Iran and Iraq seem to have been relatively poor in religious images, but in north-eastern Iran and in Central Asia, Islam encountered a rich body of representations centred around funerary cults, Zoroastrian dualism, northern nomadic paganism, and specially the immense visual vocabulary associated with Buddhism. Later, when they penetrated into India, south-east Asia, and Africa, Muslims – by then Persians and Turks as well as Arabs – were confronted with cultures full of religious images of all sorts, including cult objects easily comparable to the private icons of Christianity. Most of the people involved converted to Islam, at times immediately, at other times over many generations, but it is not very likely that ancient pious habits disappeared with conversions. The problem is rather whether forms remained that changed in meaning or habits were preserved that found new forms.

The other reason for eschewing a simplistic vision of an Islamic world without images is that there is a level at which the socialization or politicization of any religious movement requires a visual translation, an expression made to be seen and remembered as images rather than as words. This is true today as it was in the past, as we know only too well with the operation of publicity and with the national iconography developed for nearly all countries of the world, with its heroes, its dead, its history commemorated through monuments, its flags, postage stamps, medals, and propaganda films. It is thus reasonable to stretch the notion of icon beyond its concrete meaning in Byzantine Orthodoxy to any image or object playing, in society or in the mind of a believer, a part comparable but not necessarily similar to the role they played in Christianity. It is further reasonable to assume that all cultures did develop such visual expressions. In the remarks which follow, I shall concentrate on what happened within the first century of Islamic rule and then conclude with some thoughts on the more fundamental role of images in religious practice.

An episode related by a Christian ecclesiastical source written in Arabic in the tenth century can set the stage for one of the attitudes of early Muslims toward images. At the time of the conquest of Syria in the thirties of the seventh century, Arab Muslim forces stopped at the edge of the small town of Qinnasrin and agreed with the local Christian chief not to enter the town for a

year, so that Christians who desired could settle their affairs and emigrate. A stone pillar was put up to mark the temporary demarcation line between spaces controlled by Christians and Muslims. And on that pillar there was put an image of Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor, seated in majesty (*jails fi mulkihi*). It was probably a painting rather than a relief sculpture, something equivalent to a poster of today. While practising his horsemanship, a Muslim rider could not stop in time and, by mistake, took out with his lance one of the eyes of the emperor. Immediately what would be called today the mixed armistice commission was called and the Muslim general, the celebrated Abu Ubaydah, agreed that one of his soldiers had committed a fault and proposed a compensation. He suggested that a picture be made of him and that a Christian warrior would gallop toward it and remove one of the eyes. The Christians answered that this was not acceptable, because he was not an emperor like Heraclius and that only the image of 'your supreme chief' (*malikukum al-akbar*), the caliph Umar, would do. Abu Ubaydah agreed, an image of Umar was made, a Christian rider took its eye out, and everyone went home agreeing that justice had been done.

The interest of this account, whose historical veracity is more than doubtful, is that it illustrates two attitudes towards images. One, that of the Christian chief, sees in the image something much bigger that the image, the symbolic and in a way real presence of the emperor. The other attitude, Abu Ubaydah's, seems to have been one of condescending, if not even contemptuous, scepticism towards practices and beliefs that may be amusing, but lack totally in spiritual, ideological, or other value.

The century that followed the conquest – second half of the seventh century and first half of the eighth – witnessed several variations on the theme of the acting or symbolic image in the Muslim world. These were not the results of some official doctrine nor of an evolution in thought or practice, but rather a series of discrete and isolated incidents illustrating a range of Muslim reactions when they came face-to-face with Christian images.

The most obvious example is that of coins. At the beginning, Muslims used Byzantine or Sasanian models and added to them, in Arabic, the name of a Muslim ruler, a date, or an abbreviated Islamic formula; the Christian cross was replaced by a sort of ball set on a shaft. Then there were combinations of Iranian and Byzantine motifs on the same coins, an interesting essay in creating an

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13. This coin, conserved in the American Numismatic Society, clearly shows the Byzantine influence on Muslim numismatic iconography: a shaft with a sort of ball has replaced the original Christian cross.

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original Islamic iconography with, on the obverse of the coin, a ruler shown in profile and wearing an otherwise unidentified headgear and, on the reverse, what has been interpreted, probably correctly, as a prototype for the *mihrab*, the hallowed niche in a mosque commemorating the Prophet in his mosque, through the representation of the '*anazah*, the lance on which he used to lean. Adaptations of Christian or Iranian types were more or less abandoned after Abd al-Malik's reform around 695 and the creation of coins which proclaim the faith on one side and, on the other, a Koranic citation stating the missionary aim of Islam. The exact meaning of the words were only accessible to those who knew Arabic; but all could recognize something different from the existing norms, consistently repeated, and associated with the new faith. It is an important aspect of visual communication that forms can have a meaning even when one is not aware of their content.

These coins were an attempt by the new Islamic culture to conform to the prevailing practice of Byzantine and earlier Roman images acting like symbols of glory and of power, perhaps as ideological actors in the life of believers. These attempts did not succeed in creating a new iconography of symbolic representations, for two reasons. One is the theoretical: there was need for a period of time to elapse so that new terms at the service of ideas and objectives that were equally new could be accepted. The political and psychological situation of the seventh century was too tense to allow for such a time. Or else, the language common at the time should be used; for visually we only understand what we already know and there was no sufficiently shared and sufficiently flexible language at the time to express and make visible the new Muslim world on small round objects in bronze, silver or gold.

During the seventh and eighth centuries, so rich in world-shaking events, other responses of the new Islamic culture to its surroundings took place. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, completed in 691, was covered with mosaics of remarkably high quality, reasonably well-preserved until now. Some twenty years later, the Great Mosque of Damascus was also covered with mosaics, of which a few large fragments have remained. In both cases, the technique is Mediterranean and, in both instances, the quality of the work is undeniable. But how can one explain the motifs of the mosaics? Is there an iconography of these motifs? Do they have a message, to Muslim believers and to others? Or are they ornaments that are only meant to please the eye?

For the Dome of the Rock, two explanations predominate. One is that of the power of the Umayyad caliphs who would have suspended around the holy rock as trophies crowns and other royal emblems belonging to or associated with empires defeated by Islam; although expressed in a particularly original and effective fashion, this theme is not unknown in the history of art and is partly confirmed by the main inscription on the monument. The other idea is that the luxuriant vegetation on the mosaics, with its mix of specific plants easy to recognize and trees or bushes that are pure fantasy, would have had a double meaning. It would have been inspired in part by the legendary memories of the palaces and gardens built by the jinns for Solomon, memories that would have been part of the memory of Jerusalem through Judaism and of Islam through the many references in the

Koran to the Prophet-king. The other meaning is that of Paradise also characterized by luxuriant vegetation, fruits and flowers, the evocation of an expected and hoped-for world. Such an interpretation is justified by the function of Jerusalem in Islamic eschatology, in fact in the eschatology of all three monotheistic religions.

The new Umayyad patronage would have taken over in its first great monument, its first work of art, an essential theme of Late Ancient art, Christian or other, to wit that art has a precise purpose, that of bringing forth certain fundamental ideas – in this instance the power of Umayyad rulers and eternal life – and to impose them on all visitors. This was possible, because the public, whether Muslim or not, recently converted or Muslim for three generations, belonged to a world in which the arts functioned in society. At a certain point in time, these particular early meanings disappeared and later descriptions of the Dome of the Rock do not mention them. This extraordinary monument subsequently acquired another meaning, a purely Islamic meaning attached to the life and mission of the Prophet, his celebrated Night-journey and his Ascension, a meaning which no longer bears a direct relation to the decoration of the building.

Such is not the case with the mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus. The preserved fragments are limited to the western portico of the mosque and to the southern part of the courtyard. They show picturesque architectural compositions along a river and in more or less imaginary landscapes, or else trees in the spandrels of the arcade. The rest of the mosque has only kept a few fragments which are difficult to interpret, but, thanks to numerous descriptions and written references, it is possible to propose, if not to demonstrate, that the walls of the mosque were entirely covered with pastoral scenes, at times simply landscapes, at other times representations of architectural ensembles or of whole towns and villages. Each ensemble was separated from its neighbour by large trees which served as frames. The only specific iconographic motif mentioned in written sources is that of the Ka'ba in Mecca, the only pole for all believers, which was above the *mihrab* of the mosque and which has now disappeared.

Some have explained these mosaics as the representation, within the space of the mosque of the caliphs in their capital, of the whole Muslim world. To other scholars, these fantastic constructions, these imaginary buildings, these trees, were images of Paradise, depicted as a garden with chambers or pavilions, 'one on top of the other and at the base of which flow rivers' (K 39:20–21). It has even been possible for one scholar to see in these images actual illustrations of precise Koranic passages.

One last document about the mosque of Damascus consists in the Koranic fragments transcribed in glittering mosaics above the central *mihrab* on the main axis of the mosque and known only through medieval accounts. There was the *Fatiha*, the first *sura* of the holy book which summarizes divine revelation and whose ritual importance is considerable in the life of a Muslim, *sura* 79 (*al-nazi'a*, 'those who tear out') which is a proclamation of the creation and of the end of the world, *sura* 81 (*'abasa*, he frowned), another recall of the end of time after a beautiful invocation to

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life-enhancing nature, and *sura* 81 (*al-takwir*, the darkening) which is an eloquent prediction of divine power at the moment of the Last Judgement.

The images which decorate this mosque lead towards this written assemblage, towards this proclamation of the end of the world and the explosion of the beautiful nature of the earth to prepare access to eternal fire or to a world that is even more beautiful. This eschatological scenario explains the mosque and gives to this striking architectural ensemble a pious and religious (end of time) as well as imperial (enormous size of the Umayyad caliphate) significance. The originality of the mosque is that its religious expression appears in two forms. There is, on the one hand, the visual language of Late Antiquity in the Mediterranean area with its naturalistic realism in all techniques of representing space as well as in the nearly ornamental imaginary constructions. It was a language known to everyone at the time. And then there was the Koranic text in Arabic which was only accessible to a small fraction of the population, primarily to Muslims. The two mediators - representation and writing- meant more or less the same thing. But the uniqueness and the power of this decoration lie in the fact that representations, images, culminate with written texts. During its first century, the Muslim world managed to create an art which reflected its vision of the faith, a vision based on the end of the world and the expectation of eternal life, a vision that succeeded in finding its visual forms by mixing two languages of expression, of which one, writing, was going to take an extraordinary leap forward. The other one, iconographic or symbolic representation, will not have an obvious follow-up, even though we can detect traces of it over the following centuries. Why did it not take root within the Muslim world? The reason is, it seems to me, that the forms through which these images and symbols would have been transmitted were so tied to Christian art, even to the art of pagans and other unbelievers, that they could not be used for new messages without becoming misunderstood in a world that was still, in the early eighth century, largely Christian.

Coins and the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock and of the Mosque of Damascus were immediate and direct responses to the wealth and the depth of visual forms within Christian piety. They were attempts to find Muslim equivalents to these forms, but the important point is that these attempts were neither copied nor continued during the following centuries, a few exceptions notwithstanding.

Thus, from the very beginning of its history, the Islamic world replaced representations with written formulae, as on coins, or by long citations from the holy book used on buildings. It has thus been possible to talk of the transformation, within Islam, of the Image into the Word; writing would have replaced representations. In a general sense, this is certainly true. In the interior of Haghia Sophia in Istanbul enormous shields were put, probably in the eighteenth century, on the pendentives of the church re-used as a mosque. The names of the first four caliphs replace the celestial figures of Byzantine art. And there is a whole trend in contemporary historiography about Islamic culture which argues that the art of calligraphy, that is to say the arbitrary and ordered transformation of letters, words, and whole pages into works of aesthetic ambition, is a form of

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14. The standard pious formula 'In the name of God, Compassionate, Merciful, the continuation (of all things) is to God', composed here on a piece of paper shows how writing was transformed into an image.

religious expression stating the central position of the Word in the Muslim revelation.

In reality, of course, matters were not so simple. Most of the more elaborate transformations of writing were inspired by political and administrative rather than pious and religious needs and the collecting of calligraphic samples which existed since the twelfth century was the result of aesthetic and commercial yearnings much more than pious ones. But it is also true that writing was on occasion transformed into an image, that is to say a work whose significance, symbolic or other, extends beyond its form. So it is with a standard pious formula 'In the name of God, Compassionate, Merciful, the continuation (of all things) is to God,' composed on a piece of paper with considerable elegance and rigour in design; it is a constant recall of divine presence for every believer. Then the walls of the great Timurid monuments of the fifteenth century in Central Asia are covered with proclamations of the glory of God and the presence of the Prophet. These proclamations are at times like pictures hanging on walls, neatly separated through their style of writing or their size from continuous historical or religious narratives. A celebrated panel in the sanctuary of Linjan, near Isfahan, is decorated with a spiral of words beginning with God and ending with the Prophet in the middle, with the names of the shi'ite imams in between. Another panel in a Heart building simply proclaims 'Allah, God,' but the letters of the word are themselves composed of the first *sura* of the Koran, the *Fatiha*, already mentioned once before. Thus two images are provided simultaneously, one immediately accessible, the other one requiring an effort of visual concern. An even greater and subtler effort is required by this celebrated fifteenth-century painting, whose Mondrian-like composition in six different colours is in fact the name of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet and first imam of shi'ism, rotating around a small white square in the centre of the picture.

As a total contrast, let us consider an eighteenth-century image from the Deccan in southern India, a region which, just as the seventh century in the Mediterranean, was a frontier area between several religious cultures. The letters have been transformed into a human face in which one can read the word Allah, God, and the names of Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan, and Husayn. It is a shi'ite image and it is probably not an accident that one can acquire today in Iran, around many of

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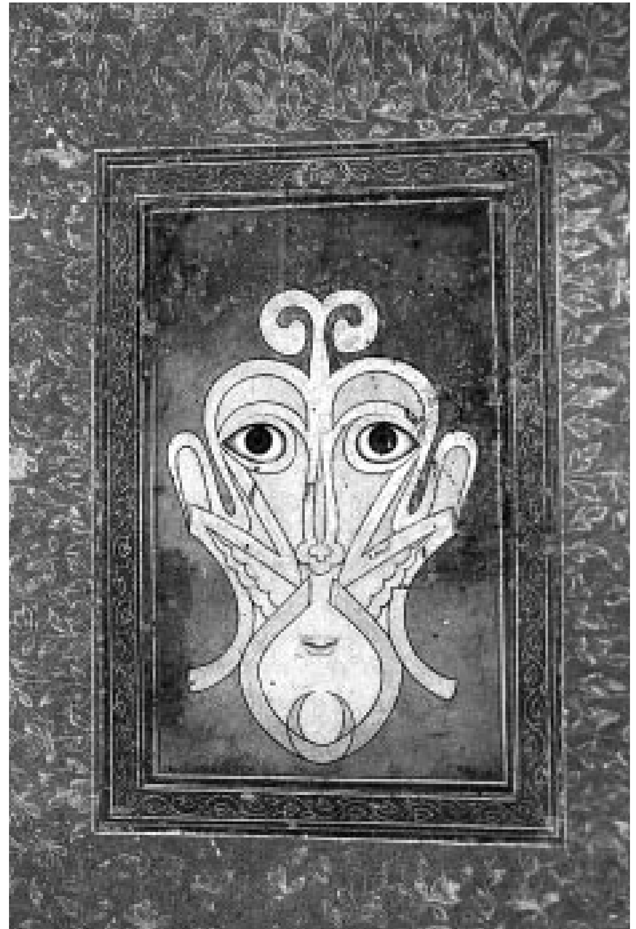
the major sanctuaries, a representation of a sensuous youth. It is, according to the text inscribed below the image, the Prophet Muhammad as he was before he was called to prophethood when he was travelling in Syria with merchants from Mecca. The original of the image, always according to the inscription, is located in a Christian museum somewhere and would have been painted by the Christian monk Bahira, who, according to legend, recognized the future prophet in the youth accompanying a caravan of merchants. And thus, through this contemporary image of popular piety in Iran, we return to the Christian world of around 630–40 with its story of an image understood in such different ways by local Christians and a Muslim general. However brilliant it may be intellectually and however remarkable were some of its aesthetic achievements, writing and true aniconism never could eliminate a need for images.



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15. This eighteenth-century Deccani image, probably influenced by Indian traditions, shows the transformation of the letters into a human face in which one can read the word Allah and the names of Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Husayn.

The Safeguarding and Transmission of Sacred Languages in Africa: Issues and Outlooks

by Salam Diakite

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In 1986, Professor Issa N'Diaye,[1] in an article entitled 'The Moral and Political Authority of the Philosopher in Traditional Negro-African Societies and in Contemporary Africa', noted that at the main entrance to the temple of Osiris, there was a large statue of Isis, seated in a pose of meditation and contemplation, and that beneath the statue was the inscription: 'No mortal has ever lifted my veil'.

This reminds me of an anecdote that I would like to share with you as it has been etched in my memory since the first time I heard it related. The other day, one of my colleagues, a linguistics professor, told me that several years ago he had been invited to a conference organized by the teachers and their students at a high school in Bamako. Honoured by this privilege, and worried about making a good impression, he carefully prepared his presentation, highlighting everything that appeared of particular interest.

For an hour, he made his presentation in such a clear and convincing manner that when he

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finished, the applause from the audience lasted a good ten minutes.

Once the clapping had subsided, the principal of the high school, who was chairing the panel, asked calmly whether there were any questions or comments. At first there was total silence; an embarrassing silence in fact. He waited, however, my colleague also waiting, his eyes focused on the principal. Finally, from the back of the room came a voice: 'Please, Sir, why would someone become interested in this kind of research, if it is to jealously hide the results?'

How could my colleague reply if only to say in all honesty what first came into his mind: 'Really…uhh…I don't know…uhh…I am interested…because it is interesting to me. And also … it is part of the research mission of my institution.'

I could not find a better example to illustrate such a delicate and sensitive problem as that of sacred languages in an environment, despite being multicultural and multilingual, where globalization, standardization and conformism seem to want us all to look in a single direction.

In the field that interests us, linguistics, our limited methods for the identification and analysis of African languages have often resulted in an over-simplified classification of the diverse language forms from the same locality, to the extent that all that does not conform to pre-established rules is often considered 'against nature'.

For example, regarding the enumeration of African languages, a same language, named differently by both sides of a shared border is counted twice, sometimes three times in certain studies. On the contrary, language forms which for various reasons have remained, for a long period of time, unintelligible and inaccessible for linguists, whether sociolinguists or ethnolinguists, are rarely taken into consideration. The sacred languages of Africa fit into this category.

Generally speaking, the language forms concerned are used within contexts that are apparently unstructured and difficult to classify for the uninitiated and require specific verbal behaviour which is essential in meeting the demands of a given community.

In practice, we can distinguish at least two categories of sacred languages:

(a) Those that are intelligible to everyone, but whose usage is reserved exclusively for privileged initiates. This is the case, for example, of the *language of the Cauris* in certain social spheres where the soothsayer addresses the Cauris in a language which is perfectly understood by the client, who has come to ask about his/her future, but who is not authorized to speak in this tongue under these circumstances;
(b) those that are both unintelligible and inaccessible to non-initiates. This is the case, for example, of entreaties addressed to fetishes, or incantations spoken in the sacred forests.

However, all unintelligible language forms are not necessarily sacred or religious.

16. The significant Christian community in Ethiopia has conserved ancient illuminated books of the Gospel. These books continue to serve as an important means of transmission of the sacred language, such as this one preserved in Bichena.

17. The Buddhist faith is transmitted not only by oral means but also by books written on fragile oblong leaves. These books, preserved in monasteries – here in Mongolia, are used by Buddhist monks for their religious studies.

As languages of circumstance (and not just any) reserved for deeply rooted ancestral rites, to which they owe their survival, sacred languages are characterized, in Africa at any rate, by their limited transference through lore. Consequently, their vitality cannot be measured by the number of native speakers, or even users, but rather by the importance that the community attributes to a given ritual practice, one that originates, in great part, from the spiritual hegemony of a very restricted number of those who possess the knowledge.

Esoteric tongues *par excellence*, the sacred languages enable only the initiates to enter into contact with the ancestors, with the world which is inaccessible and forbidden to us, common mortals. They lose their sacred nature and the respect of the community once they become more widely used. From this point of view, they constitute the only authorized intermediary between the sacred and the profane.

In other words, the authority granted to the 'priest' or guardian of knowledge functions, on the one hand, in relation to the degree that members of the community believe in ritual or initiation ceremonies and, on the other hand, in relation to the trust they place in the ability of the shaman to intercede favourably on their behalf with ancestral spirits.

The *somas* and the *donso*, traditional healers and hunters from West Africa, are known to possess knowledge of occult sciences, and unless one belongs to their fraternity, one cannot penetrate the

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secrets of their languages of communication, and especially those that commune with spirits and *djinns*. They are, for the members of their respective communities, the custodians of past knowledge that guarantees the continuity of ancestral traditions, and the guardians of social cohesion and order.[2]

The *Nama*, the *Komo* and the *Dio*, amongst other fetishes, symbolize since the beginning of time, secret organizations that are inaccessible to non-initiates. More particularly, they are forbidden to women, *griots* and children.

The fraternity of the *Komo*, for example, is presided over by a chief of worship, the *komotigui* (owner of the *komo*) or the *soma*, often assisted by a *dialafan* (the sacrificer). All communication, or dialogue, between the *komotigui* and the *dialafan*, during the ritual ceremonies, takes place in the form of incantations, very often incomprehensible to the other members of the fraternity.[3]

The ritual ceremonies of the *Komo*, the *Dio*, or the *Nama*, etc., which are becoming more and more rare today, take place either during the enthroning or the funeral of a *soma* or a *komotigui*, or during the replacement of the roof of a sacred hut (as is the case in the Mandé in Mali), or following an exceptional harvest, in order to give thanks to the spirits.

In Ashanti mythology, a throne of gold is said to have descended from the sky during ancient times. Since then, it has incarnated the Ashanti nation and so, during ritual ceremonies in which the Ashanti king participates, *this* throne of gold is placed next to the emperor. The gratitude and the entreaties of the nation are addressed to him through the agency of a 'priest', the only person entitled to communicate and commune with him.

The statuettes, the masks and many other items of African art are still considered, in many of our villages, as sacred objects which participate in animist ceremonies and religious rites. Occasionally worshipped as protective gods in their own right, because they are inhabited by the spirit of ancestors or by benevolent or malevolent djinns, they precede or accompany funerals (among the Baoulés for example) and initiation rites. They cannot, therefore, be separated from their social and religious context.

That is to say that in so far as we cannot deny the relationship between biodiversity and the preservation of languages in general, sacred languages are intimately related to ritual ceremonies and, for this reason, to the masks and statuettes which they incarnate.

The *komotigui* and the *diotigui*, commune with the deified spirits by reciting incantations memorized from generation to generation. They alone have the right to use these incantations to address the fetishes. They are therefore the masters of societies of initiation and the real masters of ceremony during practices of a mystical or religious nature, which contain rules and regulations and correspond, without a doubt, to systems of belief deeply engrained in the collective memory.

Group circumcisions, less frequent today, were always preceded by unintelligible incantations spoken by the master blacksmith, veritable master of ceremonies for the occasion, who always invoked the mercy and protection of the *djinns* before the

act of circumcising, and also, during the two or three weeks which followed this purification ceremony.

In their role as guardians of ancestral knowledge, these masters of the spoken word are entitled to grant life to a linguistic form (the *komokan*, the *diokan*, the *namakan*, etc.) that common mortals dare not pronounce in an improper or impure fashion, for fear of making a mistake or committing a sacrilege, because in deepest Africa, any inadequate and impure word, even today in the twenty-first century, is believed to have the power to inflict impurity and an ancestral curse on the person who utters it.

This linguistic form is supposed to confer a divine power on them which puts them in communication with the 'god who creates and protects' and who is often incarnated by one or several objects, generally referred to as fetishes or idols.

Let us remember, therefore, silence is considered more valuable in our villages in Africa than speech. This is largely related to the fear of any unacceptable linguistic form. Is it not often heard in Bamanan circles that one does not say *everything right away*, and that one must always wait for the right moment, or say nothing? What adults have not heard, at least once during their childhood, their elders recall the old adage: 'Whoever *knows everything* and *says everything* can only *ruin everything*'?

A sacred language is always a symbol of power, and power is not granted to everyone. Furthermore, in the traditional village hierarchy, power must be carefully perpetuated; any disturbance risks destabilizing the place of each individual in the community, as is the case in the great Shakespearian tragedies such as Macbeth, King Lear and Hamlet, etc. Therefore, the guardians of the sacred tongues are rightly feared and respected by all.

Despite the rapid development of the information society, Africa still remains a largely oral society, where ritual invocations are seldom written or recorded, for fear of making them known to others outside of the fraternity.

It is for this reason that it would be fastidious, I was going to say pretentious, to try, here, to identify and describe the characteristics of the sacred languages in Africa, given their diversity and number, and more especially their dependence on ritual ceremonies, whether *perpetual* or *cyclical*, which they are supposed to magnify. Depending on the circumstances, they serve to invoke the powers of darkness, or to banish evil spirits. In this way, they may take on the form of a dialogue between the master of ceremonies and his assistant, or a simple monologue, the master of ceremonies addressing the spirit directly and interpreting the responses of the latter, which he alone is supposed to be able to hear and understand.

In this way, sacred tongues avoid the three linguistic forms enumerated by Gérard Vignier[4] (1991) in his presentation of principles of description of linguistic situations. In fact, they do not play any gregarious role, because they do not express any linguistic or cultural identity as in the case of mother tongues; they are not common languages because they do not serve as a medium of

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comprehension between given linguistic communities; and lastly, they do not fulfil an institutional function such as that which is attributed to those languages considered to be official.

While it is generally accepted that a language by definition belongs to all of its speakers, when it comes to sacred languages, they are perceived as being exclusively owned by a handful of initiates, no one else being entitled to use them. Their scientific description, for the moment, poses serious problems to linguists, because, as emphasized above, they generally vary from one ritual ceremony to another.

From this point of view, they can be defined as non-structured linguistic forms, dictated by specific behavioural constraints which, themselves, determine the context and the real or imaginary linguistic exchanges which are necessary for the continuity and, thus, the success of the ritual sacrifice.

Ethnolinguistics, by definition, are interested in studying the linguistic practices of a given people or ethnic group. It must, however, be acknowledged that ethnolinguists during the colonial period showed little interest for the sacred languages of Africa, because they associated them with hybrid or bastard forms of what they had the habit of naming, rightly or wrongly, vernacular or indigenous languages.

To my mind, it is not a question of studying sacred languages for themselves, but rather for their contribution to a better understanding of the multiple belief and thought systems that our ancestors bequeathed to us. As Houtondji[5] (2001) clearly states, it is a matter 'of linking knowledge and traditional know-how in a methodological and responsible manner'.

With the development of multiple forms of Islam and Christianity in sub-Saharan Africa, we are now witnessing a decline, even the abandonment of traditional beliefs and, consequently, of multi-secular rites that they always incarnated.

Moreover, the uncontrolled urban development of large agglomerations invades day by day the sanctuaries that were formerly hidden from 'intruders'. National and international highways pass through the sacred forests, rendering traditional celebrations more rare and consigning the founding myths to oblivion.

On the occasion of the closing ceremony of the National Cultural Heritage Week in Mali, attended by cultural heritage officials from friendly countries, the speech delivered by the National Director of Cultural Heritage could not have been more explicit. He invited the participants and the national and regional authorities to combine their efforts so that they could jointly 'bring an end to the looting, the destruction or, even more serious, the *trivialization* of our cultural heritage'.

The Secretary General, from the same department, displayed acute awareness of the problem by stating 'We therefore have the weighty task of protecting this heritage and giving it the place that it deserves in our present traditions in order to guarantee its future, *because it is true that tradition is what deserves to be handed on to future generations, as our elders never failed to point out.*'

Therein lies the problem of the preservation, protection and transmission of sacred languages. How to reconcile the concern of passing on to our progeniture intangible cultural values while preserving them from the standardization which remains, alas, one of the essential features of information technology? How to guarantee reliable and authentic transmission when one knows that preservation of ritual and religious incantations in our villages is still based on the principle of memorization?

Appropriate action to be undertaken should therefore be the subject of studied reflection by the authorities and institutions competent in this domain. More precisely, it is a matter of studying the mechanisms to be implemented which can guarantee the authentic nature of the sacred languages and protect their transmission to the younger generations without being exposed to the kind of plundering endured by so many African art objects.

As the Malian Minister of Culture recently emphasized, when speaking of the protection and preservation of cultural heritage in general, and of intangible cultural heritage in particular, it is up to each African state to *conduct sustainable political action while taking into account the susceptibility and the resistance of the populations concerned.* The problem is even more sensitive in so far as it affects the personal domain of the guardians of knowledge (*donko*) and, consequently, access to *information of which they are recognized and accepted as being the only proprietors.*

Any approach that is part of a deliberate policy for protecting intangible cultural heritage should necessarily be given a specific focus if it is not to be misused by scientists and other research institutions which are not concerned with the protection of cultural heritage. This, in our opinion, involves:

- awareness: among the populations themselves, it is a matter for the elders to ensure that the transmission process is never interrupted. Whether they appear constructive or destructive, all the ancestral rites and their manifestations, verbal or non-verbal, deserve to be protected;
- the preservation and protection of sanctuaries and other cultural areas: in this domain, local authorities and decentralized communities are better equipped to identify and inventory the cultural areas that should be safeguarded and protected from successive urbanization projects related to territorial planning which are often ill-conceived and, more importantly, undertaken without their consent;
- the training of scientists in the collection of linguistic data: this training should aim at equipping scientists with the intellectual, moral and psychological capacities that will enable them to distinguish the profane from the sacred and to recognize objective limits in the gathering of data;
- documentation: at state level, and via local authorities, work must be undertaken to identify and inventory cultural areas where ritual ceremonies are held and, whenever possible, the constitution of veritable audio and video libraries with the co-operation of the populations (or fraternities) involved, to be consulted only with their permission.

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What is UNESCO's role?

No other aspect of life makes such a clear distinction between man and other animal species, or is a source of so many weaknesses and strengths as language.[6] By devoting attention to the problem of the protection of sacred languages, UNESCO has expressed yet again its commitment and concern to encourage continuing reflection on that which concerns the intangible cultural heritage and humanity.[7]

The safeguarding of sacred languages is, to a great extent, an integral part of the guidelines and recommendations issued at the last UNESCO Meeting of Experts on endangered languages, held in Paris in March 2003.

The states, considered individually, certainly have a major role to play, but UNESCO could greatly contribute through:

- technical and financial support to national structures oriented towards research activities on languages in general, and endangered languages, including sacred languages, in particular;
- the strengthening of capacities through the training of scientists in the domain of gathering and processing linguistic data (unfortunately, a deficiency is observed in many research facilities);
- the re-dynamization of regional centres such as the Centre for Linguistic and Historical Research on Oral Traditions in Niger, the International Centre of Bantu Civilizations in Gabon, etc., within the framework of the elaboration, harmonization and implementation of joint linguistic research programmes.

In conclusion, I cannot help but think of the despair in the voice of an elderly *griot* who said 'that because of the disappearance of the elders and the rural exodus that continues to draw away from our lands the potential inheritors of our habits and customs, there are fewer and fewer *mouths* to transmit, *ears* to listen, *minds* to learn, and *hearts* to perpetuate'. All hope is not lost, however, because as Césaire said, 'Man's task has only just begun. It remains for him to overcome any hidden obstacles to his fervour'.

I am reassured to know that there are still men and women at UNESCO who are concerned about the preservation of humanity's intangible cultural heritage, and, who are, consequently, resolutely engaged in promoting African languages, a relatively unfamiliar domain and, until now, shrouded in mystery. As evidenced by the last UNESCO Meeting of Experts on endangered languages. Further evidence is provided by UNESCO's working document on education in a multilingual world. But I am also worried, not only for our ancestral values, but also and especially for the imprudent, untrained scientist who, without paying heed, would dare launch into a terrain strewn with so many hidden pitfalls!

And what better warning than these words, taken once again from the article cited above by Professor Issa N'Diaye: 'Whosoever approaches our science and our doctrine risks their life. Insanity or death, that is what the weak or the evil will find: only the strong and the good will find life and immortality. Many imprudent people have entered by this door and have not come out alive. It is an abyss that only returns the fearless to the light of day. So think hard about what you are going to do,

the dangers you will encounter, and, if your courage isn't up to it, abandon the enterprise. For once this door is closed behind you, there is no turning back'.[8]

| NOTES

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Biodiversity and the Sacred: Some Insights for Preserving Cultural Diversity and Heritage

by David Harmon

David Harmon is executive director of the George Wright Society, an international professional association advancing the scientific and heritage values of protected natural areas and cultural sites.

Nature has been sacred since the dawn of human consciousness – that moment in evolutionary time when people first became aware of their own existence, when women and men began to wonder about their place on Earth and in the larger cosmos. To know that one is ignorant is the beginning of wisdom, and if we could pinpoint the instant when our ancestors began to think beyond themselves, we would know exactly when our species started to become wise, to become, not just *Homo*, but *Homo sapiens*. The mysteries of the natural world were certainly the initial impetus for humans to create (or, if you prefer, discover) the sacred. The notion of the sacred has since been endlessly elaborated in human cultures, producing not just the religious variety we have today, but a broadening range of spirituality, often interfused with the secular, that cannot be easily categorized as 'faith'. So we see that the sacred has long been, and continues to be, a bridge between nature and culture.

If sacredness is essentially an acknowledgment of mystery, then there is no question that biological diversity – the variety of genes, species, and ecosystems on Earth – offers

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plenty of scope to be considered sacred. It is replete with enigmas: nobody knows all the details of how ecosystems function, or how genes work, or even how many species there are. This should not surprise us, actually. Fascination with nature may stretch back to time immemorial, but biodiversity as a rigorous concept gained currency only in the 1980s. Reflecting on global environmental data that had never before been available, scientists realized that a mass extinction of species, the first ever caused by people, had probably begun. The critical point for our discussion is that despite biodiversity's scientific credentials, the continuing fervour of interest in it is squarely a moral response to a moral question: Why should we care about natural variety? Surprisingly, the answers that are being offered by scientists often make recourse to the idea of the sacred, though usually not explicitly (see Takacs 1996: pp. 254–70).

The emerging dialogue on biodiversity and the sacred offers some valuable insights for museum and heritage practitioners whose work traditionally has focused on the more 'conventional' forms of sacred expression, i.e. objects, buildings, and sites that are consciously designed with religious or spiritual intent. A brief article such as this can do no more than touch upon a few of the connections, which are highlighted below.

The loss of the sacred is profoundly, yet productively, disturbing. It has been suggested that the prospect of widespread extinctions and ecosystem destruction is deeply upsetting to many people, that the depth of their reaction cannot be explained solely on materialistic or intellectual grounds, and that 'such disturbing responses in the human psyche' are, in truth, 'signs of hope: an awakening of our forgotten, but instinctual interconnections with nature…' (Golliher, 1999: p. 439). Here is something at work that is very much akin to spiritual conviction, to a belief in a kind of sacred ultimacy whose object cannot be compromised. Under parallel conditions, a similar profound reaction can take hold within the museum and heritage professional community, as when the Taliban ignored pleas from around the world and destroyed the Bamiyan Buddhas, or when the Iraqi national museum in Baghdad was looted. These acts were quite properly branded as unconscionable desecrations and crimes against all of humanity. The fact that so many reacted so intensely, with a mixture of horror, disgust, and anger, should also be taken as a sign of hope: numerous people regard outstanding examples of cultural heritage as sacred (or at least surpassingly valuable) and will take action to see them protected or restored.

More and more, the sacred is being expressed in a secular context. The boundaries between sacred and profane have never been as sharp as is often supposed (see, e.g., Eliade, 1969: p. 126), but today one finds the two increasingly mixed. Protected natural areas, which are the cornerstone of any strategy to protect global biodiversity, provide examples that are relevant to cultural heritage. 'In the modern world,' the ethicist J. Ronald Engel notes, 'the most powerful sacred spaces are often "secular" places that implicitly function in ways comparable to the explicitly religious places of the past. …. Today, for many people the world over, national parks are sacred spaces' (Engel, 1985: p. 55). This attitude deepens, in a subtle but important way, that which was expressed three-quarters of a century ago by John

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C. Merriam, a prominent American scientist, when he said that national parks 'represent opportunities for worship in which one comes to understand more fully certain of the attributes of nature and its Creator. They are not objects to be worshipped, but they are altars over which we may worship' (Merriam, 1926: p. 478). Parks as 'cathedrals' where we encounter the sacred are becoming sacred in themselves: we may care as much about Yellowstone, the abstract entity marked by lines on a map, as we do about the biodiversity of Yellowstone and the living ecosystem encompassed by those boundaries. The plethora of non-material values that people encounter in, or assign to, protected areas (see Harmon and Putney 2003) attest to the complexity of our desire to engage nature's moral import.

In a similar way, many of the institutions that protect cultural heritage have become fused, in the public's mind, with the objects of heritage themselves. The world's great public museums and most prominent cultural monuments and sites have been 'lifted up' (so to speak) out of their immediate contexts and simultaneously placed within the larger context of global cultural heritage. That status, which adds layers of meaning to the site, its objects, and the way they are administered, is itself quasi-sacred in the same sense described above for parks and biodiversity. This is, in fact, the internal logic that holds the World Heritage Convention together, and is reflected in its three categories of natural, cultural, and mixed sites – many of which are also sacred in their own right, of course.

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18. Machu Picchu, an ancient seat of Inca culture, is an example of how natural and cultural elements come together to create a sacred site, qualities recognized today through World Heritage Site status.

The sacred is impermanent and dynamic. Even in a purely religious context, the sacred is never fixed in time. Not only does the doctrinal understanding of the sacred evolve, sacred objects and sites can be completely desacralized and, sometimes, resacralized. We have already noted an extreme form of desacralization with reference to the Taliban, but this phenomenon has, unfortunately, been around for thousands of years. For instance, the sacred groves of the old Roman Empire were systematically destroyed by imperial edict following Christianization in the fourth century A.D. (Hughes, 1998: pp. 119–20); no trace of the old worship could be allowed to remain and compete with the new. Today, there is new impetus to identify such sacred natural sites and give them official protected status (Putney, 2003), effectively

resacralizing them. The recent anointing of biodiversity as one of the supreme 'goods' of existence is essentially an act of sacralization.

So new forms of the sacred are constantly emerging, often being fashioned out of secular experience. Now consider the following question, which illustrates a situation many cultural heritage practitioners will be familiar with: Is the cell at the Robben Island Prison (now a museum) where Nelson Mandela was held for the bulk of his imprisonment by the apartheid regime a sacred place? For those who revere courage and the ideals of democracy, it must be something close to that. The symbolism is already taking hold: Mandela himself helped light a votive candle in that cell to mark the turning of the millennium in 2000. It is a difficult question to answer, for the psychospiritual footing is very shaky here. On the one hand, Mandela is very much alive and therefore not yet eligible for secular canonization (if we may put it that way). On the other, there is the strong potential that he will posthumously attain such stature, much as Lincoln or Gandhi have. Adding to the complication, such iconization can be reversed, even after many years, as has happened with Lenin in Russia. New forms of the sacred are constantly being carved out of the secular, but what has been sacralized can be desacralized and then sacralized all over again. The sacred aspires to permanency, but in a culturally dynamic world never truly attains it.

Creating the sacred may have unintended consequences. Writing of the sacred groves that were found all over ancient Greece and Rome, J. Donald Hughes recognizes an important unintended consequence of assigning sacredness to special places: 'The practice of setting physical boundaries for sacred spaces consecrated and protected what was within, but by implication unhallowed the land outside. Beyond the bounds, the gods no longer protected the earth, and people were free to use it as they saw fit. Inside the *temenos* (Greek: a 'cut-off' or demarcated place) there might be glimpsed a holy light, but outside shone only the ordinary light of day' (Hughes, 1998: p. 119). Likewise, when we select which objects and sites from our collective cultural heritage to preserve, admitting them to the Pantheon of official recognition and protection, do we not run the risk of tacitly consigning the rest to a second-class status where 'anything goes' (and usually will)? Considering the changing notions of value discussed above, this can be disastrous, though it may be unavoidable.

Every aspect of diversity is important. What distinguishes biodiversity from a mere general concern about nature is that biodiversity assigns importance to every contributor to variety, no matter how inconspicuous, rare, or seemingly useless to humans it may be. Biodiversity scientists are just as concerned about unseen mycorrhizal fungi or obscure freshwater mussels as they are about 'flagship species' such as the giant panda. To borrow a term from the vocabulary of religion, biodiversity concern is *ecumenical*. Museum and heritage professionals would do well to urge a similar attitude towards cultural diversity. In years past, artefacts associated with minority cultures were routinely discarded because the decision-makers of the day were certain they had no lasting value – and the cultures that made them were 'insignificant' anyway. Now we know how foolish such ethnocentric short-sightedness is.

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There can be perils in trying to explain the sacred. The secular desire to clear up all of life's mysteries can be self-defeating when it pursues understanding of the sacred. For example, natural sites that are sacred to various peoples exist all over the world. These range from striking geological features carrying obvious emotional impact, such as prominent mountains, to rather nondescript places that an unschooled observer would never classify as special. The pitfall is this: 'Once explained scientifically, the apparently arbitrary existence of natural sacred sites as objects of veneration may become 'visible' for interpretation by conservationists yet such an interpretability may not in fact be desirable in terms of the cultural integrity of local and indigenous people' (Hay-Edie and Hadley, 1998: p. 65). This observation encapsulates two key points that bear on our discussion. First, for many people the sacred is precisely that which cannot (or should not) be explicated, and attempts to do so are ill-advised at best, and sacrilegious – or even dangerous – at worst. This presents a problem to Western secular societies, where a particular group's desire to exclude 'outsiders' from sacred sites and sacred knowledge may well seem an affront to basic democratic principles, such as the people's 'right to know' (principles which themselves are practically sacred to those who hold them). Here, sacredness as traditionally conceived seems almost like something from another epoch, in that it is fundamentally at odds with modernity and its search for universal codes of conduct. Understanding it, therefore, calls for exceptional sensitivity and the ability to set aside professional predilections for openness. Readers of this journal will recognize parallels here with contentious issues facing museums, such as repatriation of human remains and burial goods, whether to keep and display accessions whose function was meant to be secret, and the proper handling of sacred items in general.

Second, Hay-Edie and Hadley correctly identify what is ultimately at stake: cultural integrity. The related notions of integrity and authenticity provide another parallel between biodiversity conservation and cultural heritage work. Part of the intrinsic value of biodiversity is its authenticity, the fact that it evolved without overarching human direction. To be sure, people have greatly influenced the course of biological evolution, and through domestication of plants and animals have augmented natural biodiversity with varieties and breeds whose importance to our survival is unquestionable. But most of the millions of species on the planet have evolved with little or no intentional direct influence from humans. Continuing the course of unmediated, authentic evolution – rather than relying on the prospect of genetic engineering being able to manufacture replacements for extinct species – is the major

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19. At a workshop held in February 2003, in Kunming (China), participants discussed how to get wider recognition of the biodiversity-conserving qualities of sacred natural sites.

concern of biodiversity scientists. The best way to do that is to preserve functional ecosystems that retain a high degree of ecological integrity. The same principles apply to cultural diversity and cultural heritage preservation. Ensuring the authenticity of objects under its care is obviously the foundation of any museum, but the institution's mission is immeasurably enhanced when it is also connected to field activities that support the integrity of living cultural traditions. Authenticity and integrity thus combine to support the continued evolution of cultural diversity.

Diversity, the expression of life's fundamental creativity, is good. As the environmental philosopher Holmes Rolston III observes, biology and theology have many basic disagreements, but one conviction they share is that the Earth is prolific, and that this creativity is good (Rolston, 1993: pp. 45–6). Biologists call the creative process *speciation* while theologians call it genesis, and they have very different explanations for it, but both have agreed that it is eminently valuable. This does not mean that every result of the process is good – the organisms that cause virulent infectious diseases are an obvious example to the contrary. But such cases are so small in proportion to the whole that we can say with confidence that biodiversity is good. The same is true for cultural diversity. Saturation news coverage, with its penchant for the sensational, can make it seem as though the world is populated exclusively by zealots and their repugnant ideals. The reality is that the creative process of cultural evolution has given us a wealth of world-views – animated by languages, art forms, and other means of expression – whose very existence is a cornerstone of our humanity. Our species could no doubt survive in a world with far less biological and cultural diversity, and we might even be more 'secure,' but it would not be a world with enough breadth to let us explore the possibilities of positive civilization.

These are just a few of the points of congruence between biodiversity and cultural heritage as linked by the idea of the sacred. Where might these insights lead us? One important conclusion to be drawn is that the sacred still has a role to play in the human experience, one whose focus increasingly is on existence here and now rather than on an otherworldly afterlife. Nature itself can be conceived of as both religiously ultimate, without God, gods, or animating spirits of any kind, and metaphysically ultimate, requiring no explanation of its cause. In this view, earthly nature is that which is given, the 'first thing' out of which everything else (including human culture) has come, and the proper object of our reverence (Crosby, 2002; see also Ehrenfeld, 1988). Moves in this direction do not necessarily mean that the intensity of the sacred experience is diminishing, though it certainly is broadening to include new objects, places, and forms of veneration. Any explanation of the sacred as it is conceived of today must, at a minimum, account for the biological and cultural diversity of life on Earth – what I have elsewhere called 'the biocultural presence' (Harmon, 2002). To do even that much will be an intellectual and spiritual odyssey worthy of the best that humankind can muster.

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Archaeological Memory and Popular Piety

by Azedine Beschaouch

Azedine Beschaouch is Adviser to the Assistant Director-General for Culture in UNESCO for the International Safeguarding Programme of Angkor. As Chairman of the World Heritage Committee he played a key role in the decision-making process leading to the inscription of Angkor on the World Heritage List and in the implementation of its safeguarding programme.

For several centuries, Carthage, the famous Phoenician Punic metropolis, was the heart (it is probably worth remembering) of a western maritime empire. Under Roman domination, it also became the centre for the government of the Roman Province of Africa, for centuries.

Not far from this capital – today inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List at Tunisia's request – one can find, in a bower of greenery, among laurels, eucalyptus and Allepo pine trees, a modern spa resort named after the hill which overlooks the landscape from an altitude of 400 m: *Djebel el-Oust*.[1]

These baths are arranged around a hot spring (gushing out at 55 degrees Celsius), which belongs to the sodic and chlorinated water groups, particularly appropriate for treating rheumatism, arthritis and bone traumatisms.

The major, rare feature of the Djebel el-Oust baths is the harmonious, effortless combination of hydrotherapy and cultural tourism, an association of the springs' healing powers with the pleasure of archaeological discovery.

Indeed, at the foot of the hill (the *Djebel*)

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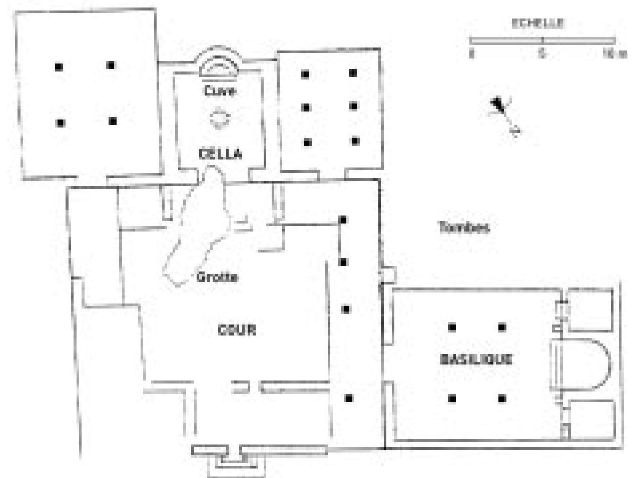
lies a small historic site which has exceptionally well preserved Roman baths, including a lovely circular swimming pool, a vast rectangular pool surrounded by a twenty-column portico, as well as bathing huts, rest rooms and leisure areas. Its decorations in marble and marbled limestone, its polychrome stucco coatings and its mosaic floors lend a special charm to the site.

Nevertheless, it is endowed with another remarkable characteristic, which, I believe, makes of it a significant cultural reference between history and memory.

The archaeological finds have brought to light, at the far end of a cave, the fault from which, in ancient times, the thermal-mineral spring gushed out. A basin dedicated to the worship of a spirit or deity of the waters was also found. Certain coins collected during the excavations as well as several pieces of pottery have led us to think that this place of worship, prior to the Roman era, could date back to at least the third century B.C.

A *temple of the waters*, a sanctuary built in approximately the second century A.D., was erected during the peak of Roman African civilisation. This sanctuary, with a courtyard overlooking the cave of the spring, comprises three rooms dedicated to worship. The discovery of a statue of Esculape, god of medicine, as well as one of his partner Hygie, divinity of health, fully confirmed the identity of the place. This is a sanctuary dedicated to the worship of healing waters. The discovery confirmed also the continuity of worshipping practices across the centuries. Consequently (in the sixth century at the latest, with the Byzantine conquest of North Africa), a Christian basilica composed of three naves was erected on the right of the pagan temple's courtyard which itself was rearranged in accordance with Christian liturgy. And so it came to be that a *baptistry* was placed in the central room of Esculape's temple. None the less, this Christian period was not to be the last one in the history of this religious site.



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20. The sacred complex of Djebel el-Oust: The location of the cave (i.e. Grotte), between the temple (i.e. Cella) and the courtyard. On the right, the Byzantine church (i.e. Basilique).

As we know, the Muslim Arab *Ifriquiya* followed the Christian Roman *Africa*, before the heart of the ancient and medieval region took on the present, modern name of 'Tunisia'. In the midst of this development, the baptismal font of *Djebel el-Oust* was filled in and in its place a marabout's cenotaph was erected, whose striking, white cupola remained in the landscape until 1959. So, with Islam the devotion to the spirits of the healing waters was kept alive.

It is clear that the *Djebel el-Oust* spa resort in Tunisia is an extraordinary example of the continuity of the notion of the sacred through thousands of years, going beyond cultural changes and religious conflicts.

As regards the preservation of life and conservation of health, providence adapts its name to all times and places. In fact, in the memory of human beings, the strength of the sacred prevails over the narrowness of the religious spectrum.

| NOTES

1. *Djebel* (transcribed from Arabic) means mountain or hill, or even elevation; *El-Oust* means median, rising in the middle of a plain.

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21. Included in the List of World Heritage,
this Buddhist site in Polonnaruva (Sri Lanka) is still a place of
pilgrimage and religious contemplation.

Journeys through an Australian Sacred Landscape

by Cathy Robinson, Richard Baker and Lynette Liddle

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Lynette Liddle is manager of Cultural and Natural Resources, Uluru Kata Tjuta National Park, Environment Australia. She participated as a panellist at the UNESCO Asia Pacific Regional Conference on Science for the 21st Century, in Sydney in December 1998, and was a member of the Australian Delegation to the World Conference on Science in Budapest in June/July 1999.

This article begins by describing two contrasting journeys through a central Australian landscape. One is undertaken by senior Aṉangu[1] women and their families as part of their responsibilities to care for their country. The other is a pilgrimage taken by large numbers of tourists in the same landscape but on a very different journey – to climb a rock that is internationally promoted as an Australian outback icon. We present these contrasting journeys to highlight key tensions in the joint management of Uluṟu – Kata Tjuṯa National Park. These tensions emanate from the issue that climbing Uluṟu is offensive to Aṉangu sacred law as the site is spiritually important. Aṉangu are also distressed by people undertaking the dangerous climb as their law (Tjukurpa) requires them to look after all visitors on their land. They feel a sense of responsibility when people get injured or die on the climb.

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Anangu journey through sacred country

When senior Anangu women Mrs Tjikadu, René Kulitja and Nancy Miller join one of us (Lynette Liddle) to go bush, they gather crowbars, shovels, axes, blankets and country and western music tapes. The purpose and direction of the trip is keenly discussed. For these women, this journey is part of an ongoing responsibility to care for the sacred, social and ecological elements of this landscape – often referred to in Aboriginal English as 'caring for country'. Children are always included in this learning experience, bush tucker will be collected, and the health of the country will be appraised and maintained.

The Toyota four-wheel drive finally leaves the community with everyone singing in their Pitjantjatjara language – happy to get away from the pressures of community life. As with other Anangu activities, Tjukurpa (Aboriginal law) will form an integral part of the journey's purpose and the way Anangu relate with each other and with landscape. The journey is slow to allow these women to carefully appraise their country with the help of their grandchildren's sharp eyes. Ecological changes are noted and past experiences recalled in extensive network of communication of past and shared experiences. Sites that have often yielded bush tucker are visited and carefully checked and form a focus to teach the children what used to happen in *Iritja* (olden) times. Stories are shared, bush tomatoes, ashes for pitjuri and wittchetty grubs are collected, before the Toyota heads for home.

As the women drive into Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park a long trail of *minga* (the Anangu term for ants that is also used to refer to tourists) can be seen like ants climbing Uluru. Like other Anangu elders these women find it offensive that *minga* walk over a landscape that contains sacred sites created from the activities of ancestral beings. As Anangu have explained, the Uluru climb is one example of a walking track and journey that is at odds with the maintenance of Tjukurpa and Anangu responsibilities for the country's care.

Tourists journeys to an icon

Like the Sydney Harbour Bridge the silhouetted outline of the Uluru landform is a readily identifiable national and international symbol. By ignoring Anangu views tourists often project their own meanings on this landscape. For example, Uluru is a magnet for followers of new age spirituality, to visitors keen to see the 'heart' of Australia, and as part of 'doing the outback'. It is a Mecca for over 300,000 visitors a year, most of whom arrive with a fixed idea of what they are going to do – climb an impressively big rock rising majestically out of starkly contrasting sand plain desert. The following description outlines the kind of journeys these tourists make through this country.

The 10am Qantas flight from Sydney to Ayers Rock[2] is full. German, Japanese, American, British and Australian accents can be heard. Everybody is in holiday mode. Few watch the video on the cultural values of the park but there is a rush to the left-hand side of the plane when their pilot announces, 'Ayers Rock is in sight'. On arrival airport buses take everyone to the nearby resort.

After an afternoon of shopping for souvenirs tour buses arrive at hotels to take everyone into the park to view the sunset. Up to

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22. In the Uluṟu National Park (Australia), Uluṟu, an immense monolith, and Kata Tjuṯa, the rock domes located west of Uluṟu, form part of the traditional belief system of one of the oldest human societies in the world.

1000 tourist line up to watch Uluru turn raging red in the light of the setting sun. This pilgrimage is repeated at dawn on the opposite side of the rock, which is followed by a rush to be the first to get to the base of the climb. Before climbing some tourists briefly read the multilingual interpretative sign that explains that the A<u>n</u>angu do not want people to climb Uluṟu. While a few tourists change their minds and go on one of the interpreted walks around the rock the majority head up the arduous and sometimes fatal climb. This journey takes between two or three hours and some tourists arrive back at their buses with little chips of the rock that they have collected as a souvenir.

Many tourists learn very little about the sacred nature of Uluru and the surrounding country during their visit unless they have time to visit the park's cultural centre. Some tourists are prompted to write apologetic notes about their inappropriate behaviour in the visitor comments book on display while others write similar guilty letters when they return home. The park regularly receives parcels with bits of the rock that people have stolen with a note enclosed with a plea for forgiveness for offending the law of A<u>n</u>angu.

Contrasts between the journeys – challenges for joint management

There are a number of contrasting issues that these two journeys raise. On the one hand, the A<u>n</u>angu journey is about living, maintaining and upholding the everyday sacredness of a landscape created and governed by Tjukurpa. On the other hand, most tourist journeys leave little time or opportunity to learn about and observe the appropriate protocols required as visitors in A<u>n</u>angu country. As A<u>n</u>angu have observed, *minga* (tourists) are often *pina pati* (hard of hearing). There is a dominant and persistent expectation to climb, interpretation of A<u>n</u>angu wishes are often ignored, and *minga* activities undermine and disregard Tjukurpa. Such ignorance and disregard by *minga* is a serious issue. As stated by A<u>n</u>angu in the current Park Plan of Management, if the requirements of Tjukurpa are not fulfilled, the country may die.

Uluṟu – Kata Tjuṯa National Park is committed to the concept and practice of joint management, which entails a working partnership between A<u>n</u>angu and Parks Australia that aims to respect each other and achieve mutual goals. That respect includes recognition of Tjukurpa as the fundamental value to guide park management. Tjukurpa is strong in this landscape and was acknowledged internationally in 1994 when Uluṟu – Kata Tjuṯa National Park was inscribed on the World Heritage List as a Cultural Landscape.

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Joint management in the park faces many challenges. This partnership not only seeks to balance Anangu landscape values with those of a World Heritage National Park it must also deal with the issue of managing tourist (ignorant) attitudes and (mis)behaviour. Anangu have actively participated in a range of initiatives within the park that are designed to improve information available to tourists. Interpretative material seeks to help visitors understand the implications of being visitors in Anangu country. This includes a variety of mechanisms to translate the Anangu message '*Nganana Tatintja Wiya* – We never climb'.

Tjukutjuku – Slowly slowly, little by little

This case-study has highlighted the complexities of managing landscapes with contested meanings. The Anangu landscape is a sacred text that links people with Tjukurpa. In contrast most tourists come with the view that Uluru is merely a feature of the outback and is open to their own interpretations. The management of Anangu sacredness through Tjukurpa and the tension in translating Anangu law to ensure tourist interpretation and behaviour is appropriate provides an intriguing perspective to this journal's issue focus. Sacredness in this context is not abstract or contained to a site or an object but is embedded in Anangu culture, country and its care. It is a challenge to translate such local and deeply regarded notions in a Park that is exposed to a globalised world.

The challenge of interpreting Anangu landscape values and world views is currently focused inside an impressive cultural centre but as many visitors don't go here or only visit it after they have climbed Uluru. More strategic and multi-targeted interpretation tools are needed in the landscape itself. Interpretation needs to slow tourists down – or as Anangu say Tjukutjuku – go slowly slowly – so that Anangu landscape values can be regarded and understood. The problem of cross-cultural translation highlighted in this article can also be addressed by employing Anangu to tell tourists about their country. It is a vision that is supported by Anangu but it also recognized that such aspirations might take generations to achieve. In the meantime, the Anangu message remains strong. As Kunmanara – senior traditional owner of Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park, Australia has explained.

That's a really important sacred thing that you are climbing …
You shouldn't climb.
It's not the real thing about this place.
The real thing is listening to everything.
This is the thing that's right.
This is the proper way: no climbing.

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Uluru – Kata Tjuta Board of Management, 2000, Uluru – Kata Tjuta National Park Plan of Management, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

| NOTES

1 Anangu is the term Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara speaking people from central Australia use to refer to themselves.

2 Qantas flights are still to Ayers Rock and the resort built outside the National Park is called the Ayers Rock resort.

Before Vanishing Forever: the Rescue Operation of the Centre for Jewish Art

by Professor Aliza Cohen-Mushlin

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The year is 1718. The thriving community of Berezhany in Ukraine consecrates its 'Great Synagogue'. It is a monumental stone building, meant to survive the ravages of time. It is now 1992. Of its flourishing Jewish community, Berezhany has one Jewish survivor. The beautiful old stones must tell their own story. An expedition team from the Centre for Jewish Art arrives, finding the synagogue in serious danger of collapse. Every aspect of the structure is documented through description, photographs, detailed architectural plans and archival data. Summer of 1994: The CJA team returns to continue their work; they find a heap of stones. Were it not for the centre's earlier in-depth documentation, the rubble of the synagogue would be all that remains of this once grand edifice. Since then, in collaboration with the West Ukrainian Conservation Department, the centre staff has been systematically documenting the synagogues in Ukraine and building three-dimensional computer models of the most significant ones, thereby re-creating an image of the past for future generations.

Documenting the endangered material legacy of dwindling or lost Jewish communities has

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23. The Great Synagogue of Berezhany (Ukraine) in 1992, as it was found by a team sent by the Centre for Jewish Art.

24 . In 1994, another team from the CJA came back to the synagogue, which had collapsed completely.

been the work of the Centre for Jewish Art (CJA) since it was established in 1979 by Professor Bezalel Narkiss, Israel Prize Laureate. The documentation and research is being done by M.A. and Ph.D. students of Art History, Ethnography, Archaeology and Jewish Studies and by four architects under the supervision of university professors. The Centre for Jewish Art has visited 39 countries, documented over 200,000 items, scanned 23,000 photographs out of a collection of hundreds of thousands, and trained more than 160 graduates, all specialized in different aspects of Jewish visual culture spanning the period from antiquity to the present.

The information and knowledge gathered from these expeditions are inserted in a database called the Jerusalem Index of Jewish Art, an iconographic index of Jewish material culture throughout the ages. The idea is based on the Princeton Index of Christian Art, though in contrast, the data for the Index of Jewish Art is collected by examining, measuring, photographing and describing directly from the objects themselves. We are working towards compatibility between the two indices and moreover, hope to inspire the creation of a third index – an Index of Islamic Art. These three databases will together provide educators and scholars with a wealth of information for comparative study.

The Index is organized into five sections: Ancient Jewish Art, Modern Jewish Art, Ritual and Ceremonial Objects, Architecture of Ritual Buildings and Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts. Each section trains students in CJA methodology as well as in the specifics of their subject matter. The approach to documentation of art and artefacts is consistent whether documenting small items or building complexes, from treasures found in private homes to Judaica collections appropriated by government-run museums.

A CJA project begins with an in-depth survey of the region/country, highlighting the

important sites/items and those in danger of destruction. An expedition is then planned and a team is assembled, often in co-operation with local institutions and experts. On site, the artefacts – objects and buildings – are carefully measured, described and photographed by trained field workers. Often, this first contact with the local material will be the only opportunity to see and document these sites and items. Precision, speed and teamwork are paramount. Back at the Centre for Jewish Art in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, comparative research is carried out to determine the accuracy of the collected information, to place it within the context of local cultures as well as to provide cross-references. Photographs are labelled and selections are stored on the computer. In the case of architecture, plans are drawn and a reconstruction of some buildings is generated on the computer which, when relevant, includes information on the stages of construction and renovation. The iconographic components are analysed and a bibliography is compiled. At this point, the data is entered in a template which is constructed to comprise the details in specific informational 'fields' common to all objects. The Index staff is constantly refining the definitions of fields, categories and links in order to develop software which will allow friendly internet access to the database, complete with photographs and hyperlinks. The software will comprise a database of objects linked to a database of Jewish subjects (The Flood, Sacrifice of Isaac, the Tribes of Israel) as well as to the biblical, talmudic, and kabbalistic literary sources which relate to them. Until this software becomes available, scholars and interested people can direct specific queries to the Centre.

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25. Computer reconstruction of the Ostrog Synagogue, Centre for Jewish Art, 2002.

The Centre has grown in response to the abundance of material which, through the vicissitudes of history, has become newly accessible to researchers. In 1973, the peace treaty with Egypt made it possible to visit the dwindling communities in Egypt and by extension, those in Morocco and Tunisia. Unfortunately, the political tide has turned, barring our access to the cultural remains of these old Jewish communities. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, countless avenues of research and documentation have opened. Expeditions to Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Baltic states and other countries of the former Eastern Bloc have generated a wealth of material which unfortunately is in the process of decay and disappearance. In the past two years alone, ten expeditions were conducted in areas as diverse as Ukraine, Italy, Vienna, Uzbekistan, Germany, Greece and countries of the former Yugoslavia. In the last twelve years more than 1,000 endangered synagogues in the Eastern Bloc, the Balkans, Central Europe, North Africa and Asia were systematically documented, some of which have since collapsed. Tens of thousands of ritual and

ceremonial objects have been documented, though many have become inaccessible or forever lost due to theft and the trafficking of precious objects.

Several dramatic examples illustrate the urgency of our work. The village of Privolnoe in south Azerbaijan, 20 km from the Iranian border was once the home of a community of 2,500 Jews, descendants of Russians who converted to Judaism 250 years ago. Living in relative isolation from other Jewish communities, the community nonetheless built two synagogues and maintained all the Jewish laws and customs and chanted prayers in Hebrew. When we arrived four years ago we found that only fifteen ageing families remained, barely enough to provide the necessary quorum of ten men (*minyan*) required for communal prayer services. Their synagogues had been confiscated, converted into an electrical plant and a cowshed, but a prayer room had been set up in a private home. A single Torah scroll is all that remains, wrapped in the old, worn Torah curtain of one of the former synagogues.

Of all the European Jewish communities, Greece suffered the most crushing blow to its existence; 87% of its Jewish population were killed by the Nazis, one of the highest percentages in Europe. Ironically, our six-year documentation of ritual objects in Poland opened up our current systematic documentation in Greece. While surveying the material housed in the Jewish Institute in Warsaw, we came across ritual objects from Thessalonica. Members of this Greek Jewish community carried their Torah scrolls and ritual objects with them to Auschwitz. They perished, but the sacred objects survived as silent witnesses. We notified the community in Thessalonica of our discovery and they subsequently borrowed these objects for an exhibition there.

Sacred buildings and ritual objects in post-conflict areas are highest on the agenda of places which are in need of documentation. Most recently, CJA documentation teams have focused their efforts on the remains of the Jewish material culture which survived the Second World War and 45 years of Communism in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. The beautiful neo-classical style synagogue of Rogatica in the Republic of Serpska, Bosnia built in 1928 was abandoned when the Jewish community was annihilated in 1941. During the war of 1992–95 in Bosnia, a shell destroyed part of the building which is now in danger of collapsing. That war did not spare the Jewish community in Sarajevo and its monuments. The old cemetery of 1630 became a war zone and was completely mined. The cemetery chapel was damaged, and the caretakers of the site who lived in the apartment below were killed.

If not damaged by war, Jewish sites are often being desecrated. In Podravska Slatina, Croatia, the local synagogue has been transformed into a factory. A toilet built next to it was paved with no less than the dedication plaque of the synagogue facing up and inscribed ‘In the house of God we walk, 1875’. During the last war in Pristina, Kosovo, Jewish tombstones were opened and horribly defiled. The latest post-conflict photographs from Nis, Serbia show Jewish tombstones forcibly opened, human bones scattered around and excrement covering the stones. In the absence of Jews there, this abhorrent situation is likely to remain.

Amidst all these sad discoveries, there are two important developments which should be emphasized. One is the Committee for Religious Monuments of the Council of Europe established by Dr Ballester, the Council's Head of the Cultural Heritage Department. Its fifteen members represent the different Christian denominations, Muslims and Jews. Together the Committee is working to raise awareness of the importance and fragility of the European artistic and architectural religious heritage and to communicate the urgency to preserve it, if not physically at least through documentation and research. Moreover, through the Committee, local governments are made to recognize the importance of maintaining Europe's manifold cultural legacies, especially those of minority groups within their own borders. As advocates for the documentation of Jewish art, the Centre for Jewish Art has a unique appreciation of how crucial this awareness is in preserving diverse cultural legacies. By its very nature, Jewish art is a product of its interaction with the cultures in which it developed. To understand the nature of that interaction, it is essential to study the components which characterize each culture. Through documentation of artefacts and monuments, analysis of data and computer reconstruction, comparative studies are carried out which enrich not only the understanding of Jewish art but the cultures in which it grew.

Another positive development is the emergence of a young generation of scholars who take great interest in the culture of minority groups in their country and consider it their own. A successful partnership began in 1994 between the Centre for Jewish Art at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Department of Architectural History and Town Planning at the University of Braunschweig in Germany. As part of their curriculum, a group of architectural students have identified and measured former rural synagogues which are now mostly used as private dwellings, garages and storage rooms. Through their documentation, over 100 former synagogue buildings in east Germany were rescued from oblivion by about 200 German students from three universities – Braunschweig, Dresden and Weimar – who have taken a keen interest in Jewish culture. Their work has generated a wealth of new information which has resulted in the construction of wooden and computerized synagogue models, numerous exhibitions, lectures and catalogues, four Ph.D. dissertations, and above all, a working relationship between German and Israeli students in preserving their common heritage.

In addition to compiling documentation data and iconographical studies for the Index and serving as advocate of cultural preservation, the Centre provides opportunities for scholarly exchange in the form of publications, events and internships of students from around the world. To date, six major international seminars have been organized, bringing scholars to Jerusalem for a productive and lively exchange of ideas. Four of those conferences were devoted to the interface between Jewish, Christian and Islamic cultures. The next conference is slated to take place in Jerusalem on 'Sacred Spaces in Jewish Christian and Islamic Art'. The CJA was instigator and co-sponsor of the 1999 World Bank's 'Preservation of Historic Cities and Sacred Sites' symposium which resulted in the publication of a book. The Centre's journal *Jewish Art* continues to be an important forum for new research in the field of Jewish art

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and its development in different regions in the world.

The Centre for Jewish Art is currently involved in several ongoing projects, many of them collaborations. Since 1998, Index researchers have been documenting the Hebrew illuminated manuscripts in the Austrian National Library, a project which will result in a two-volume catalogue to be published next year by the Library in collaboration with the CJA. In the last few years, the Synagogues and Ritual Objects section has been documenting the synagogues and artefacts in Greece and Italy as well as studying the material culture of the Syrian Jewish community in Israel. The Ancient Art section is involved in studying the abundance of antiquities located here. Most recently, they documented Jewish archaeological sites in the Republic of Macedonia and Albania. The Modern Art section has been working with Sotheby's, Tel Aviv, to document nineteenth- and twentieth-century paintings by Jewish artists before they go to auction and become inaccessible to researchers.

At the core of the Centre's work is the belief in virtual preservation of material culture. In times of limited resources, the physical preservation of every building and object is not possible. By creating a visual and informational record in our database, we can most effectively memorialize and embrace through knowledge that which cannot physically be preserved. Moreover, we are strong advocates of carrying out proper documentation even if a site is to be preserved physically. If culture is the collective memory of a nation, then this Index of Jewish art will help contain it and render it accessible for the coming generations. The Centre is proud to have set some of this into motion and to be a part of the growing consciousness amongst other minority cultures of the urgent need to preserve the unique artistic legacies of the world.