

## THOSE WHO NO LONGER BELIEVE IN THE POWER OF THE ANCESTORS

I used to think that, since questions of "intangible" heritage arise naturally in the course of any effort to preserve "tangible" heritage, there was no need to indulge in unfocussed meditations on the intangible. Why go looking for trouble when there's always lots at hand? But after mulling over the articles in recent issues of ICOMOS News, I have come to think a little differently, and wish to offer the following comments.

From the examples provided by Truscott and Nurmi-Nielsen, it would seem that "intangible heritage" has something to do with maintaining social identities in circumstances where they are threatened with dissolution. On this topic we have no dearth of discussion, though in the English speaking world it often occurs under the broader heading of "multiculturalism". This term has become very familiar indeed in Canada, where an uneasily binational state prolongs its colonialist rule over an archipelago of encapsulated native communities, and there is a good deal of talk about this troubling situation all the time.

By "identity" we understand a fundamental orientation, the way in which we order our purposes and so give our lives meaning (coherence, continuity) as the projects of embodied (hence mortal) agents.

As helps to building and maintaining identity we use, and preserve for our own and others use, a constellation of tangible and intangible things, crafts, practices, observances, laws, and so on. In

other words, identity implies the persistence of certain structuring principles.

Identity is both given and chosen. Loss of identity can occur through 1) conversion, 2) inanition, or 3) fusion. Loss of identity is both collective and individual, since each person necessarily draws on the givens of the collective to organize his or her own identity, and the collective likewise depends upon each individual's fidelity to the givens in order to persist as a collective. From this comes the central dilemma of the multiculturalism debate: should we modify the rights of individuals with a "right to community", itself comprised of a subsidiary list of "collective" rights, which the individual accepts in order to become, or go on being "at home with one's own"?



*Identity politics, American style.*

Obviously, discussion of these sorts of questions is best undertaken with restraint, in conditions of economic and political stability, because they are apt to lead rather quickly to the one that Susan Woodward put at the head of her book on the Balkans: "Why should I be a minority in your state when you can be a minority in mine?"

It is for this reason also that, as I said at the beginning, I am averse to excursions into the intangible as such. Of course, as a citizen I am required to think these matters through, but I think most would agree that by this point we have passed beyond the bounds of preservation and are now somewhere else. Since, however, it is precisely the perception that these bounds have been placed too narrowly that has prompted this discussion, we have no choice but to keep going forward in hopes of somehow eventually getting back to preservation.

What then is the ultimate source of "identity"? Are we defined by an end for which we were created or to which we are fitted? Or are we defined by an origin, i.e. a "true nature" which if good, must be re-captured from forgetfulness or the distortions wrought by society and history; or, if evil, must be corrected by society in history? Whichever, we are almost always in transition, feeling either that there was some earlier state of society from which we have departed or been separated, which we ought now to recover; or conversely that greater perfection lies in the future, towards which we ought to progress by firmly overcoming all obstacles and problems, which are due to our ignorance about nature and our own nature. To repeat, we are always in transition, and the moment of supersession is the moment when "heritage" is born, when a new ordering of what's important occurs, and elements of the past are accepted or rejected. These

decisions may be revisited later, and the discarded revalued, and re-attached to the tradition.

More importantly for the present discussion, the moment of supersession may be coercive. Those who went before us may have killed others or driven them away in order to take what was theirs and give it to their own. But these moments too may be revisited, and this is what seems to be occurring for example in Canada and Australia between the European and the aboriginal inhabitants of those territories.

This negotiation of reconciliation between identities is controversial to say the least, and need not detain us here. But two general points must be made. The first is that reconciliation, simply because it is not mutual animosity or indifference, contains already the germ of eventual fusion. Particulars which are not hostile will not forever remain those particulars. Second, both communities have changed a great deal since their first contacts, and both face fusion or worse with what we have learned to call something like "modernizing progressivism". Preservationism, of the type that we have in my country, arises mostly in response to it. This makes it distant kin to the several fundamentalisms which we see elsewhere offering resistance to "globalization" (previously known as "modernization", also known as "imperialism"), with the difference that most preservationist organizations have very little authority.

Thus we find the accumulation of charters like those which Bumbaru, Nurmi-Nielsen and Truscott mention, and which essentially amount to a call for reason, patience, and respect to be universalized.

There is wide agreement that a great and rapid transition to planetary unity is occurring. This follows on many centuries of increasing integration by commerce, war, disease, immigration, thought and technology. Traditional cultures (those in which the good is the ancestral, and divinely ordained) are everywhere supplanted, by a single, nominally homogenous culture -- nominally because all individuals will be enrolled in a schedule of rights, but collective or national particularities are rejected as impediments to the economic activity which alone is judged able to provide satisfaction.

The advent of this planetary unity is welcomed by some and feared by others. Those who fear it say that behind the banal apologies for unlimited, unplanned "progress" lies a devouring, autonomous technique, which destroys everything which is not itself. They say that we have come out of nature and now something has come out of us that threatens both nature and ourselves, and that human will has always been boundless, but that in the past its means were feeble, while now they are strong. What once was checked by nature, or by ancestral laws, is no longer so limited. All is becoming voluntary but we lack measure or any firm basis for limits.

With regard to the preservation of tangible heritage, objects themselves seem to provide us with a natural measure, since we limit our power with rules saying we ought to make the least intervention in the givens, that this intervention should be reversible, repeatable, readable, and so on. These rules are very helpful even if endlessly debatable. What they express is respect for the given, as found.

When we show respect for a person or a place or a thing, we do so by deferring to them somewhat. We limit ourselves and we do this out of sense of what is fitting that we find within ourselves. In so doing we affirm both our own dignity and that of the person or thing to which we defer. To do otherwise offends what I will call some sense of proportion which we have within.

And yet, preservation usually means, concretely, altering the course of nature with regard to the thing in preservation, and this alteration is done more and more with the help of science. This science, however, is of no use with the questions under discussion. From the perspective of mathematized physics, all entities, including presumably those brain states corresponding to the "intangible" dimension of heritage, are temporary stabilities in a ceaseless flow of dissipation. If asked, this science can assist us in using nature against itself to re-arrange the local pattern of energy and entropy, etc. etc., but it has nothing to say about whether or what preservation is good, nor even, as is often pointed out, why science itself is worth doing. For that we need something else.

In any case, the main point is that when we have to do with the "tangible heritage" the physical nature of the thing to be preserved provides a fairly durable reference by which we can regulate our actions.

The intangible heritage, however, offers no such thing, unless one is asking the questions from

within a community ordered by a revealed truth -- but then, and this is what I want to emphasize, the answers are not universal. There is no globally accepted religion, yet. The preservation of intangible heritage must therefore frequently be negotiated, between believers and unbelievers, or between more or less rivalrous believers. The intangible is very much the realm of the dialogic. Of course some participants may have very fixed views indeed, and not all may be benign, or sincere. Things get complicated. But it is also by way of this conversation, (or edict, as the case may be) that we decide which tangibles merit preservation and in what order of preference.



*Dialogue in progress? Perhaps someone is not listening to what is being said..*

In this sense Munjeri is right when he says that the tangible can only be interpreted through the

intangible, but it is important to see that the reverse is also true. This is because there is one limit at least which will never be overcome, and that is the death of the individual. It will never be overcome not simply because everyone must die but because its term is what gives life meaning. Embodiment and so mortality is the price of experience and consciousness, which are of succession and contingency. (We only have will if things escape or thwart our will, and so on.) In this perspective, it is the intangible which depends on the tangible, because it is the tangible, our bodies, our tools, our buildings, which allows us to grasp what the intangible means. Similarly, preservation can have no meaning unless measured against loss and disappearance. Moreover preservation of e.g. the built heritage, hitherto left largely to chance, cannot become entirely deliberate without, in a way, defeating us--- for right now, we choose preservation to choose meaning.

To repeat, the problems of historic preservation have become part of a larger, all pervasive problem of limits that becomes more and more urgent owing to the accelerating increase in our powers. In order to know how to regulate these powers, we need some grasp of the whole, or at least a picture of how things are related in some reasonably large region of the whole.

But again, notions about the whole vary, a point very well made in the poem of Ali Mazrui which Dawson Munjeri recalls:

The ancestors of Africa are angry

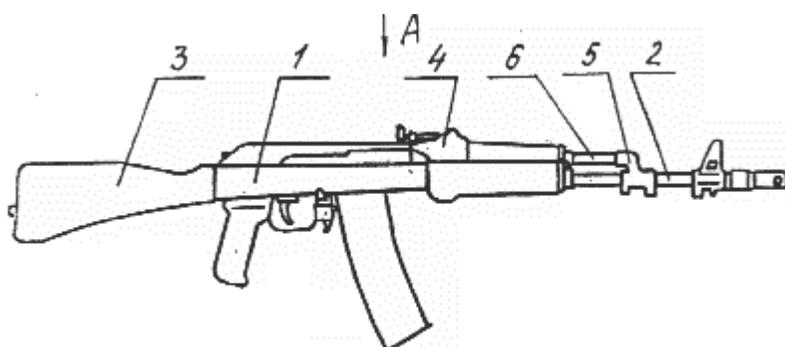
For those of us who believe in the power of

the ancestors the proof of their anger is all around us

For those who do not believe in ancestors

the proof of their anger is given another name.

"АВТОМАТ КАЛАШНИКОВА"



Фиг. 1

*Diagram from the patent, online at [kalashnikov.guns.ru](http://kalashnikov.guns.ru).  
Seventy to one hundred million produced, by makers in at  
least twenty-one countries.*

But what of those who do not believe in the power of the ancestors but who are nonetheless not indifferent to their places? If we are not indifferent we must believe something else, but what exactly?

What is the "living tradition" from which preservationism emanates? It is rather a living problem, one shared in by almost everyone, of how to accommodate conceptions of some transcendent

purpose for man as the principle of social organization with a modernizing progressivism which claims to be able to actualize the good for man in the here and now, generally on the ruins of all other temples. It is the ever more acute problem of reconciling conservation and progress which faces all doubters and would-be defectors from modernizing progressivism. Here is a good expression of it from the Canadian philosopher George Grant : "The truth of conservatism is the truth of order and limit, both in social and personal life...it is almost impossible to express the truth of conservatism in our society without seeming to justify our present capitalism. To avoid this, a careful theory is needed in which the idea of limit includes within itself a doctrine of history as the sphere for the overcoming of evil..." Here is another statement of it, from almost the reverse angle, given by the American Stanley Rosen, who describes the "paradigm of enlightenment" as follows: "It is always better to know than not to know, in spite of the fact that knowledge may be put to evil use. The early moderns were entirely correct: Knowledge is power. The more knowledge we possess, the more powerful we are. For this premise to make sense, we have to include moral and aesthetic sensibility in our definition of knowledge."

Mujeri's remark that we sometimes respect and cherish (he says "deify") a built heritage "devoid of the real message" is about right. But we do so in order to give a new message to the place, or better, to retain it as a "place of messages". We choose preservation to choose meaning, and in so doing we also claim that these sites somehow belong to all, that there is a common humanity underlying the variety of identities. On this point all creeds agree, because the prerequisite for any meaning whatever to be transmitted between generations (including the saving messages of

Christians, Muslims, Buddhists etc.) is understanding. Meanings coming to us from the past can only be received if we are like enough to those who produced them to understand what they have produced, however imperfectly.

So far we have assumed that both traditionalists and extra-traditional preservationists can share in the preservation of a site or a practice, even if they cannot fully share with each other in all of the associated "intangibles". This may not always be the case. Consider the liturgical reform of the Catholic Church which followed the Second Vatican Council (1962-64). In Canada churches were stripped of ornament, that is, "tangible heritage" was expunged, for the sake of recovering an obscured intangible. If the preservationist objects, is it not as an agent of that very modernizing progressivism whose unchecked advance they claim to resist? From the Christian perspective one chooses ultimately not preservation but sacrifice to choose meaning. Tangible helps and formalities, the built heritage and musical compositions and so on are acceptable, but only as long as they don't distract us from the transcendent. The Christian, Jewish and Muslim God is a jealous God. This is because it is dangerous for a creature capable of boundless devotion to give that devotion to anything but the boundless, the deity. So is a good preservationist a bad Catholic? (Is this really the kind of question that ICOMOS wishes to debate? It is certainly not one which can be avoided, once one embarks on discussions of the intangible per se.) The answer of course is, yes and no; but it may be more difficult to be an ecumenical preservationist, since the respect which I spoke of earlier, the openness to dialogue, presumes the possibility of an eventual fusion or even conversion. Or, if this is too extreme, let

us say that for fruitful dialogue, all participants must at least concede that none is in sole possession of the most important truths. Or, to put this another way, to have a global discussion of preservation requires a liberal framework: participants must be in agreement that freedom is essential to obedience, for obedience without freedom is meaningless. I leave it to each reader to compile their own list of those for whom such a premise is pure poison.

Just as sites and artifacts are products of a view about the order of the world, and just as all the intangibles are similarly testimony to an idea of order, so also does the preservationist stance express a conception of right order -- in this conception, self-limiting individuals engage in a dialogue with their contemporaries (and the ancestors) in order to uphold rational restraint against both capitalist nihilism and puritanical transcendentalism. In short, it is the European Enlightenment, perhaps insufficiently chastened by its more horrible misadventures, which is advancing here under the banner of preservation --advancing against itself, in a sense, and likely to encounter the traditional adversaries as well.

I said at the outset that the articles in ICOMOS News had changed my thinking. They have, but in the direction of deepening my initial conviction of the priority of the tangible.

There is a novel by Michel Tournier called "The Four Wise Men". In it one of the Magi, while touring Palestine, is shown the field from which God took the clay to make Adam. Its location is now lost, but it is likely that, if we were to find it, there would for once be near-unanimous agreement that it ought to be preserved. It is not the intangible which is fragile or evanescent.

Banned languages survive under hedgerows and nations and religions give up generation after generation of martyrs and still continue. Nothing is stronger or more durable than the thoughts in people's heads -- nor is anything more easily dissimulated. Participants in dialogues can be insincere or false, and conceal contempt or indifference behind a show of respect. But if this shrine or that bridge or this train station is freely placed beyond destruction, then it stands as proof of mutual respect between persons in a way that nothing else does half so well. If we keep the tangibles, if we select places or things of whatever size, put them into preservation and assume responsibility to maintain them there and to ask them questions about their meanings, past and present, then the rest will follow.

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