Protection of Cultural Heritage

by Pavel Jirásek, Chairperson, ICMS, and Hans Jürgen Harras, Secretary, ICMS

The protection of cultural heritage constitutes a significant part of the material and spiritual wealth of the world. Movable and immovable cultural heritage, together with the natural environment and intangible cultural heritage, represent values which contribute to the education and to the social culture of society. It also has significant economic impact because, together with the natural environment, it represents a basic prerequisite for a prosperous tourist industry.

The importance of cultural heritage is expressed in the Charter of Fundamental Rights. Its Preamble emphasises our responsibility towards future generations and establishes the right of citizens to information, education and cultural heritage as well as the rights of national and ethnic minorities. For ICOM’s General Conference in Seoul, ICMS and the Organising Committee selected speakers who would address the issue of cultural heritage protection in its broadest sense, encompassing both the tangible and the intangible.

Hong-June You, Minister, Cultural Properties Administration (Rep. of Korea), introduced in his welcoming address Korea’s national system for intangible heritage and its future prospects. Pavel Jirásek from the Czech Ministry of Culture, Chairperson of ICMS, gave a speech on the protection of intangible heritage with special reference to the Czech Republic. In his presentation several forms of the State protection system relating to intangible cultural policy were described. He also focused on international relations and Conventions such as UNESCO’s Recommendation for the protection of the traditional and folk cultures (1989) within the Czech context. According to this Convention, museums should be designated to preserve traditional folk culture and must play a significant role in the process of intangible cultural heritage protection, although the media also shares some of the responsibility for this.

Frederick Karanja Mirara from the National Museums of Kenya reported on the former situation in collection departments, laboratories and regional museums, where environmental health, safety and disaster preparedness were not given due attention. A Technical Committee on Environmental Health and Safety was established in 2003 to improve this situation. In May 2004 a workshop was held to inform the 85 participants, all museum staff members, about this new system and to give them practical advice on using security and safety items.

Ech-Cherki Dahmali (Morocco) reported on damage and loss of museums and artefacts in cases of war and armed conflicts.

Massoudi (Afghanistan) reported on damage and loss of museums and artefacts in cases of war and armed conflicts. George (Iraq), Mamadou Coulibaly (Côte d’Ivoire) and Omara Khan Massoudi (Afghanistan) reported on damage and loss of museums and artefacts in cases of war and armed conflicts.

Daniel Castro expressed the need for transparent and effective legislation, a view shared by Ech Cherki Dahmali who also called for a reliable inventory for identification purposes. So far, no specific police department has been set up in Morocco to deal with culturally-related crimes.

Donny George’s museum, the National Museum of Iraq, became a symbol of endangered heritage during armed conflict. Lack of any active intervention and the absence of security personnel created the appalling consequences with which we are all familiar. Since then, the museum has become a virtual fortress.

Mamadou Coulibaly in his presentation spoke about civil war and its impact on the cultural heritage institutions in Côte d’Ivoire. He pointed out the necessity for emergency and evacuation plans.

Omara Khan Massoudi explained how the cultural treasures in the National Museum of Kabul were saved. When the Kabul Museum was bombed and looted in 1993, he advised members of staff to safeguard as much as possible and to assess and record the damage. Taking extraordinary risks to preserve the most important items, Mr. Massoudi was directly responsible for saving a large proportion of what remains of the museum’s unique collections.

Patrick Boylan from City University, London (U.K.) presented the Second Protocol on the Protection of Cultural Property during Armed Conflict. The discussion after his presentation pointed out that in cases of armed conflict attacks on cultural property cannot always be avoided. Much remains to be done in achieving the objectives of the Second Protocol.

Sharam Karimi from the Iranian National Water Museum featured the intangible heritage of water in Iranian culture and civilisation while Ossama El Meguid from the Nubia Museum (Egypt) spoke about the improved situation of the security system in museums and cultural heritage sites in Egypt and the influence of these measures on a vulnerable tourism industry.

The Head Priest of the Hae-in-sa-temple, Sei-Min (Rep. of Korea), presented the project of preservation and protection of the famous Tripitaka Koreana and its spirit. Woo-yeol Shim, Chief Executive Officer of the Wooyoun Master of Science Company, spoke about new technology to ensure the permanent preservation of the Tripitaka Koreana, including a new method to copy old wooden panels digitally to make bronze replicas.

Daniel Castro (Colombia), Ech-Cherki Dahmali (Morocco), Donny George (Iraq), Mamadou Coulibaly (Côte d’Ivoire) and Omara Khan Massoudi (Afghanistan) reported on damage and loss of museums and artefacts in cases of war and armed conflicts.

Why, sceptics may ask, is ICMS so actively involved in intangible cultural heritage when it is perfectly happy to hide behind a purely technocratic approach, transmitting and detecting data, drawing up emergency plans, building unbreakable display cabinets and arguing with museum curators? The answer lies in the fact that the main object of interest in security management, i.e. the protection of tangible cultural heritage, is closely related to intangible heritage. Every object in a collection provides some kind of information, i.e. the protection of tangible cultural heritage, is closely related to intangible heritage. Every object in a collection provides some kind of information about its creator, the techniques of the period and its purpose and it is this information that is so crucial in the decision to protect and preserve it. Unfortunately, in many cases it is also a testimony of calamity, wars and looting but whatever the context, its relevance to our cultural heritage remains undisputed.