

Diversity at the ICOM 2007: a newcomer's observations

Clara Arokiasamy, *Chair, London Mayor's Heritage and Diversity Task Force and Independent Consultant/Adviser*

(...) The President and her Executive Council need to be congratulated for their commitment to incorporating cultural diversity into ICOM's Strategic Plan which has been reinforced by the 22nd General Assembly's adoption of Resolution No.1. - "Protection and Promotion of Universal Heritage with Respect for Cultural and Natural diversity". The challenge however will be the translation of the strategic plan objective and the resolution into practice.

> Resolution No. 1. delivers two key messages. One is about the National committees exerting influence on their governments to sign up to UNESCO's 2005 Convention on "Cultural Diversity". The other relates to the establishment of a "more functional collaboration with intergovernmental organisations, international non-governmental organisations, national heritage organisations, including associations of museums, galleries, archives and libraries, as well as teaching and research institutions of higher education and their associations". Both are strategic aspirations and provide good starting points. The danger however is that they may remain as such. Governments may be willing to adopt UNESCO's framework but that doesn't necessarily mean that the commitment would be translated into front line services which require financial and human resources, for example. Functional collaboration could prove a difficult task especially when there is a lack of a common base line in terms of levels of commitment, priorities, knowledge and understanding of cultural diversity issues between the various national and international organisations. So what are some of the key additional ingredients needed to translate ICOM's strategic plan objective and resolution into sustainable actions? Though the following suggestions are based on experience in Europe, I am sure they are relevant to some of the other regions as well.

> Enablement of national cultural leaders of the museums archives and libraries sectors and education establishments to treat cultural diversity with the same urgency and status as all of the other objectives that they are accountable for is critical to embedding cultural diversity as an integral component of the sector's infrastructure. Unless cultural diversity is integrated into the core strategies and/or policies at strategic level, and mainstream core funding is made available for this purpose, it will remain an after thought or treated as a periphery component with a short life span and therefore unsustainable. In other words, we fall back into the colonial trap of the last century and its concomitant mediocrity; yet it is excellence we are striving for. I am sure some leaders would benefit from the acquisition of skills in making a case for the promotion of cultural diversity and tactics to negotiate and leverage commitment and resources from local and national politicians and communities. Equally important is the changing of hearts and minds of practitioners who interface with cultural diversity issues and communities on a day-to-day level. They need relevant training, support and counselling to feel able to deconstruct and reconstruct collections, archives and exhibitions facilitate interpretations and debates, responding to challenging questions and issues with creativity, cultural sensitivity and confidence. Empowerment of underrepresented communities to engage with heritage pro-

viders is critical to developing equitable partnerships between the sector and the community so that the outcomes are jointly designed and owned. And equitable partnerships must, as a non-negotiable given, include minority representation at all levels in the workforce and governance and not just in often marginalised and therefore dispensable positions. These may come across as a tall order but unless these basic fundamentals are in place, commitment to cultural diversity will remain a rhetoric and nothing more than lip service.

> Finally, a further brief comment on international collaboration. A couple of weeks before I arrived in Vienna, I attended a conference aimed at improving international heritage partnerships and network between the African and Caribbean states and the UK. It was a joint event organised by UNESCO and the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council for England as part of the UK's commemoration of the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade Act of 1807. The conference had an impressive attendance from both regions and witnessed a loud and clear regional voice setting out its heritage reconstruction needs and the type of support sought from UK and Europe to rebuild their identities and heritage in mutually beneficial and equitable partnerships. There is much sensitivity in Africa about being "shown the light" by Europe in initiatives that often disregard their rich knowledge resources and cultural and heritage practices and processes from which Europe can learn. Whilst there is a need for assistance in reconstruction in the post-colonial sense, (e.g. sharing of conservation practices), there is equally much to be shared with Africa in terms of intangible heritage. The diffidence and reverence of the past had been replaced by a new confidence and demand for mutual respect and equitable and interdependent partnerships which acknowledged that African and Caribbean states also had experience, skills and expertise of value to the West; and that they had the intangible dimension, in particular, direct experience of slavery and the impact of its legacies, for the tangible objects relating to enslavement of African people, the Indian and Atlantic slave trades and slavery as a system in many of the museums outside of Africa and the Caribbean. Partnership arrangements were expected to pay attention to improving the numbers of black and ethnic minority consultants/independent advisers which is currently pretty low or disturbingly non-existent in some cases.

> Are Europe and America ready and willing to meet this challenge? How will ICOM and UNESCO facilitate a response? These are big issues to unpack and remedy over the coming months. The tide has to turn, and indeed perhaps urgently so, if we take our commitment to sustainability seriously.(...)

Clara Arokiasamy's full article will be published in the next ICOM-UK Newsletter.

"Join ICOM-CCTF in our next initiative "The International Conference on the Inclusive Museum" at the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, Netherlands 8-11 June 2008. Call for Papers and all info on our new website: <http://zo8.cgpublisher.com/>"
Amareswar Galla, Chair, ICOM Cross Cultural Task Force (CCTF)

"I had never visited a museum until I was 19 years old. I grew up in Lebanon, a country shattered by its civil war where the museums remained closed for a long period of time so there was no access to this kind of culture. The best moment of the General Conference for me was speaking for 5 minutes about my experiences as a museum researcher in the Cross Cultural Task Force Forum. Some of the young members present have decided during an informal meeting at Sacher Hotel to establish an ICOM-CCTF Youth Forum and invite all ICOM young members to contribute to this."

Lina G. Tahan, ICOFOM Board, Youth Member ICOM-CCTF, Affiliated Scholar, University of Cambridge, Department of Archaeology, UK