



Social Harmony

Examining Social Harmony

Cultural diversity is a historical and contemporary social reality, irrespective of where one is located in the world. Building on the ICOM Cultural Diversity Policy (1998) and the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001) and its Action Plan (2002), ICOM developed its Strategic Plan (2007) to promote an inclusive professional body that safeguards cultural diversity as the common heritage of humanity.



Governments have made various attempts to minimise the inequalities within the complexity of cultural diversity using access and equity strategies and affirmative action initiatives. Public policy responds to the notions of ‘harmony’, ‘social cohesion’, ‘social justice and connectedness’, ‘social inclusion and exclusion’ and so on, but not actually ‘social harmony’. Does this term infer that there are other harmonies that are lower priority, such as intercultural or religious? Or that harmony is less important in these areas, being the result of a secularist position which implies that it occurs mainly in the civil and political fields without necessarily covering economic and cultural domains?

> Harmony, a musical term, to the human ear may be pleasing. What is perceived as harmonious may change with time or differ in different cultural contexts. If melody and rhythm are horizontal, harmony is vertical with multiple assonant or dissonant variations. Great musicians interpret harmony in different ways: the scales differ, narratives vary, tempos shift — it is challenging to achieve the balance. Harmony is the pleasing combination of sounds.

Diversity is promoted and valued as an end in itself

> Social harmony is about maintaining a level of equilibrium in economic terms in civil society. The natural tensions that exist within any plural human collective are ameliorated through cross cultural understanding, respecting, iteratively renegotiating and maintaining a level of balance in the power relations, resources, functioning and capacities between potentially conflicting groups, whether these be based on broadly economic, political, social, racial and religious or cultural distinctions.

> The term social harmony infers a rather passive attitude towards civil society. That is, that ‘tolerance’ is accepted, rather than diversity being promoted and valued as both an end in itself, as well as something that adds different forms of ‘value’ to society.

> For an ecomuseum, social harmony is important because it then represents the bare ‘minimum’ civic standard upon which one can

then hope to build the social, economic, cultural, political and other architecture that is necessary, within local communities, to find a sense of shared purpose that is necessary for ecomuseums to function in any practical or sustainable kind of way.

> If museums are civic spaces that hold up a mirror to society reflecting its good, bad and ugly aspects, as spaces for interpretation, reflection and negotiation, as well as a repository of information, resources, artefacts etc. that relate to ‘social harmony’ museums, then, have a role to play.

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Engaging curiosity

> How, then, are museums to interpret such a role, which, if we accept that it infers a degree of political and social conservatism, then we must also accept that there is an inherent risk in the notion. Blind acceptance that social harmony is a goal that must be pursued at all costs, if made by museums, would mean that their roles have evolved into agents of conformity. A role, I hope, few would want to accept.

> If museums are generally seen as civic spaces where all members, ideally of a civil society, may come together, albeit in different configurations, they should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate the diversity that is naturally part of society as a whole. This, hopefully, is not just about being so bland as to be generally innocuous, but about engaging curiosity: visitors may not agree, may not be comfortable, but so long as they are entertained and informed while also feeling that they are respected, or not patronised,

this is another important starting point as a site to consider important social issues.

Harmony should not be prescriptive

> Clearly, museums, in some places may find social harmony a necessary goal behind their didactic functions and, in some sense this may be helpful. But this also depends upon the definition used. If it means transforming disadvantaged communities and their physical environments into more stable, more prosperous, safer zones, then social harmony ‘values’ may function as a stepping

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stone, or an idea, within a wider armoury of ideas, that helps with these goals. If museums are merely the handmaidens of government to achieve conformist agendas under the banner of “harmony”, this then comes at a risk.

> Museums, as a critical plank within the knowledge “industry” generally including universities, media, creative institutions, and so on have an interpreting and quiz-like function as well as a reflective one. Therefore, interrogating and critiquing ‘social harmony’ should be integral to their function. Harmony should not be prescriptive but it is a means to interpret and

balance assonance and dissonance. In the global community of ICOM, it is about sharing, about connectivity and building on the complexity of the cultural diversity of the world without minimising this richness.

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How museums can promote and contribute to social harmony

> In December 2006, the Organizing Committee of the 22nd ICOM General Conference submitted a proposal for the conference theme, which received outline approval from ICOM. The Organizing Committee then invited Chinese museum professionals to argue and discuss the theme in June and July 2008. In September 2008, the Organizing Committee held a colloquium of ICOM experts to help it reach a conclusion. In December 2008, the Executive Council approved the Organizing Committee’s proposals and adopted “Museums for Social Harmony” as the theme of the 22nd ICOM General Conference.

Apropos of social harmony

> The concept of harmony is both meaningful for mankind as a whole and emblematic of Oriental cultures. The main features of social harmony are dialogue, tolerance, co-existence and development, which are based on pluralism, diversity, competition and creativity. At its core is the ability to get on together whilst accepting difference — the effort to find common ground without jettisoning distinctive identities. Social harmony is multi-tiered: it encompasses harmony between all ethnic groups and cultures (between the dominant culture and subcultures and between the cultures of different social classes); harmony in the sense of respect for a country or a culture; harmony between different religions; and harmony between Man and Nature.

The part museums play

> It is both apt and realistic to talk about the part museums play in social harmony, insofar as they have to confront the realities of a world of alienation that is destructive of the environment and conducive to cultural conflicts. It is both apt and realistic to talk about the part museums play in social harmony, insofar as they

have already expressed the wish to help appease conflicts and restore social harmony.

> Museums’ cultural and social remit should encourage them to promote social harmony more strongly and contribute to it more actively. Social harmony is most directly demonstrated by mutual trust and interaction between populations, societies and cultures. This mutual trust springs from mutual understanding, which in turn results from the kind of mutual knowledge we arrive at by talking to each other. Museums provide a structured platform for interactions between cultures, which makes them ideal ambassadors for intercultural communication. They make it easier to acquire knowledge of cultures and gain insights into them by presenting the facts about them and their histories in an objective way, thereby mitigating cultural conflicts arising from misunderstandings.



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Debating the issue

> The General Conference theme “Museums for Social Harmony” will provide a general arena for discussion, leaving room for related themes to be developed in subsequent in-depth debate. It will act as a central pivot for topics in the areas of relationships between the individual and the group or between groups, spanning both mankind and the natural world, so that all participants from the various regions should find precisely the theme they are looking for.

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