



The *Mayamata* and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Editorial

The question of how one perceives other cultural groups as 'different' has been constant throughout human history, although with different meanings over time. In many parts of the world, it is possible to find evidence of groups who called themselves 'the people' or 'the human beings', considering all other ones as less civilized, or on occasions, less human. This idea of otherness is often less due to real differences of the other or others, than to the specific point of view and the mind framework of the person or groups of persons who perceive the other as such. From this perspective, the 'us versus them' often implies a clear division in two parts, one that embodies the elements which are appreciated and valued, and the other which is defined by comparison with the former, and tends to be devaluated. This was certainly the case over a long period of time, and it is especially true with colonialism around the world. Colonization, in the most recent history, allowed the West to export their values and impose them in large parts of the world, including in the field of cultural heritage and its conservation.

It has been a long road to readjust such a view, both by rescuing ancient texts or traditions from various regions, and particularly by proposing new paradigms to understand and view heritage. In this context, the *Nara document on authenticity* played a pivotal role worldwide. It has allowed a broader understanding that each society has a way of interpreting history and the passage of time and, by respecting that, it allows for different manners in which heritage can be conserved. It has often been argued that the nature of materials used in cultural heritage (more resistant ones such as stone, versus more fragile ones such as wood) have had a strong influence on conservation approaches and practice; while this remains true to some extent, a better knowledge of conservation traditions in different parts of the world has also revealed that this is not the only factor. Cultural heritage is much more complex, and includes other extremely important aspects such as continuity in use and practices, and a certain sense of place.

This volume of *Conversaciones...* is devoted to three important texts to discuss both maintenance and conservation, deeply imbibed in most cultures around the world, and also the need to consider conservation as a specialized activity, requiring a good understanding of the context, and respect for materials as well as traditions. The first text presented here is a version of the *Mayamata*, which was thoroughly researched, transcribed, analyzed and translated into French and English by Professor Bruno Dagens. We are deeply grateful for his generosity in allowing us to use those texts here. The *Mayamata* is a book from India but was in circulation in other countries like Sri Lanka, believed to date from the 5th or 6th century, originally written in Sanskrit; it provides information on architecture and the beliefs and rituals associated with it. We have used here a chapter that is particularly relevant for

conservation professionals, as it describes the rules and procedures for the 'renovation' of temples. This text offers a glimpse into a past world, but which still has echoes nowadays. As it happens with numerous religions around the world, the text offers a series of rules and guidelines, paired with required rituals associated to different activities, which must frame the renovation and restoration of sacred sites and objects. A broader reading of this chapter of the *Mayamata* offers an understanding of the importance of respecting the use and values associated to a specific site.

The other two texts, by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *An open letter to Kandyan Chiefs*, and excerpts from the *Christian and Oriental philosophy of art*, offer ground to explore evolving conceptions of maintenance and conservation, as well as the author's sharp understanding of different worldviews when it came to heritage. In the first text, the author dwells on the consequences of a changing world, and the loss of traditional knowledge by craftsman, and how this was affecting heritage in the ancient city capital of Kandy. The chapters selected in the second text focus on cultural differences, and on the need to have a clear understanding of their context, fundamental for the interpretation of cultural elements. Coomaraswamy's work is much better known in the world of art history than it has been so far in conservation, but we hope these selected chapters will interest our readers into exploring more his vast publications presented at the end of the volume.

Accompanying these central texts, we have the contribution of six invited authors, who offer extremely valuable examples of the practice of conservation in different contexts. They all provide important elements to reflect on the need for a variety of approaches. Gamini Wijesuriya, introducing rich references from Sri Lanka, centers his attention on the importance of traditional knowledge systems, which have taken an increasingly important role in the conservation and management of cultural heritage worldwide. He credits Coomaraswamy for his early thoughts (1905) of placing importance on traditional knowledge systems despite his close association with and influence from William Morris, who pioneered the modern conservation discourse which overlooked it. Neel Kamal Chapagain further describes the South Asian approach to conservation, highlighting the fundamental importance of local knowledge and community participation. The numerous examples he offers exemplify how conservation and maintenance may be part of a long tradition, but the concept of heritage itself (and we could add its stratification in categories) is much less apparent in different languages or cultural contexts. Understanding heritage in a broad sense, which may interlace tangible and intangible aspects, is what allows perceiving it, and respecting it, in its full richness.

José Miguel Silva then shifts our attention towards conservation practices in Japan, illustrating the various co-existing approaches that may be used, depending on a number of factors. In this case, again, the end-users and the specific context of each site have strongly influenced the decisions made for their conservation and restoration. María Pilar García Cuetos offers a reflection from the south of Spain, combining a historical review of conservation treatments undertaken on Andalusian architecture, with a focus on the concept of authenticity, taking into consideration both tangible, and intangible elements. Renata Schneider gives a rich analysis of conservation of heritage within traditional communities in Mexico, discussing the expectations, discussions and decision-making between conservation professionals and local communities. Her reflections resonate well with the central texts of the volume, even if located in an entirely different cultural context, and offer views into possible alternative approaches to conservation.

The last text is the *Charter of Mexico for the defense of cultural heritage*, written in 1976. This document was never widely disseminated at an international level, but it sets extremely interesting reflections at a moment where the conservation discipline was broadening its horizon, and when it was also concerned by the impact of economic and social change on cultural heritage.

All these texts show how diversity in culture and in the perception of heritage, which must recognize new approaches to understand significance, are increasingly accepted as essential elements for a more respectful conservation and management of both cultural and natural heritage. This is particularly necessary in a world with growing movements and immigration, both within countries and across boundaries, due to conflict and insecurity, to changing economic situations, or to climate change, to name only a few causes. Acting in the field of conservation, taking into consideration a better comprehension of and respect for local traditions and sensitivities requires long-term activities and in-depth research. Only this will allow reaching a good level of dialogue, to appraise the needs in light of the local context, customs and traditions, and make decisions accordingly. The relevance of understanding the vital importance of cultural diversity, both in time and space, cannot be overstated, in order to be able to comprehend and create respectful and people focused approaches to conservation which are in line with local traditions, while securing the transmission of a truthful message for future generations.

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