

More Than Preservation

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Can anyone ever forget the cynical response of those pariahs of the civilised world, the Taliban, when most of that world, across all religious faiths, made desperate appeals that the regime withdraw from its resolve to pulverize the statues of Bhudda? After the deed was done, and the outrage of the world was unremittingly expressed, representatives of that government declared that the Taliban regime had gone ahead with the demolition as champions of a humanistic cause. It was affronted - so it claimed - that the protesters considered a few stone statues more important than the plight of thousands of Afghanistans who were dying of hunger. This was, of course, a simply opportunistic and diversionary response, nor was the thinking behind it as original as the Taliban overlords appeared to think it was. It is a wearisomely familiar ploy of all iconoclasts in power, and I call it to mind only because we tend to forget that this plaint is permanently with us, available for resurrection whenever a community, a society, a nation, or a structure of international collaboration dedicates a portion of its time and resources to preserving a heritage that is rightly considered as belonging, not merely to the specific locality on which it is founded, but to the entire universe of sentient beings.

Except as a reminder of this unsavoury tendency, the declaration of the Taliban would merit no serious comment. It was so preposterous that it quite took one's breath away, leaving in place an after taste of disgust. In truth, we need not bother to remark the egregious dishonesty that lay behind such a supposedly pious sentiment. As the most recent and loudly articulated of our universes of outrages, however, it presents us with an opportunity to direct attention to lesser-known assaults committed in a similar anti-humanistic spirit, many of them still ongoing. It reminds us that, closely bound with the material concern with the preservation and enhancement of the palpable manifestation of human intelligence, and creativity are also implicated certain ethical principle that are crucial to the pursuit of the goal of peaceful cohabitation among communities, races and cultures - principles such as respect and understanding of others, and of the material expression of the thought and imagination, the world view of other human entities.

The tendency to eradicate all vestiges of the humanity of others is crucial to the project of domination or diminution of status of others - and by domination I do not refer simply to military or colonial domination, but to ideological, religious, cultural and allied forms of subjugation. At the heart of it lies intolerance, which is as much a child of ignorance, as it is of fear of external knowledge that frequently encompasses a suspicion that such knowledge may question one's own givens. Would those who live outside my own nation, Nigeria, believe for one instance that two centuries after the invasion of that nation space by Christian evangelists, their proteges still surge out periodically, fired by the messianic zeal of conversion, to destroy priceless works of art. Such has been the fate of the MBARI Houses of Sculpture, dedicated to the earth goddess Ala. Many within that nation space remain ignorant of the reactivation of this

death sentence on traditional heritage. In the view of these hot-blooded Christian fundamentalist missionaries of the twenty-first century, this priceless heritage of the Igbo people is an affront to Truth, embodied only in their Christian deity and none other. It means nothing to them that the admiring world would have been deprived of the novelist Chinua Achebe - among others - if his environment had been successfully culturally sanitized by their missionary forebears in the preceding centuries, long before their birth.

Travel West of Enugu, Owerri etc in the land of Igbo and there, a meeting of iconoclastic minds that would normally be found with drawn hatchets at each other's throats find common ground. In Offa, somewhat to the North of Yorubaland, the Moslem proselytizers of an equally rabid fundamentalist persuasion surge out in an equal frenzy of religious cleansing, demolish historic shrines that are erected to Yoruba autochthonous deities, including even their heroes and heroines such as Moremi, the legendary princess who has inspired countless musical compositions and epic drama. For such atavists irrespective of the history of these personages, real or mythological, the very existence of the symbolic presences of a people's authentic heritage constitutes an affront in the eyes of their deity. When we come together in these elegant spaces, where the very patina of art works, the dynamic mythological frameworks of sublime superstitions - of both the so-called pagan and Christian inspiration - not only co-exist in harmony but are treasured, revered, refurbished and even economically exploited for the millions who swarm over them year after year from all corners of the world, I wonder if the owners of these historic patrimonies are struck by a certain irony. For it is the religious storm troopers of these very European environments - and their Eastern counterparts - who sowed the seed of the destructive spirit elsewhere, smashing and making bonfires of those very treasures whose spirit animates their own adornment and evoke the admiration of all humanity. To appreciate the philistine absurdity that still affronts one in those beleaguered spaces that are mostly unknown to the outside world, one should simply imagine the Shinto temples of Japan falling victim, one after another in this year two thousand and two, to the upsurge of some dormant religious incontinence.

Let it not be considered for a moment however that the imperatives of preservation of the heritage of the world are limited only to the results of human intelligence and skill. Nature itself remains the original demiurge in the enhancement of its own being. I know that it is fashionable - well, it is, especially in an ideological school of thought that is now somewhat out of favour - it was fashionable to consider Nature as a crude undialectical repository of material resources, a kind of intuitively endowed mess of matter upon which man then scribbles and moulds his intelligence. I have always found this curious, and this of course without even accepting the need to offer the opposing view of a Master-Mind at work, mysteriously shaping and re-shaping Nature according to the dictates of his supra-Intelligence. It is sufficient, in my experience, to recognize the breath-taking variety of Natural environment, all products - accidental or conscious, we can argue till Doomsday - but certainly physical adjustments to climactic and other factors. Some of the causative factors for the mutations that provide an infinitely entrancing variety of such magnitude will remain totally mysterious to all but the most confident scientific minds that preoccupy themselves with solving the hidden processes of Nature.

For most of us, it contents us that we encounter a grove of Osun - an example again drawn from my own part of the world and one that has been adopted by UNESCO - and experience a mystic aura, one which, in our humane enlargement, we feel deserves to be accessible to all for eternity, not sacrificed to the profit and destructive lust of a few timber merchants. We are speaking of *difference* the indescribable difference that makes one walk past another part of forestry without so much as pausing, while, on the other hand, time vanishes totally within this, and similar 'accidents' of Nature. Let us leave the question of a conscious aesthetic intelligence in Nature aside, accept that the peacock, for instance, flaunts the *difference* that is manifested in the extravagance of its courtship feathers as a mere vagary of evolution. We are free to insist that a riveting waterfall is the accidental product of a climactic change or some indigestion in the earth's womb at some forgotten time - it suffices that humanity instinctively pauses beside this *difference* in Nature's manifestations. Before the former is rendered extinct as a result of some genetic interference from man's experimental hubris, or the latter's aesthetic rendition is annulled by the march of progress and the undeniable benefits of hydroelectric power, we have a right to insist on some kind of accommodation that does not deprive the world of a share in the aesthetic solace or spiritual excitation of either, or indeed simply of the archival access that goes with the preservation of those enriching differences, even while we seek solutions to the world's need for cheap and efficient power. Humanity does not lack the creative intelligence to do this, and it is only an attitude of mental laziness, a tendency towards the simplistic lure of its destructiveness, that prevents us from having our cake and eating it.

I began by speaking of that hideous crime against our common heritage that was so contemptuously committed by those lunatics of faith, the Taliban, but must remind us yet again that this was merely the latest in notoriety from a long line of destructiveness, and a continuing one in obscure places, and that we would be wise to remain conscious of this. Who dares forget the conduct of the Khmer Rouge in their treatment of Cambodian treasures, the Angkor Wat most notoriously, one that wrung from me in an article that I wrote at the time, the comment that these were not progress driven revolutionaries of any persuasion but simply 'mean-spirited thugs'. I never did return to that subject for obvious reasons. As knowledge of the horrendous decimation of Cambodian humanity gained affirmation, it would have appeared indecent to dwell on the fate of mere inanimate products of that devastated humanity. Yet there is a lesson of correlation in all of this, one that we would do well to keep in mind. It does not matter which comes first, - throughout history we discover again and again that crimes against humanity, including forced displacement, tortures and genocide tend to accompany the destruction of the victims' culture. This should not be found surprising. They are both indications of the project to destroy the humanity of others, a project that its most obviously effected either by crushing the spirit of the victims through the physical mutilation of their being and outright elimination, or by pulverizing the palpable precipitation of their humanity - their arts, cultures, monuments and observances - almost unexceptionally a combination of both. We see it happening everywhere, even today. We witnessed it in Yugoslavia where the project of both human and cultural cleansing finally aroused the world to a scenario that it had sworn would never happen again. It happened in Rwanda. We watch it happening today - understated though it may appear in proportion - in the Middle East.

For us in the so-called developing world - the last word. The primacy of development, especially in its technological aspects is a seductive but purely fallacious concept wherever posited in opposition to, or even competition with the preservation of heritage. In nine cases out of ten, there are always alternatives. I call to mind - and here comes my final cautionary example - the inundation of the Nubian valley in preparation for the construction of the Aswan Dam. What is not generally known is that scientific experts of UNESCO offered alternative blueprints that would have saved, not simply the Abu Simbel monuments but also the ancient, organic cultures of the Nubians that had served the affected peoples for centuries before the commencement of the millennial count. There are cultures from which - for we do not speak of monumentalism as the sum of cultures - cultures from whose ancient but living actualities the world may yet find solutions to many of the contradictions that now plague its march towards an unreflective globalisation. Those alternatives were rejected, the valley was inundated and with it, much of the unique culture of Nubia, a crucial and rich component in the recapturing of the authentic history of the African continent and obtaining a holistic apprehension of its culture.

The Aswan Dam was built, the communities displaced and relocated. From the surge of power that transforms the environment and the admitted marvel of such human ingenuities, there is indeed pride and even light but, just think of what we may have lost in - illumination!