

## Guidance Note

# Authenticity in the Asian Context

FORUM 2014: SRI LANKA

The objective of the 2014 Forum was to examine the ways authenticity is applied to the Asian context in relation to the international context and to suggest alternative approaches to authenticity. The key question under discussion was: what is the relevance of the concept of authenticity for more effective conservation and management of heritage in Asia?

### Context

The 2014 Forum occurred during the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nara Document on Authenticity and provided an opportunity to revisit the concept of authenticity. The theme of this Forum emerged from concerns in the Asia-Pacific Region that, in some cultural circumstances, the historical weight of the concept of 'authenticity' within the conservation discourse poses challenges to conservation practice in the region. This is evident in some international approaches and obligations that may make it difficult to address the specific local cultural circumstances that have a bearing on heritage conservation. As a counterpoint, some local cultural and/or religious practices may hinder the work of conservation professionals working to meet international requirements.

The Forum participants highlighted the validity of different approaches to conservation in Asia and questioned the western concept of authenticity. They identified and discussed a range of issues that are associated with the use of the term 'authenticity' in the assessment of World Heritage but which are also echoed in other heritage evaluation processes.

As a result of the discussions the participants questioned the continued validity of the prevailing concept of 'authenticity' within World Heritage discourse and beyond.

### Key issues

1. *Accommodating change*

There are ambiguities and difficulties of applying current frameworks of authenticity in the event of change which impacts on the values of the place (e.g. in the context of recent disaster recovery efforts).

2. *The process of understanding spiritual values, attributes and aspects of authenticity*

While materialist, scientific and empirically supported notions of authenticity may be necessary, there was nevertheless a consensus that this does not often go far enough in some Asian circumstances, so as to include the spiritual values of the place.

3. *Supporting community participation*

The interpretation of authenticity in conservation practice may alienate local communities in the preservation of heritage places. This underscores the issue of who most benefits from conservation.

## Conservation processes

### 1. *Longstanding traditions*

There is diversity in Asian cultures in approaches to the preservation of heritage structures. These are based on longstanding traditional theory and practices that predate the Venice Charter. For example, the restoration of temples in South Asia was discussed in the *Mayamata*, a manuscript from the ninth century.

### 2. *Continuity*

There is a tradition of rebuilding buildings, where the process embodies spiritual significance. This is informed by a regenerative view of the relationships between the past and the present, which is circular and continuous.

### 3. *Conservation can be a revitalizing process*

In general, while older elements of a building may be obscured by more recent treatments, the place may still be understood as 'authentic' because it represents a revitalizing spiritual process or the continuing embodiment of enduring spiritual beliefs and practices valued by the community.

### 4. *A wider context*

It was agreed that the assessment of 'authenticity' ought to occur in a wider context because authenticity resides not only in material forms but also in processes, interactions and linkages between tangible and intangible aspects and living heritage and within cultural landscapes.

### 5. *Ambiguity in the application*

It was noted that currently there is ambiguity in the use of the concept of authenticity in the World Heritage context. On the one hand, the State of Conservation reports regards authenticity as a generic or overarching term, while in the designation of authenticity in the World Heritage nomination form, it is reduced to the selection of specific aspects.

### 6. *Nomenclature*

In part the discussion of the concept of authenticity remains problematic because the term is not always directly translatable into the many local languages that exist in Asia. Conservation practitioners therefore rely upon inexact synonyms in the establishment of local frameworks or in their interactions with communities and stakeholders.

## Guidance

We propose that the concept of authenticity should be guided by the process of assessing heritage values, rather than settling for a fixed aspect. In real terms this would mean that the authenticity segment of the World Heritage nomination form needs to provide a more clearly articulated and substantial rationale. There is a need for more concerted research efforts into significances that utilize community knowledge and participatory processes for the assessment of heritage values. There is also a need to understand the extent to which the material form is relevant to the preservation of spiritual values or cultural practices. Each country may benefit from revisiting the concept of authenticity in their own context, exploring the relationships between continuity and change, as well as between material and immaterial attributes and associated values.

For further discussion of these issues and illustrated examples, please see the publication of this Forum.

#### Forum participants

Abu Sayeed M. AHMED, Neel Kamal CHAPAGAIN, Stefano DE CARO, Radhika DHUMAL, Nagtsho DORJI, Peou HANG, Sharif Shams IMON, Nobuko INABA, Rohit JIGYASU, Wonki KIM, Seong do KIM, Sujeong LEE, Zuraina MAJEED, Webber NDORO, Ji Young PARK, Vasu POSHYANANDANA, Tara SHARMA, Jonathan SWEET, Kai WEISE, Gamini WIJESURIYA, Eric ZERRUDO, Guo ZHAN, Lyu ZHOU

#### Guidance note editors

Nobuko INABA, Sujeong LEE, Prasanna RATNAYAKE, Jonathan David SWEET