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Session: Identifying Approaches to Living Heritage

Documenting what is not supposed to be documented: Contradictions in Conservation of Living Heritage in Nepal

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Following a presentation on 'authenticity' at a conference in Kathmandu, I was approached by a local site manager to discuss the issue of authenticity at his site. He was in a confused state with regards to an upcoming UNESCO mission to his site where a temple in need of repair works had customary practice that no one other than the priest could be allowed inside the inner chamber. In such a case, if the experts' mission would wish to inspect the temple, how should they be responded? There would be issues of authenticity on the repair of this temple – particularly in the inner structures, how should that be dealt with? Should the experts mission be allowed to enter the chamber and advice what needed to be done or should the priest (who was the only authority to enter the inner chamber) be the only authority and implementing agency to intervene in this inner structure? Further complication was that the priest's responsibility as per the custom was to ensure that no information (not even a description) of what is inside the chamber; is shared with anyone else. On the one hand, there were structural repairs required but at the same time it was guessed that there would be wall paintings and other details within that sacred chamber. At the core of our conversation was the concern about authenticity in such case. Thinking further, the question led me to think about the need of documentation, and consequently the approach of conservation in such living heritage sites. Recently, Mr. Satya Mohan Joshi, a renowned culture expert in Nepal has shared his views and efforts on bringing to public light a sacred dance practice in Kathmandu. However, there are many other such community practices which are not yet revealed to the public, except the performers themselves. Such instances are not unique just to Nepal, but we find many such cases across South Asia.

Some professionals strongly feel that there is no alternative to documentation in any case of heritage; whereas some would see no need of documentation if the custom prefers the secrecy. There might also be situations where in lack of a larger public interest, the secret traditions may gradually fade away. What should be the concern in such case? Do we begin to document for safeguarding the heritage (and thus go away from the traditions), or do we facilitate the continuation but safeguard the customs of secrecy? Can documenting and continuing the custom of 'no documentation' itself could be a logical way to approach the cases in living heritage? How can we document what is not supposed to be documented? Can this be a logical approach to some of living heritage? Referring to some cases from Nepal as well as some observations from Bhutan, I would like to discuss such complications of documentation and consequently conservation of living heritage – both tangible and intangible heritage. Can we continue some forms of living heritage without documenting it? Or can we think documentation and conservation in alternative ways to facilitate the continuity of living heritage in its own spirit?