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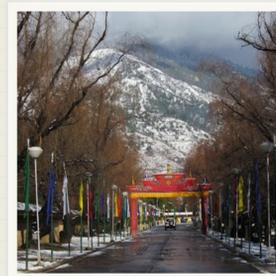
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Friday, March 01, 2013 - Asia, Bhutan, conferences, cultural heritage, Interpol, Norway, Norwegian Minister of Foreign Affairs - No comments

Coverage of the first Conference on Protection of Cultural Property in Asia (15-18 February 2013, Thimphu, Bhutan)



Snowy entrance to convention center in Thimphu, Bhutan

By Julia Brennan, ARCA Alum 2009

Part I

The Royal Government of Bhutan graciously hosted the first Asian-based cultural security conference, under the auspices of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (MoHCA), and funded by Interpol and the Norwegian

Department of Foreign Affairs. It was the first attempt to bring together professionals in the culture protection and law enforcement sectors to begin to develop networks and alliances in this region. In funding this convening, Interpol's goal is to launch stronger initiatives with member states in Asia—promoting engagement and information exchange; regular posting on the stolen art database; and sustainable relationships with Asian country law enforcement and customs agencies.

The Royal Government of Bhutan was a gracious and generous host. For many attendees, it was a first visit to this remarkable and beautiful Kingdom. This gathering was unlike most conferences where attendees are 'on their own' for most evenings and free days. Instead, the foreign guests were treated to well-organized cultural tours of sacred monasteries and museums, and feted with rich local meals, cultural dance programs, comfortable hotels, hot stone baths, and quick shopping sprees - a rich and generous welcome and introduction to Bhutan. Everyone was humbled by the kindness and all-inclusiveness of our hosts.

Opening day began at the National Convention Center started with the *marchang*, a traditional Bhutanese ceremony performed to promote an auspicious start to a new endeavor. That night, a deep snow fell blanketing the country - an auspicious sign for our forum to protect cultural heritage. We were profusely thanked and blessed, as indeed the deities were pleased with our conference; the much-needed snow heralded a good start to the new year of the Water Snake, a robust harvest, and an end to the forest fires.



The marchang, a traditional Bhutanese ceremony, performed.

In attendance were about 30 international participants and 60 Bhutanese. The Bhutanese representation included the Cultural Officer and local police chief from each of the 20 national districts, as well as professionals from the Ministry of Home and Culture, local museums, and monasteries. Foreign participants came from Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, The Netherlands, UK, USA, Korea, Australia, Vietnam, China and India. The strongest law enforcement sector heralded from Europe, with the Executive Director of Police Services of Interpol, M. Jean-Michel Louboutin as the Honorable Chief Guest. European police, investigators, criminologists, and customs agents made up the strongest component of the conference.



Interpol's Jean-Michel Louboutin with Brigadier Kipchu Namgyel, Chief of Police Royal Bhutan Police

presenters, chiefly non-Asian, laid out sound instruments, platforms, and methodologies for combatting the illicit trade and retrieving lost cultural heritage. It was a powerful tool kit that we began with. It covered national and international laws, conventions, inventories and object ID databases, and international joint customs operations. Presenters reviewed platforms such as ARCHEO, COLOSEUM, ICOM's Red List and INTERPOL's stolen art database. Additional information was provided about museum security measures; investigations by police and criminologists; the role of prosecutors; the importance of preventative measures adopted from the conservation practice; and grass roots initiatives in culturally-rich areas. The content-rich agenda even covered liaison with tourist and local infrastructure; use of the media to build awareness and participation; development of emergency and disaster preparedness; and the role of market versus source countries in the fight to protect cultural property.

Sadly, there was little police representation from most Asian countries. Noticeably lacking at this first Asian-based conference were law enforcement, customs, or Ministry of Culture personnel from Thailand, India, Nepal, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Singapore or Malaysia. Several of these countries - Thailand, China, and Singapore, for example - play major roles in international trafficking and trans-shipment. Others, such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Indonesia, are victims of ongoing looting and theft of their cultural property. The Bhutanese may have benefited the most from this conference, with a strong and broad-based attendance, with several presentations focused on illicit trafficking and theft cases in Bhutan.

There was a paucity of dialogue about other Asian countries, with no mention or discussion of the ever-growing Asian-based market for antiquities. Singapore and Bangkok are both active illicit hubs, with China and Vietnam's growing population of individuals with purchasing power creating renewed demand for antiquities globally. Thus, it felt like a missed opportunity to not explore these newly emerging markets and laundering sites. At the same time, perhaps now that the first such gathering is complete, it's possible that future gatherings will begin to address these major threats to regional cultural heritage.



Bhutan emerged as the star player in this conference and in the protection of their cultural property. A preview of this strong role was the large sign at the national airport customs picturing Bhutanese artifacts and stating "Help Us Protect our Culture and Heritage" (along with caveats, guidelines, and penal consequences). Bhutan is an active member of INTERPOL, with regular communications and postings to INTERPOL's stolen art database. It also has a sound and growing national database (both written and

photographed) of their cultural heritage; training and posting of cultural officers in all the districts widely distributed and culturally-aware police force, and a strong base of nationalism and religious beliefs by the population at large. Bhutan is actively engaged in the protection of their religious heritage and presented several compelling talks focused on the theft and loss, recovery and preventative methods in place.

Bhutanese speakers included: The Minister of Home and Culture, H.E. Lyonpo Minjur Dorji; Mr. Dorjee Tshering, Director General of the Department of Culture; Mr. Tshewang Gyalpo, Director of Department of Culture; and Brigadier Kipchu Namgyel, Chief of Police Royal Bhutan Police. All gave clear overviews of the current state of cultural property protection, regional statistics of loss, including case studies of the on-going vandalism of remote *chortens* or stupas. These religious sites are primarily targeted for the possible snatching of the valuable *dzi* bead, or cat's eye agates. Since these relic beads are greatly sought after by Taiwanese and Chinese willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars for a stunning example, the thefts continue, perhaps by hire, and certainly executed by a well-greased international smuggling ring. The violation of these sacred protective sites deeply pains the Bhutanese, and steps are being taken to stem the on-going vandalism. Several law enforcement experts from Europe, as well as the deputy director of UNESCO, met with Bhutanese officials to discuss the urgency of this problem, and launch of a strategy and programs to end these thefts.

Ms. Brennan's coverage of the conference will continue tomorrow.



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