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Iraqi libraries : a general outline (July 2003)

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ORGANISATION OF THE MISSION

A first UNESCO mission to assess Iraqi cultural heritage was carried out from 17 to 20 May 2003, devoted to museums and archaeology. A second mission, from June 27 to July 6, also conducted by Mounir Bouchenaki, Assistant Director general of UNESCO for Culture, included the assess of libraries and archives. It was composed of 4 archaeologists, 1 architect, 1 conservationist, 1 representative of Interpol and 1 librarian (also reporting for archives on behalf of ICA).

Programme of visits

A formal programme was established in conjunction with UNESCO representatives in Baghdad and UNESCO in Paris, according to the results of the first mission, the literature and reports by travellers in Iraq since the end of the conflict, and the opportunities opened each day in function of the security measures to be respected by the mission members.

Finally, to assess a coherent vision of libraries in Iraq, and to avoid too great a dispersion of visits of interesting but not really representative libraries, it was decided that mostly libraries and institutions placed under the authority of official administrations (ministries of education, of culture and of religious affairs) should be visited. This model is not completely representative of the diversity of Iraqi libraries but it gives the possibility to enhance the major questions about libraries in the present context and to propose answers.

ASSESSMENT OF VISITS

BAGHDAD

Iraqi Centre for manuscripts

The Centre for manuscripts which has gathered a main part of Iraqi patrimony, is safe : the building is in a good state and has not been looted. During the last years, the collection was increased with a great number of small collections coming from different parts of the country ; it now has about 47 000 volumes. During the months before the conflict, the collection was transferred to a safe place in a secret shelter. Answering the question on the actual conditions of conservation, it was said that everything was correct (humidity, temperature) inside the shelter.

The return and reinstallation of the collection in the previous premises is foreseen when the security is restored in Baghdad.

The laboratory and restoration unit (situated in a small house close to the Centre) have been completely looted : there are only empty rooms left. Binding material and equipment have disappeared.

National Library

The National Library has been severely damaged : the building (built in 1977) has been burnt and looted twice, on April 14 and one week later. The ground floor with the main reading room has been sacked : catalogue cards pushed down on the floor, starts of fire of open access books in several places. The binding unit no longer exists. The first and visual acknowledgement is that the fire was well organised : books were gathered in some places and burnt with combustive agent so that they entirely burnt together with metallic shelves ; it means that temperatures were high enough to destroy books and the structure of the building itself. The concrete is deeply damaged as indicated in a specific study conducted by a civil engineer in charge of the buildings at the City of Baghdad Council which concludes that the building cannot be restored.

Between the first and the second fire, a staff containing employees of the Library and volunteers moved a part of the collections to a Shiite mosque (in former Saddam City) and into a building of the Board of Tourism. Actually, the collections are stored on three different sites :

- About 700 000 volumes are still in the National Library, in stores situated on the ground floor and in the second floor of the building (mainly small collections and donations of contemporary books).

- About 300 000 volumes (about 300 m³) are stored in the Shiite mosque, together with archives, in a room of 12 x 8 x 4 meters, without ventilation, full at about 2 thirds with books piled up from the floor to the ceiling ;

- About 200 000 volumes (most of them are said precious) must have been stored in a building of the Board of Tourism, in Baghdad.

All the inventories are said destroyed by fire or by vandalism. A part of the catalogue cards is still remaining in the drawers (in the main reading room on the ground floor, the catalogues in the technical services and in the first and second floors are destroyed) but

an important part of the cards is laying on the floor, with rubble, soot, broken glass, trampled by visitors.

National Archives

The National Archives are located in the same building (second floor) as the National Library. The same kind of fire has been used to ravage the service, destroying the collections that were in the room and of which only thick ashes are still visible, furniture and equipment now completely melted down by heat and high temperature.

A part of the collection seem to have been moved, and fortunately saved, in the same locations as the books of the National Library

It is difficult to know precisely which part of the collection has been destroyed and which part is safe. I was not allowed to open bags in the mosque, but I was said that it was mostly archival documents from the Mandate period up to 1958, but without certitudes for the Ottoman period.

Inventories and catalogues available in the reading room and in technical services are said to be destroyed by fire and I was not assured that complete and correct copies were existing in other places.

Awqaf Library

Awqaf Library was totally destroyed by fire, with the same method used in the National Library building, and probably looted. Only outer walls are still standing.

It was not possible to meet people in charge of the Library nor of the Awqaf administration as they do not come regularly to the site.

According to information collected abroad, the situation of the collection is as follow : about 40 % of the manuscripts must have been destroyed (by fire and by looting), as well as 90 % of the printed books.

According to a visual observation, the building cannot be reused.

Mustansiriya University

The Central Library has not been damaged by fire but by looting : equipment and furniture were stolen (including doors and windows, air conditioning systems, etc.). A part of the collections was stolen but a part was returned later ; only 2 % of the collection must have been looted.

Manuscripts (168) are said looted by the director of the Centre for manuscripts.

This library was not visited during the mission ; information was transmitted by Mr Wishyar Muhammad, counsellor for libraries at the CPA.

BASRA

Central Public Library

The Central Public Library has been totally destroyed by fire, and probably looted before. Outer walls are still standing but concrete is deeply damaged by high temperatures. The method used is probably the same as in Baghdad : use of a specific fuel to activate fire and completely burn books and shelves. It seems difficult to restore the building.

University of Basra

The building of the University Central Library has been looted and vandalised : doors and windows were broken and smashed, as well as the equipment in the reading rooms and the technical services. Shelves, as well as tables and chairs, have been looted.

The collections have been gathered in some places of the library and burnt ; about 75 % of the collections are destroyed but I have no precise figures.

It was not possible to know if the 600 well-known manuscripts are safe or not.

MOSUL

Central Public Library

As the Library was closed by the time of the visit, only an outside assessment could be made. Apparently, the building presented some degradations (broken glasses, forced doors). But the inside of the Library, seen through the windows, looked in good condition : books seemed intact on shelves, furniture was still in place. Eventual looting had not disturbed the Library.

University of Mosul

The Central University Library, well located on the campus, has been vandalised and looted (furniture, equipment and books), but not burnt. The building did not suffer in its structures as in Baghdad and in Basra.

A strong and energetic reaction of religious authorities of the city (appeals in the mosques condemning theft and requiring restitution of stolen books) gave good results. An assessment made by employees should indicate that there are only 30 % of books lost.

This Library is a good example of the good co-operation between scholars and representatives of coalition forces. With help and funds of US forces, looted tables, chairs and furniture, were acquired in a short time ; broken glasses and forced doors were also repaired. The building was rapidly closed and accessible to the students. In other respects, important and tremendous efforts were made by employees to clean the Library. Professors on their own contacted their foreign colleagues to send books to replace lost collection.

Library of the Museum

Located in the basement of the Museum, the Library has been looted by specialists, as the Museum collections : only important reference books (about 10) have been stolen. A start of fire is noticed in the reading room but without consequences for the Library.

REORGANISING LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

The libraries that have been described are only a sample whose representative value has to be validated as other visits are made in other places. However these examples make it possible to identify the main problems to be dealt with in order to reorganise documentary institutions in Iraq and must not be burdened by the safekeeping of historical patrimony.

Consequently, the Centre for manuscripts won't be taken into account since it needs appropriate measures that will benefit semi-private or private patrimonial libraries in the long run.

We have to distinguish between four types of files :

1. the architectural reconstruction
2. the reconstruction of collections
3. the "requalification" of personnels
4. the administrative and legislative reorganisation.

1. The architectural reconstruction

- The repairing of vandalism damages

A large part of the visited buildings have been destroyed mainly by fires. However an important number of buildings have been damaged by mere vandalism.

Vandalism and ordinary looting of buildings will only have secondary consequences : mending frames (doors and windows), repairing ceilings, ventilation and climatisation systems, dividing walls, etc. Those works will certainly be very costly but they can be very quickly carried out whenever the structures of the buildings have not been affected.

- The reconstruction of buildings

A number of libraries have been burnt down and in the first place, the National Library. As established, the fires have been organised with a will to destroy as much as possible. Therefore, it is no longer a matter of replacing window frames, mending ceilings or laying cables : in every case the structure of the building has been damaged and the whole construction has to be reconsidered. It is the case of the National Library (a technical study has been carried out) and the Central Public Library in Basra : the structures have been destroyed to such an extent that there is no possible mending or restoration.

Reconstructions have henceforth to be contemplated. The file is enormous but it may be an opportunity to reconsider the architectural programmes of libraries in order to make them more functional regarding contemporary necessities.

However, owing to the time needed to build up projects (dealing with the location, the architectural programmes, the signing of contracts and the building itself), it is strongly advised to find as soon as possible temporary buildings likely to receive the collections that have been scattered into unadapted buildings in order to treat them (cleaning, inventories), and receive the personnels who have to be motivated again and go back to work.

2. The reconstruction of collections

It means a reconstruction rather than a mere reconstitution that would only involve the replacing piece by piece of the destroyed books. Because of over a decade of considerable budgetary restrictions and the embargo that blindly reduced the opportunities of acquisition, Iraqi libraries are doubly wrecked.

In most cases, catalogues and inventories have been either utterly destroyed or enough disturbed to be quite unserviceable in their present state ; that is why it is necessary to check remaining inventories and catalogues before verifying saved collections.

When the verification is over or sufficiently in progress, it will be possible to identify the fields in which acquisitions are absolutely necessary to reconstitute and bring the collections back to standard either by purchases or gifts. The international community, sensitive to the hardships of Iraqi libraries, is likely to make gifts of books ; it will be advisable to see that they correspond to the actual needs expressed by the Iraqi authorities.

As to patrimonial collections (National Library and National Archives) their reconstitution through the reproduction of destroyed documents will imply an international co-operation with a lot of countries, mainly the countries that had historical links with Iraq.

3. The "requalification" of personnels

The economic and political situation of the country had greatly disturbed librarians. A few years ago, libraries had already lost a large part of their technicians since they were deprived of technical or scientific tasks justifying their presence in the premises. There were only store-keepers left as well as directors (whose titles were often honorific rather than professional); During the mission it was impossible to check the state of personnels but they can't possibly have evolved within the last two years.

So the reconstruction of libraries has to face a major problem of qualification rather than labour. Indeed, if we consider the case of the National Library and National Archives, 119 people are part of the personnel (they could get a salary but they don't come regularly for lack of work to do). Some of these people have been trained but that was a long time ago (the initial training system was deficient and to be renewed in 2000-2001). Therefore, the reconstruction of libraries implies a necessary requalification of professionals through the setting of a temporary system of training until it is possible to create a basic teaching with diplomas for book, documentation or archive workers and to restructure careers.

All the fields of librarianship and records management have to be taken into account through professional training

- locally thanks to local and regional professionals,
- abroad for the training of trainers.

The following fields have to be privileged : preventive conservation, catalography, bibliographic research, computerisation, new technologies of information, public libraries including children for libraries.

4. The administrative and legislative reorganisation

It is obviously one of the most important files for the reconstruction of the whole of Iraq. Libraries and archives are not the only ones to be involved but it is absolutely necessary to deal with them as soon as possible and not to under-estimate their importance in the setting back to work of cultural, patrimonial and academic Iraqi institutions. Before the war those institutions were divided between the ministries of culture, education and religious affairs, and they need a deep reorganisation that must not be overlooked because of the mere rebuilding and reopening of premises.

It is not important that such services and their personnels should be part of an administrative and financial logic so as to insure their efficient working, their investments and the everlastingness of their objectives towards the population of a democratic country.

And last but not least the whole system of libraries and archives : the legal deposit of documents produced in Iraq and the law on archives.

CONCLUSION

After the initial horror due to strong pictures (the library of the French Cultural Centre in Baghdad, severely looted, the National Library) often investigated by the media, from different points of view, a feeling of incredulity even some questioning is progressively taking place in front of a less spectacular but more surgical reality.

Most certainly, the great collection of manuscripts for which, during several days, even several weeks, we had so many fears, is safe and sound : a part of the patrimony of humanity, infinitesimal in quantity but colossal in quality, is undamaged. Every precaution will have been taken for that treasure to fall neither into the looters' hands nor the coalition's. And if this patrimony is safe, it's due to Iraq and Iraqis and more particularly to the director of the Centre for manuscripts. The major catastrophe didn't take place. Now this patrimony must be preserved in good conditions. And it seems to be the case.

But it must also be admitted that Iraqi libraries have been deeply disturbed, in their premises, in their collections and in their personnels. This statement is less spectacular in the sight of public opinion but it alone bears testimony to a major catastrophe for the country. Reorganising the daily life of libraries and archives, indispensable tools for a return to serenity, organising their net and their respective administrations, are considerable tasks a democratic country can't be deprived of.

ANNEXE 1

2nd UNESCO Mission to Iraq

UNESCO team Leader : Mounir Bouchenaki, Assistant Director General for Culture

Dr. Shigeo Aoki, Environmental Scientist, Tokyo National Research Institute of Cultural Property (Japan)

Jean-Marie Arnoult, Inspecteur général des bibliothèques (France)

Arch. Usam Ghaidan, Architect, UNESCO Focal point for Culture (Holland/Iraq)

Prof. Ingolf Thuesen, Archaeologist, Director, Carsten Niebuhr Institute for Near Eastern Studies (Denmark)

Dr. Margarete Van Ess, Archaeologist, Director, mission to Uruk, German Archaeological Institute (Germany)

Prof. Roberta Venco, Archaeologist, Department of Anthropological, Historical and Archaeological sciences, University of Turin (Italy)

Prof. Ken Matsumoto, Kokushikan University, Archaeological expedition on Kish (Japan)

Mr. Karl Heinz Kind, Representative of Interpol (Germany)

ANNEXE 2

Visited institutions

Baghdad

National Library

National Archives

Iraqi Centre for manuscripts

Awqaf Library

Mustansiriya University Library

Basra

Central Public Library

Central University Library

Islamic Library

Mosul

Public Central Library

Central University Library

Library of the Museum

ANNEXE 3

Since the end of April, more and more news have been going on the Internet from library professionals, university members, amateurs and journalists alarmed by the situation in Iraq. Some pieces of news are original, other have been modified through various transfers. Several travellers have made interesting descriptions that progressively give an idea of the situation. Edouard Méténier and Nabil Al-Tikriti are some of them, and I would like to thank them.

Edouard Méténier, Aperçu sur l'état des bibliothèques et dépôts d'archives irakiens au terme de la guerre d'avril 2003 (mai 2003).

Nabil Al-Tikriti, Iraq Manuscript Collections, archives and libraries. Situation report, 8 June 2003.