

Museums and Intangible Heritage: Culture Dead or Alive?

by Richard Kurin

About a year ago, at the meeting of its General Conference, UNESCO member states voted overwhelmingly for a new *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. The Convention encourages the survival and vitality of the world's living local, national, and regional cultural heritage in the face of increasing globalisation. Heritage is broadly defined in terms of the social practices, aesthetic traditions, and forms of knowledge carried within cultural communities. National governments are called upon to designate and empower organisations not only to document intangible cultural heritage, but also engage in its presentation, preservation, protection, and transmission by working closely and cooperatively with the relevant communities.

> The Convention's areas of concern – ethnography, art, history, science and technology – certainly overlap with the subject matter of museums. The means of safeguarding envisioned research, presentation, protection are similar to how museums traditionally address material culture, whether tangible artefacts, artworks, or specimens. But intangible heritage is by definition living, vital and embedded in ongoing social relationships. Should governments around the world now designate museums as the primary agencies for the new Convention? Can museums really safeguard intangible cultural heritage? Do they want to? And if so, must they be re-conceived and re-configured to do so?

Methodological and sociological challenges

> Museums are adept at dealing with objects. Objects are accessioned, numbered, measured, catalogued, stored, preserved, conserved, exhibited, repatriated and de-accessioned. While museum curators and professionals fully understand that each object tells a larger story, it is the object itself that is fetishised. Conveniently, those objects usually stay where they are put, they don't talk back or complain of their treatment. The primary difference in dealing with intangible cultural heritage is that the "thing" or "object" is the social practice or tradition – not a material object, recording, written transcription, pho-

tograph or videotape. It is the singing of songs in the community, the spiritual beliefs of a people, the knowledge of navigating by the stars and weaving meaningful patterns into cloth. Counting, measuring, and inventorying such intangible traditions is no easy task and is fraught with methodological difficulties. Museum workers are not really trained for such an effort, and, to be clear, scholars in fields such as anthropology, folklore, and ethnomusicology

would have grave misgivings about how to do this in an intellectually satisfactory way.

> The methodological challenge is also sociological. In museums, objects become part of collections and reside under the roof and the authority of the museum. With intangible cultural heritage, the traditions exist outside the museum, in the community. They reside under the authority of the people who practise them. People, unlike objects, do indeed talk back. They do complain about how they are placed and how they and their traditions are treated and mistreated. According to the new Convention, they must have the major role in defining their own intangible cultural heritage and how it is documented, preserved, recognised, presented, transmitted, and legally protected.

> In order to deal with intangible cultural heritage museums must have an extensive, fully engaged, substantive dialogue and partnership with the people who hold the heritage. Such partnership entails shared authority for defining traditions, and shared curation for their representation. Museums cannot

resort to the controlled re-creation of idealised or romanticised living culture performed by scripted actors, but must instead deal with heritage as it is lived by real people. Nor can museums hide behind a history of elitism, ethnic, or class bias that has often afflicted the institution. Charged with the twin duties of cooperation and respect, museums will have to cross all sorts of boundaries that have sometimes kept them "above and

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beyond” the broader populace. They will have to recognise that knowledge exists in homes, villages, slums, out in the fields, in factories and social halls as well as in the halls of academia and in their museums. They will have to overcome prejudices of class difference and taste, recognising a diversity of legitimate aesthetics and values. They will have to recognise and in many cases confront biases of ethnicity, language, and religion that may prevent them from interacting and appreciating the cultural forms of “other” people. Clearly, the skills needed by museum professionals to work with people and communities in this type of engagement are much more akin to community development than they are to materials conservation. You have to specialise in diplomacy, local history, and psychology more than you do in glass, wood, or metal.

> There is much museums have to overcome. All museums are constrained by the fact that they can only represent larger wholes by smaller, abstracted pieces or parts. We represent a prehistoric era with a few bones or stone tools, an ecosystem by a few plants and stuffed animals, an aesthetic movement by a painting, a cultural group by a costume and some pottery, a historical event with a sword or crown or page of emblazoned calligraphy. We simply cannot pull their whole existential reality of historical events, aesthetic movements, natural environments, and cultural traditions into a museum. The true skill of museum curatorship, collections activity, and exhibit design is to utilise clever techniques to represent those larger wholes through a careful selection of well arranged objects.

> When it comes to intangible heritage, the task is especially challenging. When a museum presents an exhibit of instruments and hosts a performance of instrument makers and musicians it can indeed provide a sample of the larger cultural heritage of a community — and if it chooses well, can do so very effectively. Museums have brought in artists to paint the pictures seen in their galleries, craftsmen to carve and sculpt the artefacts displayed, technicians to use and tinker with the machines they exhibit. Such activity calls for curation of living beings and their practices, for museum design that is sensitive to culture as performed, and often for novel considerations of audience and museum space.

Safeguarding intangible heritage

> The charge of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is a much larger one than the effective, even inspired exercise of the techniques of display and presentation. It goes to the heart of the moral purpose of the activity itself. Museums can preserve and protect objects in their collections by caring for them and locking them away. They can transmit them to the next generation by holding on to them. They can realise their lawful obligations by returning objects to their rightful owners. The skills involved are those of conservator, guard, collections manager, researcher, even lawyer. No amount of work in the museum alone can accomplish that goal. Living culture is preserved and transmitted through its continued social practice.

> Consider the intangible cultural heritage of the so-called marsh Arabs of Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of people for thousands of years have occupied the marshlands of Mesopotamia, building reed houses and boats, exploiting the natural resources, and developing a way of life in a tough environment. These wetlands were home not only to a people and a culture, but also to unique species of water fowl and migratory birds. Under Saddam Hussein’s regime, particularly after the Gulf War, the marshes were a region of refuge and opposition. Saddam dammed the rivers and thus drained the wetlands, eliminating the ecological basis of marsh Arab culture. People migrated to towns and cities, and even to neighbouring Iran, impoverished not only economically, but also culturally.

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> Now suppose you run the museum of Iraqi marshland culture. You can acquire the region’s traditional reed houses and its unique long canoes, record the memories of those who fled the marshland and remember its ways, collect and exhibit historical photographs of life in the wetlands and develop charts illustrating the complex cultural ecology. But actions on such atomised morsels of culture will not by themselves restore or safeguard the culture as a way of life. The only real way to do that would be to actually restore the marsh environment, re-populate the region, and work with cultural exemplars and practitioners to see that the community’s traditions re-assert themselves. As a museum professional you would need to start by working with hydrologists and agronomists, economists and engineers. Your canvas is not the walls of a museum building, but the landscape of a large, distressed country. Your constituency is not the museum patron or donor or audience, but the community represented. In safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, the larger whole is the object of attention and the measure of accomplishment.

> The task of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage as provided for by the new Convention must then seem both amazingly ambitious and also quite difficult for museums to achieve. One might argue that it would be better for museums not to have such a role in safeguarding culture. Indeed, many museums have built their great collections from cultures dead or dying with no one to complain, no one to consult, no competing power to challenge the museum’s authority, no obligation to the producers and creators of the artefacts and works of art.

> Some museums like their culture dead and stuffed. As many museum professionals and commentators have found, it is hard to bring life into the museum. Museums don’t have a strong historical track record in this regard. Museums are generally poor institutions for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage — the only problem is that there is probably no better institution to do so.

Museums in the community

> There are opportunities here for museums to expand their connection to their constituencies, build upon some basic successful strategies and techniques, utilise various sources of support, and play a positive role in society by serving a larger social purpose. Museums do have a tool kit for this role. They value cultural heritage. They employ specialists knowledgeable about and appreciative of cultural traditions. They engage in a useful social function — the broad dissemination of knowledge. They help legitimate understandings and values in the public sphere. Museums can encourage and promote cultural diversity, the continuity of tradition, and ongoing cultural creativity. Not all museums will want to do this, nor should they. Some will be ill-prepared and ill-positioned to do so. But there are many signs and cases worldwide where museums have come forward to take on this larger, more expansive task.

> Community-based museums in Central and South American are a good example. Many of these museums function as community centres, and serve an important role in the cultural life of their societies. Eco-museums have done a good job in highlighting the intangible natural heritage of regions, illustrating the larger whole and inter-relationships of tangible features. Museums in Japan and in our host country, Korea, have built exhibitions and programmes upon the basis of long established and prestigious living cultural treasures programmes.

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New city museums in Europe have developed around local traditions and efforts to safeguard them. The Museum of the Desert in northern Mexico has taken as its mission the preservation of both the natural and cultural heritage of the region and sought to transmit the knowledge necessary to do so to the region's youth. In South Africa, the District Six Museum stands as a dramatic case, where the heritage of a Cape Town neighbourhood was totally intangible – its buildings and streets, homes and businesses having been physically destroyed and dissembled by the apartheid regime. The very stuff of the museum is the resurrection of memories kept alive in the hearts and minds of its former residents.

> Closer to my professional home, the Smithsonian Institution, with some 140 million very tangible objects in its collections, has for decades made inroads, albeit on the margins, to promote intangible cultural heritage through its museums. Almost four decades ago it established the Smithsonian Folklife Festival – when its head, Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, admonished his staff to *“take the instruments out of their cases and let them sing.”* The idea was to show that everything in the museum had either been made or used by humans, or was crucial to their meaning. The Festival is an annual “living exhibition” of culture held outdoors, between and amongst the national monuments and museums. It highlights the knowledge, artistry, skill and wisdom of culture bearers and conspires with them in its research, production, and presentation. The Festival is not an end in itself, but rather a means for the museum to engage in cultural research, public presentation and institutional legitimisation of cultural exemplars so as to encourage their continued practice and creativity.

> At the same time, in the mid-1960s, the Smithsonian also established the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum to reach into the local African American community in Washington, D.C. Here was a national museum recognising the living culture of its own hometown. If it could not engage citizens in its own neighbourhood in a cultural dialogue relevant to contemporary life, how could it claim to engage a nation? The Museum has, over the last decades, featured local culture, and developed a relationship with the local community as both audience and presenters.

A living cultural heritage

> The apotheosis of this impulse is most dramatically evident in the creation of the brand-new National Museum of the American Indian. This is a new museum that seeks to represent the oldest people of the nation and the hemisphere, the First Americans. The museum is historical to the extent that it recognises a cultural legacy tens of thousands of years old. But more importantly, it makes a powerful statement – that a diversity of Native People are alive, here today, possessed of wisdom, arts and knowledge. The museum takes the Smithsonian beyond the older, more traditional idea of a museum, represented by its vast, unprecedented collection. It entails a new compact between the nation and Native Americans – one in which Native Peoples have taken the lead in conceptualising, planning, designing, supporting, and directing the museum to represent them. Aside from public display places in its two museum buildings in Washington and New York, it has a Cultural Resource Center in a third building devoted to connecting visiting Native Americans with objects, in private, for study and reflection. And perhaps in the strongest illustration of its attention to the intangible nature of cultural heritage, it has defined something it calls “the fourth museum,” a massive outreach and community services programme that has as its

goal the encouragement and support for the continuity and creativity of Native cultural communities. If you are looking for a world-class model and dramatic illustration of how a museum can address the heavy responsibilities set forth in the new Convention, look at the National Museum of the American Indian. Cultural heritage for that museum is not something dead, frozen, stored away for the voyeuristic gaze of tourists or the idiosyncratic interest of scholars, but rather something living, vital and connected to the identity and spirit of a contemporary people trying to make their way in a complicated world today.

> Museums that see others better off dead may find themselves consigned to the same fate by the people they are supposed to serve. Museums that see life around them may be better poised to account for it, react to it, and seek it as a cause for attention and maybe even a source of inspiration. Museums such as these are laden with the purpose envisioned in the new Convention, and provide a source of optimism that an old social institution – the museum – is not dead, but can itself find new life in the 21st century.

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