

**The Roles of Museums in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage**  
**(UNESCO Convention, October 2003)**  
*Position Paper for the Expert Meeting*  
*April 5 – 7, 2004*

**Introduction**

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)<sup>1</sup>, as well as the ICOM definition of the museum (2001, *see below*), and the Shanghai Charter (Asia Pacific ICOM, 2002)<sup>2</sup>, form the principal coordinates for this expert meeting. Considering the purpose of the UNESCO Convention (2003), this meeting will focus on the (future) roles of museums and similar institutions in safeguarding living heritage by considering two main questions: 1. how can museums contribute to safeguarding living heritage, especially at the level of local communities? 2. how can museums contribute to the visibility of forms of living heritage, in accordance with the aims of the UNESCO Convention (2003)? Since the emphasis is on the *living* nature of intangible cultural heritage, which is closely tied up with the identity and continuity of groups and communities, it will be referred to in the following as *living cultural heritage*.

Recalling that the museum is a ‘non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment...’ (ICOM, 2001), what role could it play in implementing the 2003 Convention concerning living cultural heritage? Participants at the 7th Asia Pacific Regional Assembly of ICOM on ‘Museums, Intangible Heritage and Globalisation’ (Shanghai, 2002), affirmed in their Charter the ‘significance of creativity, adaptability and the distinctiveness of peoples, places and communities as the framework in which the voices, values, traditions, languages, oral history, folk life and so on are recognised and promoted in all museological and heritage practices’, and recommended museums as ‘facilitators of constructive partnerships in the safeguarding of this heritage of humanity’. The goal of the present meeting is therefore to establish a framework for putting the Convention into practice, based on the foundations already laid down. This framework includes developing parameters for the UNESCO manuals, which will provide practical guidelines for those on the ground entrusted with the task of safeguarding living heritage in practice, as laid down by the Convention of 2003. This

process should clarify how UNESCO and ICOM can cooperate productively on living heritage (and contribute to the ICOM Seoul Meeting in the Fall of 2004). In order to achieve these goals we need to examine cases and experiences of dealing with living cultural heritage at local community level, and the role of museums in this. We should leave some space for discussion of how internationally recognized efforts to safeguard living cultural heritage impacts on local communities, existing collections, and their embedding in national-level institutional networks.

## **2. Museums, communities and the dynamic intersection of tangible and living heritage**

A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment (...), ICOM (2001).

If museums have been conventionally concerned with tangible cultural heritage, their *raison d'être* is the community (or communities) they serve, whose identity is bound up in complex ways with museum collections. Since living cultural heritage is, as mentioned earlier, closely tied up the identity and continuity of groups, we need to consider how straightforward it would be to add *living cultural heritage* to *material evidence* in this definition. Two aspects of the definition may be questioned when applied to living heritage: 'acquires' and 'conserves'. Acquisition and conservation of (records of) living heritage might (arguably) contribute to fossilizing it; while this is not a necessary entailment it may be a risk that needs to be weighed up (cf. Nas 2002). On the other hand, the facilities and skills for carrying out 'research' and 'communicating' for the 'purposes of study, education and enjoyment' seem better attuned to a future role in safeguarding living heritage. If items of living heritage are located outside the museum, we need to consider what the relationship of the institution and its skills will be to the practices and to those practicing them, as Præet (2004) has pointed out in connection with the conservation of natural heritage. Acknowledgement and recognition of practices that take place outside the museum's walls may be an important first step towards the goal of safeguarding. Provision of supporting expertise in undertaking research, in establishing connections with other national institutions and with UNESCO (if required) in order to obtain moral or financial support, could be a second concrete role for museums. Museums could also explore the way in which living heritage practices might be

related to existing collections, and harnessed to the interpretation of those collections for the people whom the museum serves ('local' communities – wherever these may be located). Story-telling is one expressive form that deserves attention in this respect: we might wish to examine concrete cases, such as story-telling associated with the African 'iron routes', or the Berber 'language of things', or the story-telling as an integral part of collecting from contemporary migrants, in order to reflect upon the dynamics of living heritage as a process that may involve museums and their contents in quite novel ways. The research function of museums could take on a new lease of life by engaging with living meanings and memories in this way. The issue of exhibition deserves careful scrutiny in consultation with those with different vested interests in what is to be exhibited: this may range from the conventional material held by museums, to the kinds of living heritage now under discussion. There may be good reasons for restricting visibility, or for re-directing, re-focusing and re-habilitating the gaze. The educational role of the museum may require teaching respect and a non-consumer approach to culture, which runs contrary to the commoditization of culture that has been a global trend for at least the past two hundred years (and in which museums have played a key role).

Considering the definition of the museum as an institution, it seems clear that adding living heritage to the kinds of collections for which museums are currently responsible, could have a dynamic effect upon both. Turning briefly to the community (or communities) associated with these forms of heritage, it is useful to refer to Karp's (1992: 20) formulation of museum – community relations. Karp discusses four issues that elucidate the processes of identity formation, which go to the heart of discussions on the role of museums in safeguarding living heritage: (1) identities are defined by the content and form of public-culture events such as exhibitions and performances; (2) identities are subjectively experienced by people participating in public culture, often in ways conditioned by their other identities and experiences; (3) expressions of identities can contain multiple and contradictory assertions – that is, there can be more than one message in a single expression or performance of identity – and the same is true for the experience of identities; and (4) identities are rarely, if ever, pure and uncontaminated by other identities, because they are usually fabricated from a mix of elements.

Bearing in mind these complexities in the relationships between local communities and public culture, it is important to consider how local museums might function as intermediaries in safeguarding both local

interests and those of UNESCO regarding cultural diversity, while taking into account the intervening interests of the state involved. The positioning of local museums among the various fields of interest that converge upon a particular form of living heritage, mean that they may be key players in the complex processes of identity negotiation between the various levels and parties involved. Papers addressing specific instances of local museums operating in these complex fields of relations would be welcome at the April meeting.

### **3. Practical Experience with Living Cultural Heritage at Local Community Level. How Do Museums Make a Difference? How Could Museums Make a Difference?**

#### *a. the museum as setting*

Considering that museums are collections **plus** their settings (buildings, gardens, courtyards, parks, sometimes; but also neighbourhoods in cities, villages, small towns etc), the notion of **context** is multi-layered. This has consequences both for making living heritage visible and when considering display techniques, since different types of museum tend to engage different exhibitionary languages that are related to their position in the local museum hierarchy. Museums as (keeping) places, buildings, sites with specific qualities (secular temples, is one way of putting it), have potential as loci for gathering living heritage and its bearers. However, if the movement of such heritage were to be one-way, 'inwards' into the museum, then there is a real chance that it will end up as an extension of the museum as modernist archive. However, it is conceivable that living heritage could be used in a two-way movement – re-connecting the museum with practitioners in its catchment area and actually enlivening collection elements (as with the Stichting Identiteitsfabriek Zuidoost in the Dutch province of Brabant). Another remarkable case is that of the Swedish National Ethnographic Museum's totem pole: the original was reclaimed by Northwest Coast people, who came to an arrangement with the museum to make them a new one. What this establishes is a **relationship and an exchange** that is in itself a living dynamic part of contemporary culture.

\* We need to examine specific cases where local museums have played a role in safeguarding living heritage within their catchment area(s), such as the Amsterdam Cultural Heritage Minorities Project.

#### *b. museums and the problem of presenting living heritage*

Considering the broader setting of the museum may help in redefining the problematic issue of presenting living heritage in (and out of) museums. The process of making the intangible or living practices visible is intrinsically a process of musealisation: attempting to preserve something, to stop its decay, decline or demise. Behind it is the fear of neglect and irretrievable loss and the desire to capture and to transmit things identified as valuable, enriching, endangered. (Similar sentiments motivated scholars such as Franz Boas and A.C. Haddon in the great collecting era of the late nineteenth century.) Presentation of such living heritage might therefore not be limited only to museums as such, but might rather make use of the expertise and resource base of museums to safeguard presentation in other locations (such as ateliers). A representation or record of living heritage taking place outside the museum, as well as the occasional use of the museum for a performance or presentation, might safeguard such heritage in the sense of regulating tourist access. This kind of visitor centre construction does of course have consequences for living heritage (for example, the village of Clovelly in Devon): community involvement may imply commercialization.

\* We should discuss concrete cases of community involvement with safeguarding different aspects of living heritage (for example, Aboriginal practice in deciding which aspects of living heritage may be shown and what must be kept secret); how does this work? How are museums involved? What is the potential for museum involvement?

### *c. local vs. national museums*

In re-defining the classic role of museums from archives of material culture to a more dynamic role involving the safeguarding the transmission of living heritage, it may be the case that local rather than national museums will play a crucial role. At the same time we need to be alert to the relationship between local and national museums when an item of local living heritage is identified as being heritage of humanity: the case of the Dutch Hindeloper Kamer (Dutch folk interior), which was elevated from the status of local item through display at World Exhibitions to the status of national item, illuminates this point. Local heritage may well be transformed into national heritage because of identification by an international organization such as UNESCO, and documentation as part of the process of safeguarding.

\* We need to examine concrete cases where local museums have or could cooperate with national museums in safeguarding living heritage; and to draw the necessary conclusions. In general, the dynamics of designating and attempting to safeguard living heritage deserves careful monitoring: it is almost an experimental situation.

*d. museums and the re-patriation issue as an issue of living heritage*

Museums might start considering the potential of **releasing** or lending certain materials under well-defined circumstances as part of the process of re-defining their role in terms of living heritage: human remains are already a classic case, but there are many more things involved than this.

For example: the case of the Torres Strait Islanders and their claim on ancestral objects (some of which are ritual things) to be returned to their islands. It is difficult to imagine discussing living heritage and museums without touching upon the issue of repatriation: the issue of visibility is one that arises for those claiming back collection elements.

Museums are already, in this sense, involved with living heritage: collections that look dead to us in their depots and showcases may be very much alive to descendents widely separated in space and time from this material and conventional ways of dealing with it. And here is a conundrum: if the dead collections in museums (dead, anyway, except to the few who can lay hands on them!) can 'come alive' under certain circumstances, can currently 'living cultural heritage' die (inadvertently) if it is musealised in a certain way? What does it mean to speak of 'safeguarding' living heritage when the outcome of musealisation is so unpredictable?

\* We should discuss concrete cases where repatriation and living heritage issues are interconnected.

#### **4. End Note**

Pinna (2003), basing himself on the UNESCO 2001 definition<sup>3</sup>, identifies three categories of intangible cultural heritage: 1. expressions embodied in physical/ living form; 2. expressions without physical form (which museums might translate into physical records, thereby risking fossilization); 3. the multiple meanings and interpretations fostered by museum culture (cf. Sherman and Roghoff 1994).

Reformulating Pinna's three categories as starting points, we could consider the following questions by means of concrete cases to be presented by the invited experts:

1. In which ways does or could the transmission of forms of living cultural heritage in physical form on the part of local populations *beyond* the physical boundaries of the museum, be safeguarded by (local) museums?

\*Which skills are present or need to be developed by museums to safeguard living heritage within their sphere of influence?

2. In which ways is or might living heritage without physical embodiment be safeguarded by museums?

\*Which skills are present or need to be developed by museums to safeguard living cultural heritage without physical embodiment within their sphere of influence?

3. In which ways are or could the meanings of physical museum collections be dynamised by the incorporating the concerns of living heritage?

\*Which measures do museums need to address the concerns of individuals, groups and communities from whom collections have been made in the past, and for whom these collections have multiple meanings in the present? What concrete steps are museums already taking in this direction? What further steps might they take?

### **References:**

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## **Appendices**

### **1. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, October 2003**

#### *Purposes:*

- a. to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage
- b. to ensure respect for intangible cultural heritage of communities, groups and individuals concerned;
- c. to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof;
- d. to provide international cooperation and assistance

#### *Definitions*

i. ...“Intangible cultural heritage” means practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This ICH, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and with history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.



- ii. The ICH ...is manifested i.a. in the following domains:
- a. oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle for ICH;
  - b. performing arts;
  - c. social practices, rituals and festive events;
  - d. knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
  - e. traditional craftsmanship;
- iii. “Safeguarding” means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the ICH, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and informal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.

## 2. SHANGHAI CHARTER

### Museums, Intangible Heritage and Globalisation

*We, the coalition of participants, at the 7th Asia Pacific Regional Assembly of the International Council of Museums convened between 20-24 October 2002 in Shanghai, affirming the significance of creativity, adaptability and the distinctiveness of peoples, places and communities as the framework in which the voices, values, traditions, languages, oral history, folk life and so on are recognised and promoted in all museological and heritage practices, recommend that museums as facilitators of constructive partnerships in the safeguarding of this heritage of humanity... (2002)*

[\(ICOM Statutes art.2 para.1\)](#)

### 3. UNESCO (2001) *First Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, designated nineteen examples:

1. The Garifuna Language, Dance and Music (Belize)
2. The oral heritage of Gelede (Benin)
3. The Oruro Carnival (Bolivia)
4. Kunqu Opera (China)
5. The Gbofe of Afounkaha: the Music of the Transverse Trumpets of the Tagbara Community (Ivory Coast)

6. The Cultural Space of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos of Villa Mella (Dominican Republic)
7. The Oral Heritage and Cultural Manifestations of the Zápara people (Ecuador-Peru)
8. Georgian Polyphonic Singing
9. The Cultural Space of Sosso-Bala in Nyagassola (Guinea)
10. Kuttiyattam, Sanskrit Theatre (India)
11. Opera del Puppi, Sicilian Puppet Theatre (Italy)
12. Nôgaku Theatre (Japan)
13. Cross Crafting and its Symbolism in Lithuania (Lithuania)
14. The Cultural Space of Jemaa el-Fna Square (Morocco)
15. Hudhud Chants of the Ifugao (Philippines)
16. Royal Ancestral Rite and Ritual Music in Jongmyo Shrine (Republic of Korea)
17. The Cultural Space and Oral Culture of the Semeiske (Russian Federation)
18. The Mystery Play of Elche (Spain)
19. The Cultural Space of the Boysun District (Uzbekistan)