

Museums and Intangible Heritage: The Dynamics of an 'Unconventional' Relationship

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The concept of intangible heritage can have significant implications for museums in the areas of collecting, making exhibitions and working with communities. Drawing on the model of the 'post-museum' envisioned by Hooper-Greenhill (2000), some of the ways in which the concept of intangible heritage can affect museum practice are examined. The limitations and concerns around the engagement of museums with intangible heritage are analysed and future challenges are identified. It is hoped that this paper will provide practical insights and help explain how the concept of intangible heritage can contribute to the discussions around the 'post-museum'. The aim is that the issues discussed will raise awareness with respect to the impact of intangible heritage and invite museums to extend their concern from objects *per se* to the human element inherent in objects.

Keywords

Collections, communities, exhibitions, Intangible Heritage, post-museum

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to assess the implications of the use of intangible heritage in museum practice and more precisely in the areas of collecting, making exhibitions and working with communities. The concept of intangible heritage has only recently been the focus of academic interest in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies (Butler 2006; Galla 2003; Garton-Smith 2000; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Kreps 2005; Kurin 2004a), and its impact on the understanding of cultural heritage and the work of museums is currently the subject of much debate as witnessed at the 2006 Conference of the Museum Ethnographers Group. In brief, intangible heritage suggests a holistic understanding of what is cultural heritage by acknowledging the significance and value of oral and living practices and expressions that are related to objects, monuments and cultural spaces. In other words, as will be elaborated later in this paper, the concept of intangible heritage focuses on the human element inherent in artefacts and cultural spaces and in this respect raises practical and theoretical issues for museum theorists and professionals to engage with. Thus the scope of this paper is limited to the examination of the use of intangible heritage in museum practice as a way for assessing the dynamics of an 'unconventional' relationship. Since museums are primarily concerned with collecting, conserving and displaying material traces of the past, their involvement with living culture at first might seem paradoxical. In this sense, museums may seem unsuitable for dealing with living cultural expressions. It is hoped that an assessment of this 'unconventional' relationship will challenge traditional museum practices and

reveal that the engagement of museums with living culture can suggest new functions and roles for museums in the 21st century.

This paper seeks to explain what intangible heritage is and is concerned with assessing its implications in the work of museums with a particular interest in the compilation of collections, the making of exhibitions and the collaboration with communities. It engages with contemporary discussions in Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies that question the traditional notion of the 'modernist museum' (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) and underline the need for a museum that is in line with current social, educational and cultural concerns. While the Eurocentric criteria for identifying, designating and displaying heritage are questioned both within and outside the Western canon (Bennett 2004; Bharucha 2000; Londres Fonseca 2002), it will be argued that the concept of intangible heritage significantly affects basic museum functions according to contemporary demands for inclusion and access. Thus the concept of intangible heritage challenges mainstream museum practice and makes a call for inclusive collection and exhibition policies.

Defining the Context of the Research

Over the last two decades museum priorities have been characterised by a shift from the preservation of collections to the satisfaction of audiences (Keene 2005: 2). Important in this shift has been the publication of the collected essays entitled *The New Museology* (Vergo 1989) that acknowledged the occasionally exclusive character of museums and underlined the need for a more inclusive museum practice. According to the movement of the New Museology, museums have a social, educational and cultural responsibility towards their public and for this reason special attention should be given to the satisfaction of the educational and cultural needs of audiences.

In this context of increased interest in museum audiences and ten years after the emergence of the New Museology, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) announced the advent of the 'post-museum'. This new museum model is defined as the opposite of the traditional 'modernist museum' that has dominated Western museum practice over the last centuries. More precisely, the 'modernist museum' was primarily focused on the accumulation of objects that were displayed to present "harmonious, unified and complete" narratives (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 151). As a consequence the 'modernist museum' came to stand for the dominant, Western and upper-class ideology expressed through strict, didactic interpretive frameworks. However, the 'modernist museum' seems to be outdated in the context of contemporary post-modern thinking that questions grand narratives, continuity and objective truth.

The concept of the 'post-museum' is thus proposed as a way for enabling multivocality in terms of displaying artefacts and active meaning-making in terms of audience response. In her vision of the 'post-museum', Hooper-Greenhill describes it as a process of several events taking place before, during and after the exhibition and underlines the existence of multiple perspectives that replace static and monolithic knowledge. In this sense, the 'post-museum' envisions museums as vibrant spaces of creation and dis-

covery of new knowledge, fostering cultural diversity and constructive learning. Thus the emergence of the 'post-museum' has signified a new way for perceiving museums, asking them to move "beyond the mausoleum" (Witcomb 2003) and to reinvent their role and functions in contemporary, heterogeneous societies. From authoritarian and antiquated establishments they are asked to engulf diversity and dialogue.

Nevertheless, despite its optimistic and inspiring vision, the 'post-museum' is characterised by several gaps. To start with, it is not sufficiently analysed. In other words, its basic characteristics are mentioned only briefly in two pages but ideas like the "feminisation of the museum" or the "cacophony of voices" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 152-153) require further explanation in terms of actual museum practice. In addition, the author only succinctly refers to the engagement of the 'post-museum' with intangible heritage (ibid 2000: 152), without further developing the subject. Finally, concerns have been expressed that the 'post-museum' is primarily focused on events and outreach programmes and shows little interest for museum collections (S. Keene, pers. comm.).

Drawing on the vision of the 'post-museum', the concept of intangible heritage will be used in order to clarify and assess the basic museum functions of collecting, making exhibitions and working with communities. Recently, international organisations dealing with museums and cultural heritage, such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) have developed an interest for the impact of intangible heritage in their work. Specifically, ICOM dedicated its General Conference in 2004 to the theme of 'Museums and Intangible Heritage' in an effort to examine the application of the term in museum theory and practice. Thus within the framework of the 'post-museum', this paper attempts to examine in a concentrated and focused manner the operational issues that are raised for museums when dealing with the concept of intangible heritage.

What is Intangible Heritage?

The term 'intangible heritage' was established at an international level by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in the 1990s to cater for non-monumental, living culture and the areas of traditional and popular culture (Kurin 2004: 60). The 1972 World Heritage Convention, the prime normative instrument dealing with cultural heritage, was criticised for being "Eurocentric, restrictive and excluding" (Londres Fonseca 2002: 9) because it is principally concerned with the protection of monuments and sites making no reference to the expressions of living culture. In this way, however, the cultural heritage of a large part of the world is ignored, or considered as less important. Therefore in 2003 the General Conference of UNESCO adopted the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage as a sister document to the 1972 Convention making provisions for the protection of the culture of non-monumental societies (Smeets 2004: 39). The significance of the 2003 Convention within the operational grounds of UNESCO is proven by the fact that it came into force only three years after its adoption, in April 2006.

According to the 2003 Convention, intangible cultural heritage:

[...]means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as

well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. [...] It is manifested inter alia in the following domains:

- a. oral traditions and expressions, including language [...];
- b. performing arts;
- c. social practices, rituals and festive events;
- d. knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- e. traditional craftsmanship

(UNESCO 2003: 2 §1)

This definition suggests a more holistic understanding of what constitutes cultural heritage and reveals the shift from cultural objects and monuments to cultural processes and practices. While, for instance, from a Finnish perspective intangible heritage might suggest among other things the stories, fairy tales and the traditional technique of wooden house building (Nurmi-Nielsen 2000: 28), in a Korean context intangible heritage might refer to expressions such as the *Jongmyo Jerye*, the ritual taking place once a year in Seoul (Nas 2002: 140).

Despite the concerns expressed on account of the “broad and confusing” definition of the term (N. Merriman, pers. comm.), the fact that the 2003 UNESCO definition includes both tangible and intangible elements is important because it reveals the interconnectedness between the two terms. It thus suggests that heritage sites, monuments and cultural objects are imbued with symbolic meaning and values that are not necessarily related to their material properties or technical characteristics. This argument is also supported by the fact that the 1999 Revised Burra Charter, which is one of the most influential documents for the management of sites and landscapes, includes intangible values throughout its principles and guidelines (Truscott 2000: 11), thus revealing that monuments, cultural spaces and objects are associated with non-material beliefs and practices that ought to be taken into consideration.

Intangible Heritage in the Museum Context

In addition to the definition provided by the UNESCO 2003 Convention, intangible heritage has been further analysed with particular focus on the context of museums. Thus, Pinna (2003: 3) locates intangible heritage in expressions embodied in physical form and related objects (e.g. theatrical performances, costumes and masks), in cultural processes of no physical or tangible form (e.g. dances, songs) and more generally in the symbolic meaning of objects. Vierregg (2004: 5) has added to this an additional dimension that comprises oral history as an expression of memory and identity.

In this sense intangible heritage reveals the cultural significance and value of museum collections. It relates objects to their conditions of production and use, presents their

deeper meanings and enables different associations. For instance, a mask from Central Africa is not only exhibited as an art object with distinct technical and artistic features, but as a means of introducing museum audiences to the symbolic expressions of its initial use. Thus the notion of intangible heritage in museums enables a wider and deeper interpretation and contextualisation of artefacts.

Collections

With the above in mind and turning to the issue of collections, it can be argued that the concept of intangible heritage suggests a more inclusive approach as to what museum collections can be comprised of. Museum collections could encompass video and sound recordings of cultural expressions and practices. In this way, the processes and conditions that lead to the creation and use of objects can be made present in the context of museums. As a consequence museum collections are enriched so as to treat aspects that objects alone cannot address. In this respect Franz Boas' complaints that ethnographic objects are incapable of presenting the "psychological as well as historical relations of cultures" (1907: 928) are dealt with to a certain extent through the use of new technologies that help capture the more subtle and ephemeral dimensions of cultural production.

For instance many museums have initiated oral history programmes that shed light into the lives of people that objects can not reveal. One such instance is the collection of stories from inhabitants of east Amsterdam by the Amsterdam Historical Museum and the accompanying exhibition "East". These oral histories have been characterised as the "first virtual object in the collection of the museum" (van Veldhuizen 2004: 70). In addition, museums of performing arts are a further category of museums involved with intangible heritage. The objects of which the theatrical collections are comprised are insufficient in portraying the theatrical event in its totality. This is the reason why different museums, among others the Athens and London Theatre Museums, record theatre performances (Alivizatou 2004). In this manner not only do they complement exhibitions but they also safeguard the theatrical heritage of their communities. Furthermore the recording of expressions and practices of intangible heritage and their placement in museum collections suggest that these expressions will be maintained for future generations. This argument characterises the thinking of UNESCO and ICOM (Aikawa 2003) which is directed towards the need for museums to safeguard intangible heritage. Consequently museums, through recording and documentation transform cultural expressions into new museum objects to be conserved and safeguarded for the future.

Exhibitions

Exhibition making is one of the main aspects of museum practice. While most museums in the 19th and 20th centuries exhibited objects taxonomically in glass cases, contemporary museum practice has witnessed exhibition models with features like music, special lighting effects and live performances. In other words, today and over the last few decades, when the responsibility of the museum towards the education and enjoy-

ment of audiences was stressed, display practices have evolved and considerable attempts are made towards a more holistic interpretation of museum artefacts.

In terms of exhibition making the concept of intangible heritage is relevant in the following respects. Firstly it enables the contextualisation of objects. In other words, it reveals their cultural significance and symbolic value that extend beyond their technical and artistic features by placing them “into wider circles of meaning” (Garton-Smith 2000: 58). This can be achieved in several interpretive ways that help trigger different associations and connections, such as storytelling, narrations or music (Garton-Smith 2000: 58), and also through what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991: 389-390) has described as “in context” installations that include multimedia applications, headphones, charts, panels and labels and facilitate the production of different levels of meaning. Furthermore in the spirit of interpretation and contextualisation many museums organise events that enable audiences to think beyond the exhibited objects and gain new and profound understanding of exhibition themes. Such events include craft demonstrations, performances, talks and study days. Events of this kind reveal the effort on the part of museums to introduce into their practice elements of living culture. One such example is the series of performances of A. Jarry’s play *Ubu Roi* organised at the Musée d’Orsay in 2005 to accompany the exhibition on the Théâtre de l’Œuvre. Therefore it can be argued that the concept of intangible heritage with the diverse ways for interpreting and contextualising collections affects the making of multidimensional exhibitions.

Communities

As discussed earlier in this paper, the concept of intangible heritage has signified a shift in perceptions of cultural heritage from objects and monuments to practices and processes. This implies that a fundamental constituent of the concept of intangible heritage is the human element, in other words the people that create and practice cultural expressions and produce and use cultural artefacts. Museums, when interpreting cultural artefacts, have not always been able to satisfy the expectations of communities from which cultural objects originate. This has often led to fierce debates and crises (Riegel 1996). Acknowledging the important role of ‘practising communities’ (Deacon et al. 2004: 42), the concept of intangible heritage suggests that through community partnerships museums can find a useful aid in interpreting and displaying cultural objects. Specifically, communities can help museums identify and safeguard expressions of intangible heritage. The director of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology with respect to the safeguarding of intangible heritage argues that with close cooperation with communities, the museum supports the preservation of expressions at risk of disappearing, and revives those that are important to people’s lives (Van Huy 2003: 8). Community partnerships suggest that museums are no longer viewed as repositories of objects, separated from the lives of people and intended for the gaze of the tourists that visit them but as vibrant places of value for the people and communities that locate part of their heritage in its environment (Phillips 2005).

Recent museum practice developing in extra-European context reveals that community partnerships suggest a new role for museums in the 21st century. One example is the Te

Papa Tongerewa Museum in New Zealand that directly collaborates with indigenous groups that pre-existed European settlers (Mahina 2004). In addition, the National Museum of the American Indian in the USA established partnerships with native people from North and South America for the design of the museums and the interpretation of collections (West 2004: 40).

Discussion: Intangible Heritage in Museum Practice

Based on the above it could be argued that the concept of intangible heritage has significant implications in main fields of museum practice and envisions new roles for museums in the future. In this respect it clarifies and adds to the discussion of the 'post-museum' that seeks to engage with contemporary social and cultural issues. In what follows, some of the implications and limitations around the concept of intangible heritage in museum practice will be further examined.

Intangible heritage, in terms of enriching museum collections, is based on the use of new technologies. In this sense museums are asked to follow technological advancements in order to record and present cultural expressions. However, there is little doubt that such ventures can be costly in times when museums have limited financial resources. Thus financial constraints may impede several small- and medium-scale museums from adding video and sound recordings to their collections. In addition, similar constraints may impede museums from organising events to accompany exhibitions and enable an in depth and multidimensional understanding of exhibition themes.

With respect to the documentation of living cultural expressions in order to enrich museum collections it could be argued that, via recording, living culture is transformed into an additional museum object. As a consequence cultural expressions are transformed into sound and video monuments to be conserved in museum archives and their living nature is fossilised. Moreover, the recorded version of a cultural expression, for example a song, becomes the official one since it is the one that is being conserved and presented in the museum. Therefore it could be argued that the recording of cultural expressions by museums harms their living and changing nature and impedes their evolution. In addition, the claim that the recording of expressions of intangible heritage by museums is beneficial in terms of safeguarding cultural expressions has met with scepticism (Pinna 2003: 3). Safeguarding practices are oriented towards maintaining expressions as they were in the past from fear that they will eventually disappear. However, such fears underestimate the potential of living culture to reinvent itself according to contemporary stimuli and imply that museums ought to be concerned with maintaining an antiquated version of living culture that may not necessarily be related to people of the present.

Furthermore, the organisation of events and performances in order to complement exhibitions is an additional issue that requires contemplation. By taking cultural expressions out of their original context in order to present them in the museum setting, it could be argued that the museum fosters the "folklorization" (Aikawa 1999) of expressions and leads to the distortion of their content and significance. For example, the performance of a ritual dance in the museum environment can be met with lack of

understanding and even derision by unaware museum audiences. In addition, it might lead to the commercialisation of expressions in order to generate income from tourists that seek an authentic experience (Sekler 2001: 354).

The constraints related to the engagement of museums with intangible heritage demonstrate that bringing living culture into the museum requires the consideration of different issues. Firstly, it is financially demanding. Secondly, careful planning is required in terms of selecting the most suitable ways for interpreting and displaying living culture so as to avoid turning museum exhibitions into superficial representations. Thus the question is raised: can the museum effectively engage with intangible heritage and living culture and what would the benefits of such a venture be?

The concept of intangible heritage demonstrates a commitment to expanding the traditional notion of cultural heritage in order to include in its scope people-oriented processes and expressions. As such, intangible heritage is about people and their beliefs and practices. The basic contribution, therefore, of the concept of intangible heritage in museum practice is the reorientation of interest from museum objects *per se* to the people that are linked with museum objects. In this context, by focusing on the human element inherent in artefacts, intangible heritage moderates the tendency that exists in many museums to 'fetishise' objects by focusing on their technical or aesthetic dimensions and reveals an interest for the use and meaning ascribed to museum objects by the people who created them. Thus the museum object stands for something that extends beyond its physical dimensions to the people that are or were related to it.

Furthermore, Hooper-Greenhill's call for a 'post-museum' that is different and more engaging than the traditional notion of the 'modernist museum' necessitates innovative practices. Based on what has been argued so far, such practices that create multiple perspectives and offer several opportunities to communicate with exhibition themes can be initiated and developed through the concept of intangible heritage. In this way, the notion of the museum collection is expanded to include, in addition to objects of material culture, elements of living culture. Moreover, exhibition themes are presented through different interpretative ways and new media are employed to add different perspectives. Therefore by engaging with the concept of intangible heritage museums are asked to reconsider their practice in terms of making collections and exhibitions and become active agents in the lives of communities.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper doubts were expressed as to the compatibility between the concepts of the museum and intangible heritage and the relationship between the two was characterised as 'unconventional'. Having examined some of the implications of intangible heritage in museum practice, it was argued that the contribution of this concept is the acknowledgement of cultural processes and practices as an expression of living culture worthy of preservation and presentation within museums. Thus this 'unconventional' relationship reveals the potential to reinvent the practice of museums so as to include elements of living culture in the fields of collecting and making exhibi-

tions. By enriching collections and exhibitions with elements of intangible heritage museums are challenged to reconsider their role and basic functions.

In this sense museums are invited to make use of new technological innovations that allow the recording and presentation of cultural expressions and practices. Such recordings enable a profound understanding of artefact collections and provide a holistic way for representing exhibition themes. As a consequence exhibitions are challenged to develop a greater variety as far as their themes and interpretative media are concerned. In addition museums are invited to create partnerships with communities in order to gain a deeper understanding of collections and create new knowledge with respect to the issues that should be discussed. Thus museums adopt an active role in fostering debate and dialogue on different social and cultural themes.

To recapitulate, this paper has tried to make an assessment of how the concept of intangible heritage can be of use and relevance to the work of museums and add to the discussion around the 'post-museum'. Since the systematic examination of intangible heritage in the museum context is still in its infancy, there is little doubt that further research is required in order to fully appreciate its potential. Such research, for instance, might include the examination of the practice of museums of a specific type. In this sense, ethnographic museums might deal with the concept of intangible heritage in different ways than social history museums. As a consequence, the examination of the different ways for dealing with intangible heritage could further explain the benefits and limitations of bringing living and oral culture in museum work.

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