

06 Preserving the Ephemeral: the International Museum Day 2004 in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the process by which intangible heritage has gradually been integrated into the conservationists' awareness. Intangible heritage, whose creative products are expressed in skills, knowledge, and representations, constitutes a challenge for museums, which were conceived, from their start, around the value of objects. Even when these spaces have previously acknowledged the importance of intangible cultural expressions, they have rarely performed the tasks of collecting, conserving, or displaying this kind of heritage. The prevailing perspective in Mexican museums is, to this day, to present them only as part of a 'glorious past' –before the Spaniards' arrival to the continent–so that only recently have museum professionals become interested in the vast amount of traditional knowledge, skills, and activities that indigenous peoples still keep alive, more than 500 years after the Conquest. The conservation of cultural diversity implies not only the sampling of a few customs or artistic expressions that dominant groups consider valuable, but rather the formulation of government and social programs which ensure the continuity of ways of life, customs, and a sustainable relationship with the environment which created a given culture.

*What our eyes see is only the final expression,
What is visible of all that we want to tell each other by
means of a shared belief.*

*What we want to tell each other is what matters, that
which gives life to flowers, objects,
And words.*

It is the intangible that makes us live in community,

*the core challenge of our humanity:
Death, when shared, is life.*

(Lourdes Arizpe)

Tangible heritage is expressed in objects, concrete matter, enduring years and sometimes centuries, carrying with it some of the substance of human life,

feeling, and thought. In contrast, that which cannot be touched only takes momentary shape in the mind, the speech and the motion of a human being. The carriers of intangible heritage are mortal, and therefore intangible heritage dies with each person and is reborn with each new member of a community. Hence its multiplicity and vitality, but also its fragility.

The conservation of intangible heritage is a matter which requires consideration, discussion, but most of all, urgent action. Its complexity includes the preservation of the natural and cultural environments of producer groups, and the continuity of spontaneous creation. The efforts which have been undertaken to protect and promote this living legacy have not always been successful, but it is imperative that we exchange our ideas and experiences.

Intangible heritage, whose creative products are expressed in skills, knowledge, and activities, constitutes a challenge for museums which developed to preserve and display tangible objects. While it is true that they have previously acknowledged the importance of such cultural expressions as narratives, music, languages and traditional knowledge, they have rarely performed the tasks of collecting, conserving, or displaying this kind of heritage. Besides, due to the fact that the fate of intangible heritage is intertwined with that of its producers, museums today, in collaboration with the communities who create it and transform it, face the question of how to preserve and display this heritage.

As part of ICOM's effort to enhance international awareness of the importance of intangible heritage, ICOM Mexico organized a colloquium on *Intangible Heritage and Mexican Museums* on the occasion of International Museum Day, 2004. The meeting assembled distinguished anthropologists, historians, philosophers, bio-ethnologists, urbanists, art historians,

museographers, cultural managers and private and public sector officers, as well as 354 museum professionals, who attended the academic sessions. The issues discussed in this forum illustrate the Mexican perspective on the main concerns regarding intangible heritage. How can we avoid separating practices from their social and political contexts? How can we highlight their value and protect them from destruction and discrimination? What strategies do we need to preserve a kind of heritage which, by nature, is ephemeral and always changing? Is it possible (or logical) to protect culture without taking into account environmental and socio-economic problems?

Every day, more and more communities in Mexico experience the effects of projects promoting eco-tourism. Tourists come to sacred places and to archaeological and historical sites; they are interested in ethnic groups and cultural traditions (crafts, history, languages, traditional medicine, traditional technology, ceremonials, music and dance), they watch audio-visual presentations and visit community museums. Tourism is highly profitable and is becoming one of the world's greatest industries, and cultural heritage contributes greatly to it, thus creating a veritable heritage industry. Paradoxically, with its growth, the tourist industry threatens to destroy what it promotes. Eco-tourism destinations tend to lose their special characteristics after only a few years of exploitation.

It is not only our cultural and ecological heritage that is endangered. In countries like Mexico, which suffer from acute social inequality, tourism has tended to increase existing problems such as the inefficient distribution of wealth, the degradation of natural resources and the inadequate, elitist use of our natural and cultural heritage. This is counter-productive and, in the long run, unsustainable.

At the colloquium we learnt several relevant facts about our country. Mexico today is home to one of the largest populations of indigenous peoples in America, who, with their respective dialects, speak about 62 separate languages. Another significant fact is that the land surface under indigenous custody is estimated as at least, 30 million hectares - therefore the indigenous people are the owners of roughly 80% of the country's forests. The majority of the hydrological basins in the central and southern regions of the country are in regions populated by indigenous peoples, so our water supply depends, in great measure, on their use of these precious resources (see Toledo, 2004).

All these facts gain special significance when we consider that our indigenous peoples are amongst those most seriously affected by poverty, discrimination and lack of opportunities. This shows that the conservation of cultural diversity is not just about the preservation of a few customs or craft traditions that mainstream society considers valuable. It actually requires the government to formulate social programmes for the indigenous peoples which will ensure the continuity of their customs and way of life, and will allow them to have a sustainable relationship with the environment in which they live.

Very often, government programmes, NGO initiatives, and efforts by cultural institutions ignore or underestimate the way indigenous cultures have, for centuries, lived in harmony with nature. They therefore try to impose development programmes on them which neither suit these groups' needs, nor value the positive aspects of their relationships with their environments.

In Mexico, among the indigenous peoples, over time, almost every plant species, animal group, kind of soil or landscape, has come to have a cultural meaning - a

linguistic expression, an epistemological category, a story or legend, a mythical or religious meaning, a practical use, or some meaning in the life of an individual or group. The Mesoamerican pharmacopoeia, for example, is as rich as those of the Hindu or Chinese peoples - there are at least 3000 plant species with some recorded medicinal use.

There are traditional knowledge systems among indigenous communities - for instance, with regard to the kind of soil and quality of the terrain - which are almost unknown to us. They are comparable to our scientific soil diagnosis studies, and could constitute perfectly viable alternatives to them when it comes to preserving the productivity of our land and reservoirs. Nevertheless, the prevailing perspective in Mexican museums is, to this day, to present the indigenous population only as part of a 'glorious past' - before the Spaniards' arrived on the continent. It is only recently that museum professionals have become interested in the vast amount of traditional knowledge, skills, and pursuits that indigenous peoples still keep alive, more than 500 years after the Spanish Conquest.

One exception has been the National Museum of Popular Cultures which began its work in 1982 with a project that criticized the dominant museum theoretical framework of those years in our country. Since then, it has gone through different stages, but it has consistently asked for the participation of indigenous communities in the preparation of exhibits about their culture. This institution has shown Mexican audiences how museums can record, preserve, and make widespread a wealth of knowledge, meaning, and creativity that no previous institution had taken into account. The museum describes its field as 'popular culture' and while that is

not a synonym for intangible heritage, its projects have paid considerable attention to the intangible aspects of culture. There have been numerous exhibitions illustrating the methodology of the National Museum of Popular Cultures.

However, the National Museum of Popular Cultures is not the only institution in Mexico to have represented the intangible heritage of various groups alongside their tangible heritage. The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) launched its project *Community Museums* in the 1970s, and traditionally community museums have invited local communities, in collaboration with museum professionals, to decide what they want to display in their local museums to represent their societies.

Even small cultural groups are complex, and not all of them are sympathetic to seeing themselves displayed as museum exhibits. However, the aim has always been to acknowledge their complex histories and conflicts, as well as the transformations of their cultural traditions in the face of the turbulent currents of technological progress and globalization, rather than to present an idealized or 'folkloric' image of them. To reinforce this, a colleague at the colloquium urged museum professionals to show multiple perspectives in their work, and to attempt to make sense of contradictions and fragments by showing indigenous communities within their complete context.

As intangible heritage is constantly changing and ephemeral by nature, museums should be the first to develop suitable documentation methods and tools in order to keep a proper record of this increasingly endangered heritage. In the case of our indigenous peoples, who preserve and create all kinds of traditions, it should be clear to us by now that they are not minorities who remind us of our past, but essential components of our society. At the same time, we ought to avoid the opposite extreme in our representation of them, namely idealisation. Only if we truly endeavour to know and understand the past, and present, of these communities, will we be able to achieve real integration with them. Government and non-government agencies must try to do this by means of coherent social, educational and health plans, which respect the communities' differences and learn from their strengths.

In the case of Mexico, museums should change the paternalistic attitude that they have generally adopted towards indigenous groups as a consequence of

governments' policies, and establish a dialogue with them as equals. Museums all over the world have started considering their audiences as their peers and taking them into account in the design of their exhibitions and programmes. These institutions should set an example as to how to initiate a genuine exchange of ideas between diverse sectors of our societies.

With regard to the discussion about intangible heritage in the Mexican colloquium of May 18th, 2004, there was a lecture which reminded us that the words we use to name a concept actually determine the way we think about it. It summarized the process by which UNESCO reached the definition of intangible heritage, and the effort this process required to ensure that nothing important was left out. An insight derived from this presentation was that a definition must always be open to revision: it is a working tool and a framework, but it should never turn into a corset, limiting or narrowing our vision of what is valuable and deserving of our attention.

During the colloquium, government officers highlighted the problematic aspects of the current definition of intangible heritage. If this includes traditional performing arts, why do not government plans consider contemporary dance and theatre as part of our current intangible heritage, and support these activities in official programmes? This raises the question of what makes us decide what is to be considered intangible heritage. Is it only activities whose quality has been tested by time, or can we include present manifestations in our museums?

Other significant contributions to our exchange were lectures pointing out the political aspects of heritage preservation, and the dangers we ought to keep in mind when taking action in favour of a group or activity. Who decides what is considered heritage nowadays? Capital? Political power? What is the future of traditions in a globalized world, in which everything (including ideas and knowledge) is bought and sold?

The issue of funding for preservation tasks is never a simple one as it has to do with power, ideology, and selection criteria. Who decides what is worth funding and protecting? Does choosing to protect a particular tradition act against the preservation of many others which are not as visible? Is it valid that cultural and political elites determine what the majority should value? How can we achieve the integration of communities in decision-making and in formulating programmes to preserve our varied and vast traditional legacies? These

are just a few of the questions which arose during the ICOM Mexico Colloquium on *Museums and Intangible Heritage*. Meetings, exhibits in different museums of the Republic, and the publication of the colloquium's proceedings have been some of the forum's outcomes.

In addition, the most pressing matters to solve have been identified: it is urgent that we modify our laws regarding heritage preservation. Currently, these restrict such activities to government agencies and prevent the non-governmental sector from participating in it. It is time to intervene in order to involve different agencies in the financing and support of both our tangible and intangible heritage. If museums in Mexico barely have enough resources to survive and maintain their collections, they must procure funding from other sources in order to be able to plan activities concerning intangible heritage.

With regard to the documentation and exhibition of aspects of intangible heritage, these are not enough to ensure the continuity of the various communities' creative activities. It is essential to foster awareness in people from these different groups of the value of their singularity. They should be the first to enjoy their own traditions, knowledge, and art, otherwise we would be in danger of transforming these into the heritage of outside groups.

The intangible heritage offers museums a perfect way to broaden their scope. By bringing into the museums the incredibly vital presentations by groups of youngsters and individuals seen every day in our cities, we will be participating in one of the most progressive parts of our contemporary urban culture. This, of course, needs to be managed carefully as the expression of radical new ideas may challenge our conceptions of art.

Assuming responsibility for cultural heritage requires us to rethink museums. First of all, it is essential that we work closely with those communities that create intangible heritage, so that they may participate in the interpretation and presentation of the issues and traditions they consider relevant. When talking about

communities, I do not only mean ethnic groups with their own distinct culture, language, set of customs, and habitat, but also groups in urban areas, groups that are marginalised and others who are more integrated, people with distinct cultural identities but who frequently escape the attention of our institutions.

Equally important for museums is the establishment of close contact with those researchers from universities and institutes (who have already produced remarkable studies in the field), in order to formulate joint projects, not only for research, but also for the systematic documentation of intangible heritage. Thus, museums may become an effective link between specialists, under-represented communities and wider audiences.

At the same time, museums must involve their visitors in the 'meaning-making' processes which are the source of intangible heritage. Be it by means of a collection of objects or using interactive exhibits, we should encourage thought, creativity, and the awareness that each individual is capable of, and responsible for, the generation and transmission of intangible heritage. This means that every visitor should realize that he or she can contribute to the wealth of their culture and society.

Intangible heritage is not only relevant to ethnographic museums. It concerns all of us, as museums are creators of collective memory. Therefore, we should be aware that one of our main objectives is to bring to the present the meaning of any object or topic we are dealing with, be it art, history, ethnography, or science. The museological object should be brought to the visitor's current reality. This way it makes sense in his or her world view, and is integrated into a coherent network in his or her conceptual framework.

Finally, understanding of those who are different from us can be fostered by 'arranging a rendezvous' between groups in museums' galleries and outreach programmes. As a consequence, they will be more likely to acknowledge their differences, but most importantly, they will see their similarities, the cultural overlaps that exist between all human communities. 🇪🇺

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