

07 Transforming Representations of Intangible Heritage at Iziko (National) Museums, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The article is about the dilemma of transforming five former national museums in South Africa into one amalgamated heritage institution subscribing to a post-apartheid national agenda and UNESCO's broad definition of intangible heritage. By way of introduction it situates the intangible heritage discourse in the country against the backdrop of a transformation process initiated after 1994, which led, inter alia, to the formation of Iziko Museums by an Act of Parliament. The larger part of the paper is devoted to the question of the extent to which Iziko Museums can regard its inherited collections (from 1825) in the Social History, Natural History and Art Collections functional units - representing the various domains of expressions of living cultural heritage - as genuine representations of intangible heritage from the Cape to Cairo and beyond.

The Minister stressed that issues related to heritage, culture and identity were 'deeply emotional' – after all these are issues that are at the very core of the transformation agenda in South Africa. (Harriet Deacon et al, 2003:7)

Since the advent of democracy in South Africa more than twelve years ago, there has been significant transformation in the heritage policies of government which have themselves impacted on the heritage institutions of the country and the manner in which their mandates are expressed.

This article provides a brief overview of the policy processes which gave rise to the Iziko Museums as a

national heritage institution and elaborates on the manner in which the new policy on intangible heritage infuses the execution of the work of this institution.

The creation of post-apartheid national heritage institutions in South Africa

As was to be expected, the discourse on transformation in the heritage sector in South Africa was driven by the new democratic government together with practitioners within the heritage fraternity.

Seminal in these policy debates was the official government White Paper, tabled by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) in 1996 which

preceded the passing of a series of heritage related Acts of Parliament towards the end of the 1990s. This White Paper acknowledged, inter alia, that

[a]ttention to living heritage is of paramount importance for the reconstruction and development process in South Africa and that [m]eans must be found to enable song, dance, story-telling and oral history to be permanently recorded and conserved in the formal heritage structure¹.

This document further set in motion a process which re-defined the notion of national cultural institutions (and monuments) and ultimately resulted in the total transformation of the state heritage institutions through a systematic process of re-structuring and rationalization.

The White Paper envisioned an overarching statutory body with a range of tasks to advance, effectively and efficiently, the transformation of the heritage landscape in South Africa. This White Paper eventually saw effect in the National Heritage Council Act passed three years later (in 1999), and saw its provisions begin to be implemented in 2003. At the time of writing (2006) its provisions are not all functioning effectively.

However, the heritage sector was already undergoing considerable change at symbolic text level. Already in 2003 the DACST called for public nominations for appointments of new Councils (by the national Minister) in terms of the Cultural Institutions Act of 1998². This act also brought into existence the two national heritage institutions, namely the Southern Flagship Institution (now called Iziko Museums) and the, soon to be re-named, Northern Flagship Institution. The National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 made provision for the establishment of the South African Heritage Resources

Agency [SAHRA] (which replaced the National Monuments Council) and Provincial Heritage Resources Authorities [PHRAs].

The status of intangible heritage on the South African transformation agenda after 2004

The legislative framework of the aforementioned heritage institutions makes provision for the promotion of living heritage in their respective domains within the context of a transformation agenda. In South Africa, living heritage is defined in terms of the intangible or symbolic aspects of inherited culture and may include cultural tradition, oral traditions and history, popular memory, performance (music and dance), rituals, skills and techniques, indigenous knowledge systems and a holistic approach to nature and social relationships. For the International Network on Cultural Policy (INCP-RIPC),

[i]t includes meanings associated with places and objects, making it an essential component of all heritage³.

Living and/or intangible heritage is understood both as related to the tangible, such as cultural landscapes which may have spiritual significance, but also as totally independent of tangible heritage, such as in oral history or song. This is alluded to in a paper commissioned by the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa, which was presented to the INCP-RIPC in Croatia in 2003. It came to the conclusion that -

Intangible heritage consists of the oral traditions, memories, languages, traditional performing arts or rituals, knowledge systems, values and know-how

*that we want to safeguard and pass on to future generations. It is essential not to lose our ancient knowledge, especially the traditional and indigenous knowledge that has been marginalized for so long, but we need to remember and value more recent heritage too, such as the oral histories of people who lived under Apartheid*⁴.

At the same time, at the meeting in Croatia in October 2003, UNESCO adopted a similar definition in its *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*⁵.

In its own right, in 2000, DACST initiated, in collaboration with the National Archives of South Africa and other organisations, a National Indigenous Music and Oral History Programme that made the promotion of living heritage a prime objective⁶. Within the same context of a transformation agenda, by virtue of its enabling legislation, the SAHRA has become a leading heritage institution in the promotion of living and intangible heritage in the past three years⁷. In the symbolic texts of the Robben Island Museum the intangible aspects of memory and commemoration feature prominently because of its message concerning *the indestructibility of the spirit of resistance against colonialism, injustice and oppression*⁸. In the same spirit, though managed differently because of its context, the Nelson Mandela Museum, spread across three historical sites (Mveso, Mandela's birthplace, Qunu, where he grew up, and the Bunga Building in Mtata, capital of the former Transkei) since its opening in February 2002 has tried hard to promote living or intangible heritage. The National Archives of South Africa, the Robben Island Museum and the Nelson Mandela Museum are all national heritage institutions.

The making of Iziko, 1999-2004

Iziko is significantly different from the other national heritage institutions mentioned above. Its genesis however was, as with the Northern Flagship Institution, an initiative taken by the DACST in 1995 to create new policies and institutional structures for post-apartheid South Africa. DACST entered into a consultative process with stake-holders in the fields for arts, culture and heritage. Museums, viewed by the state as primarily heritage institutions, were included in this process. One of the outcomes of the consultation on the future of museums was the promulgation in 1998 of the Cultural

Institutions Act which, inter alia, made provision for the amalgamation of state-aided museum institutions in Gauteng and in the Western Cape into separate northern and southern flagship institutions. The Western Cape flagship included the oldest museum in Africa, the South African Museum of 1825, and other long established institutions with large and internationally acclaimed collections. As alluded to above, the museums were a cluster of state-aided, cultural institutions of colonial and apartheid times located in the Cape Town area. By ministerial regulation the Act was amended in July 2001 to allow the southern flagship to be branded as the Iziko Museums of Cape Town.

The state-aided institutions that became part of Iziko were the South African Museum and the South African National Art Gallery in the Parliamentary precincts' Old Company Gardens, the Michaelis Collection in the Old Town Hall on Green Market Square, the South African Cultural History Museum next to Parliament outside the Company's Garden and the William Fehr Collection at the Castle of Good Hope. Before 1999 the five institutions, with their satellite sites, functioned as independent entities each with their own council, director and staff. The councils were dissolved and a new council was appointed in April 1999 to oversee the amalgamation and transformation of the institutions inherited from the old order.

By 2001 the current structure of eight functional divisions, Human Resources, Central Services, Property Services, Education and Public Programmes, Marketing and Fundraising, Art Collections, Natural History Collections, and Social History Collections, was put in place. For curatorial purposes, management of the fifteen museums is grouped into three collections-based divisional clusters: Art Collections (Iziko: SA National Gallery, Michaelis Collection and Natale Labia Museum), Natural History Collections (Iziko: SA Museum, Planetarium and West Coast Fossil Park) and Social History Collections (Iziko: Slave Lodge; Koopmans-de Wet House, Bertram House, SA Maritime Museum, SAS Somerset, Groot Constantia Estate's historical precinct, Bo-Kaap Museum, Rust en Vreugd and William Fehr Collection).

Transforming and restructuring Iziko is a process that is continuing under the present Council inaugurated in May 2003, and the incumbent CEO appointed in November 2002. Also, at curatorial level, the amalgamated institutions have begun a process of

Figure 1: The Linton Panel of San rock paintings, 18th or 19th century, Iziko South African Museum, Cape Town. The complex paintings of the Linton panel reflect the intangible beliefs and cosmology of the San people, the earliest inhabitants of the African subcontinent.



Figure 2: Detail from the San rock paintings in the Linton Panel. This figure provided the basis for the central motif in the South African Coat of Arms, acknowledging the cultural heritage of San hunter-gatherers and their descendants.



transforming exhibitions and the interpretation of the meanings of heritage objects within the context of Iziko's vision to be *African museums of excellence that empower and inspire all people to celebrate and respect our diverse heritage*. With a view to functioning more effectively and efficiently, the Collections divisions and Education & Public Programmes were grouped together in the latter part of 2005 as functional units of a Business Unit called the Core Functions Business Unit.

Collection and recollection: the intangible heritage dimension of Iziko's collections and education policies

Iziko Museums, like many museums that have their roots in the colonial period, tended in the past to interpret the objects in its collections through a limited range of perspectives in keeping with the curatorial interests of the time. The South African Museum, which was founded in 1825 and which from the mid-1860s shared a building with what is now the National Library of South Africa in the Old Company's Garden, has accession records dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, placing Iziko's social history collections among the earliest heritage collections in South Africa⁹.

The collections embrace the fields of pre-colonial and historical archaeology, anthropology, colonial and post-colonial history, and contemporary cultural studies. In the past the focus was on bringing order to the collections through systems of classification. In the case of African material culture, these systems were based on ethnic

groupings or, more correctly, on definitions devised by outsiders of what constituted ethnic or cultural groups. In the process of classification many intangible aspects of meaning, and the fluidity of meaning, were eclipsed by imposed boundaries or categories. An object stood for the culture of a defined ethnic group – for example, a Zulu spear in the old South African Museum represented Zulu culture. History was perceived in Euro-centric terms and related to imperial and colonial history. African history tended to be reduced to timeless tradition.

Research and field collecting were aimed at building up systematic collections of artefacts, documented with information from selected informants. In museum exhibitions, material culture was treated as an end in itself, with representative artefacts displayed according to the categories in the accepted classification systems, and organized by geographic distribution, with little or no historical context. African material culture implicitly conveyed intangible elements but this was not emphasised. As alluded to above, with the amalgamation of Iziko the name 'Social History Collections' was chosen for the integrated material culture collections rather than 'Cultural History', in order to emphasize that museum objects are not ends in themselves. Even though they may have intrinsic value, they are manifestations of intangible relationships between people and things. They are tangible embodiments of intangible ideas and practices.

In current practice at Iziko there is a focus on cultural diversity and indigenous knowledge, and on the relationship of collections to broader processes in South

African history. There is an emphasis on both tangible and intangible relationships between the people and the natural environment, and the complex uses of cultural and natural resources by people of different communities over time. The previously ignored voices of the San people were given space in new exhibitions, such as */Qe. The Power of Rock Art*, which, in December 2003, replaced the dated, permanent *Bushmen* rock paintings exhibition that had remained unchanged for over 80 years. This new display of authentic, original, San rock art containing, among other things, the image that appears in the centre of South Africa's new national Coat of Arms, represents a unique opportunity for understanding intangible heritage. The new exhibition focuses on the belief systems of the San people as expressed through their paintings and engravings that are found throughout southern Africa. This tangible heritage of San rock art is a silent testimony to the once widespread presence of hunter-gatherers in the African sub-continent. The silence, however, is broken in the exhibition by the voices of contemporary San people, who are reclaiming the heritage of their ancestors¹⁰. An original work of San rock art now appears in the centre of South Africa's new national Coat of Arms (Fig. 1).

Ethnographic classifications have been critically reviewed and historicised, representing a paradigm shift that was demonstrated in *Democracy X*, which opened in April 2004 at the Iziko site at the Castle of Good Hope in Cape Town. This exhibition, rated in the autumn 2004 issue of the *Royal Academy Magazine* among the top 15

exhibitions around the world, did not concentrate on classifications. Instead, our curators allowed the objects on show to evoke multiple meanings, while the intangible dimensions of language, poetry and song were incorporated into the narrative.

In accordance with the Iziko vision and mission, which is to manage and promote Iziko's unique combination of South Africa's heritage collections, sites and services for the benefit of present and future generations, the Social History Collections Division sees the development of representations of intangible heritage at Iziko in years to come as follows:

- Indigenous knowledge systems and intangible heritage will play a growing part in museum interpretations.
- The intangible dimensions of existing and new collections will be explored and recognized more fully.
- Using new technology, collections that give tangible form to the intangible aspects of culture, such as oral history and music, will be developed.
- With Iziko museums as meeting-places of cultures, living heritage will be embraced and our sites will provide forums for engagement across cultural boundaries.
- As noted above, descendant communities were participants in the development of the rock art exhibition at Iziko SA Museum. This approach is also being pursued at Iziko's Bo-Kaap Museum, where



Figure 3: Women of the Bo-Kaap community in conversation with anthropologist, Gerald Klinghardt, at an event focused on using historical photographs in Iziko collections to elicit memories of the Bo-kaap.

new exhibitions are being developed in partnership with members of the Muslim community who are keepers of their own cultural knowledge and intangible heritage (Fig. 2).

- Iziko will play an advocacy role in emphasizing the importance of preserving intangible heritage for future generations.

Like Iziko's other divisions, its Art Collections Division also believes in the power of the visual to make the intangible tangible. With reference to the relationship of the controversial exhibition of 1996, *Miscast: Negotiating Khoisan History and Material Culture*, at what is now the Iziko South African National Gallery, its director prior to amalgamation emphasised 'that the exhibition and the book were not about 'Bushman', but a critical and visual exploration of the term and the various relationships that gave rise to it¹¹. In line with its new policy of re-imagining arts and culture in the new South Africa, the gallery stimulated and challenged visitors through the Miscast displays and public programmes to rethink the state of Khoi-San studies locally and abroad. It raised critical questions. Who was writing their history? Who was telling their tales? Who spoke on their behalf and claimed the right to represent them? For Marilyn Martin, Director of the SA National Gallery at the time,

.... the exhibition served as a reminder to acknowledge and preserve San rock art as part of our South African heritage. Furthermore, the exhibition allowed the tensions that existed in museums – between what was displayed, how it was displayed, what was in storage and what was available for study purposes – to come to the fore... intended as a visual confrontation of the 'Bushman diorama' at the South African Museum¹².

Concomitantly, though the catalogue published at the time did not use the term 'intangible heritage,' it alerted its readers to the fact that the Bleek and Lloyd archive of 13,000 pages of records contained *the memories of cultures and traditions which were fatally threatened*¹³. Traces of the multiple meanings of recollection were uncovered in the introduction to the catalogue when Skotnes reminded the reader –

...that there is not just one narrative, nor one history, nor even one past, but that our knowledge of other

realities is most severely limited when we limit the formal framework that we choose to employ in understanding them¹⁴.

A more recent partnership art exhibition in 2003 at the Iziko SA National Art Gallery, *Coexistence: Contemporary cultural production in South Africa*, also had an intangible heritage dimension to it. This exhibition examined the state of coexistence as it pertained to the visual arts in general and the gallery's permanent collection in particular. The curator's premise was that the arts were making a significant contribution to social transformation in the country. A subtext of the exhibition was that whereas in the apartheid years many artists were working in the western high art tradition – the majority of them white – raising individual voices in protest through powerful 'resistance art,' some politically-concerned artists now work collectively to contribute to the alleviation of poverty and to promote awareness of HIV/Aids. In the process, artists-initiated projects are harnessing the untapped creative voices of some of the most disadvantaged of the country's citizens.

Sue Williamson's exhibition *Can't forget, Can't remember* involved the viewer in testimonies through the manipulation of imagery and soundtrack whereas William Kentridge's *Shadow Procession* continued to delve into history and memory, producing haunting drawings and videos against which human stories of growth, exploitation, and pain are told¹⁵.

Iziko's Division of Education and Public Programmes, in collaboration with the other three core functions divisions – Art, Natural and Social History Collections – is championing a mind shift from educating the public about research and museum objects as ends in themselves, to the use of research and objects as resources to facilitate learning¹⁶. Through facilitating an awareness of intangible heritage, the division has become increasingly conscious of its importance within a South African nation-building context. In this regard the education programmes at Iziko are informed by knowledge and experience of the struggle for political liberation.

Under apartheid, museums, theatres and galleries were considered to be alien, uninviting, privileged spaces which did little to cater for or attract black and poor audiences. Instead, communities representing these audiences often found themselves to be the subject of scientific and anthropological study. In post-apartheid South Africa, however, this view has been seriously

challenged. The recognition of museums as public spaces of engagement has opened up a range of opportunities for curators, collection managers and educators, amongst others, to confront these challenges afresh. More especially because the discourses around indigenous knowledge systems, and nation-building as the subtext to that, have collectively placed the challenge of engaging the public in a meaningful way at the forefront of debates around access, relevance and the representative nature of museum collections and acquisition practices. In this regard, Iziko, as an African museum of excellence, wishes to be among the leading agencies of change externally and internally in both post-colonial and post-apartheid contexts.

Conclusion

As South Africa enters its second decade of democracy,

awareness of intangible heritage has grown and become more widely acknowledged in museum discourse. A number of local and national museum conferences have addressed this theme, and the forthcoming AFRICOM meeting in Cape Town in October 2006 will again invite engagement on this topic. Acknowledging intangible heritage in South Africa is an integral part of changing perspectives on what constitutes the cultural heritage of the nation. In this context, museums have a vital role to play. Iziko is only in the initial stages of integrating intangible heritage into its exhibitions and public programmes, but a foundation has been laid. Over the next three years Iziko faces the challenge of giving tangible expression to the commitment to focus on intangible heritage throughout its fourteen museums. In this way Iziko will be true to its vision to respect the diverse heritage of all South Africans. 🇷🇵

NOTES

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3. Deacon Harriet, et al, 2003. Legal and Financial Instruments for Safeguarding our Intangible Heritage, p.4. *HSRC paper presented to INCP-RIPC* (Croatia, October 2003).
4. *ibid*, p.7
5. UNESCO, 17 October 2003. *Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/00132525/1325/13254e.pdf>
6. see Bredekamp, Henry C Jatti, 2004. The South African National Oral History and Indigenous Music Programmes in a Decade of Democracy, 1994-2004, *International Congress on Archives, 23 – 29 August 2004* (Vienna, Austria)
7. SAHRA, *Annual Report 2003/2004*, pp.18-23
8. *see Robben Island Annual Report 2003/2004*
9. The greater part of this section contains information generously provided by Dr Patricia Davison, since July 2005, Iziko's Executive Director: Core Functions
10. Personal communication from Patricia Davison,
11. Personal communication from Marilyn Martin, Director: Iziko Art Collections Division
12. *ibid*.
13. Skotnes Pippa (Ed.) 1996. *Miscast: Negotiating the presence of the Bushmen*, (Cape Town: UCT Press) p.23
14. *ibid*
15. Martin, Marilyn 2003. Under the Cultural Microscope: Redefining the National Art Museum in a changing South Africa in Allara, Pamela et al, 2003. *Coexistence: Contemporary cultural production in South Africa*, (Brandeis University) p.19
16. Personal communication from Vivienne Carelse, Director: Iziko Education and Public Programmes Division