SPECIAL CONTRIBUTION

Renewing museum meanings and action with intangible cultural heritage

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In light of the development of a new International Council of Museums (ICOM) Museum Definition, I discuss here the benefits of prioritising intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in museum work, reflecting the values that have driven this process of redefinition and that museum professionals strive to espouse. Indeed, key concepts that have emerged during the process reiterate the importance of ICH – and 'culture' as encompassing 'heritage, memory, and place' (ICOM 2021, 13) – in constituting a main focus of museological activity, a stance that gained solid footing in 2004 with the Seoul Declaration of ICOM on the Intangible Heritage (ICOM 2004). Moreover, emerging concepts signal the need for greater attention to 'diversity,' 'inclusivity' and 'community participation' as features of what can be considered 21st-century, outward-facing and proactive museum practice (ICOM 2021, 21–26).

With its deep relations to material culture and place, ICH can be understood as cultural traditions, practices and expressions, often shared and safeguarded in cultural communities and social groups, as well as historical and cultural knowledge, memories and stories that are also passed on and kept alive by people. ICH is living and, therefore, contemporary, shaped by its keepers in relationship to economic, political, sociocultural and ecological forces of the past through the present. As such, prioritising living heritage offers crucial opportunities to reframe museum approaches to community engagement with ethics and equity at the fore, where culture and knowledge keepers are centred as the authorities of their heritage through collaborative efforts. In turn, inclusivity, representation and community involvement can be deepened in more meaningful and lasting ways.

Such ideals are worth striving for in this time of undeniable challenge. As the Covid-19 pandemic carries on, we see the centuries-deep fault lines of social and economic inequality – on a global scale – so clearly revealed in its wake (with many solutions also staring us in the face). Wealth and political power, in long-standing concert, are gripped by an increasingly concentrated few, many of whom are busy pilfering resources and weakening democratic structures at a troubling speed. The alarm bells warning of mounting ecological crises, already affecting populations across the world, have been largely ignored, especially by the entities – e.g. corporations,

industries and governments – that can contribute most to mitigating them. Whether this is too grim an outlook or not, there is no denying that radical changes need to be made, where the (continued) fight against these ranging, yet interconnected, injustices is also unfolding within museums.

According to a recent *Trends Watch*, the annual report of the Center for the Future of Museums of the American Alliance of Museums, it is forecasted that 'systemic inequalities of wealth and power' will continue to grow, constituting an inescapable problem facing societies across the world and, thereby, museums in service to them (Merritt 2021, 6). Museum professionals are asked to assess how their institutions 'profit from and perpetuate these inequalities' and 'support or challenge structural inequalities in society' (Merritt 2021, 6), actions that most affect marginalised and oppressed communities. In terms of practice, they are encouraged to devise ways in which assets and power be 'shared/given/returned with those who are excluded', which includes an assessment of how museum 'collections, exhibitions, and research reflect marginalized communities' to enrich their representation (Merritt 2021, 6–12).

Despite the controversy, these concerns were evident in the revamped definition proposed by ICOM for consideration in 2019, in which 'social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing' were flagged as high-priority museum causes. In addition, guaranteeing 'equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people' and working 'in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world' were presented as cornerstones of 21st-century museum practice (see Adams 2019).

Although rising and urgent, such concerns are not necessarily new within the museum field. Decades-long movements for socially and politically engaged action have been directed outwards – to the public and with local communities – and inwards – to decolonising institutional structures, professional mindsets and methods – opening decision-making pipelines that have long been rusted with exclusivity. Such advancements reflect an increased institutional and professional reflexivity and adherence to ethics and equity, where those whose heritages have been extracted and recontextualised for centuries without consent and involvement, or neglected altogether, are

guiding museological processes.

For example, the Australian Museums and Galleries Association's 10-year plan, *First Peoples: A Roadmap for Enhanced Engagement in Museums and Galleries*, is based on a sector-wide survey that examined activities geared towards enriching Indigenous representation and participation that, it notes, have generally 'stalled' over past years (Janke 2018, 5). To reinvigorate efforts, the *Roadmap* essentially calls for the bolstered commitment of time, people power and space that is needed for *more* 'exhibitions that are curated by Indigenous people', 'public programs developed and delivered by Indigenous people' and 'collaborative projects between Indigenous communities and museums and galleries', in addition to increased employment of Indigenous professionals and their involvement on decision-making boards (Janke 2018, 15). While ICH could have featured more prominently, the *Roadmap* acknowledges the importance of Indigenous knowledge systems and recommends 'programs for traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions to be shared', particularly between elders and young people (Janke 2018, 33). It also suggests enhanced support for Indigenous Australians' own safeguarding frameworks and approaches in source contexts, a rightful path to take in forging a more ethical and equitable – and thus decolonised – heritage sector (Janke 2018, 35). These calls echo scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith's framing of decolonisation, in that it

> does not mean and has not meant a total rejection of all theory or research or Western knowledge. Rather, it is about centering our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory from our own perspectives and for our own purposes. (Smith 2012, 41)

Here, I must acknowledge the museums, heritage organisations and cultural centres founded and led by cultural communities and social groups for many decades now, in urban, suburban and rural locations around the globe. Though not without challenge, these are places in which community self-determination and representation are facilitated on communities' terms, and where heritage processes and underlying decision-making are 'decolonised' from the start (Kreps 2003). As I write this in Baltimore, Maryland, I think of the Baltimore American Indian Center, initiated by Lumbee community leaders in the late 1960s. Serving the city's Native American

communities' social and cultural needs, activities focus also on the safeguarding of cultural knowledge and living traditions, and their transmission to younger community members (Minner 2017).

Furthermore, the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum, as it is now known, was first established in a downtown storefront in 1983 by the educators Dr. Elmer and Joanne Martin. Seeking to uplift Baltimore's Black community and empower young people, the museum 'resist[s] the pressure to "pretty up" Black history and not tell the truth of struggle, survival, and accomplishment' (Cooks 2018, 94; see also Wood 2009). In a series of diorama exhibits, such as of the middle Passage, depicting in detail the dehumanising horrors of enslavement, prominent African Americans are spotlighted for their extraordinary fights for justice and equality, underscoring the racist, White supremacist currents of US and global history in the present. The exhibit on lynching, of which its 'very sensitive and potentially disturbing scenes' are forewarned, spans a not-so-distant past, ending with the 1998 lynching of James Byrd Jr. in Texas (Martin and Martin n.d.). Above the diorama depicting the devastatingly brutal lynching of Hayes and Mary Turner (and their unborn child) in 1918 Georgia, a sign states:

> The definite message the lynching exhibit sends is that many people of all colors saw lynching as a blot on America's claim as a Judeo-Christian, democratic, and civilized nation and fought against it. They waged holy war against lynching, through marches, protest demonstrations, literature, art, organizational unity, the ministry, lectures, politics, donations to the cause, and even individual organized self-defense. Identify with the victims and martyrs and never forget them. But do not get bitter or despondent over what they endured. Get angry over the oppression that Black people and other oppressed people are still suffering today; and put yourself in a position to resist now as your ancestors did back in the day when lynching was a national pastime as popular as baseball games and circuses. (Martin and Martin n.d.)

Much should continue to be learned from community-led heritage work of all kinds, especially with respect to living heritage and the unswerving lessons it holds for today. Brought to light are home-grown approaches to mobilising heritage for contemporary meaning-making, activism and change by the experts themselves, as based

on their agendas and in response to the present-day problems most in need of solutions.

Centring intangible cultural heritage

As stated, 'diversity', 'inclusivity' and 'community participation' are underlying concepts in the formulation of a new museum definition, undoubtedly reflecting concerns about our shared future and the roles museums play in its betterment. They are also woven together: a commitment to bolstering community participation in museum activity is inclusive practice, fostering the representation of a greater diversity of people – such as in terms of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, class, religion, geography, and intersections thereof – and their heritages and perspectives. In taking these concepts seriously, and to ground any vagueness they may present, they prompt taking concrete steps, such as in addressing the deeply entrenched inequalities affecting museum communities worldwide, as the aforementioned definitions and road maps imply.

One step is for institutions benefitting from sizeable resources to increase support of community-based heritage organisations and programming, uplifting the authoritative voices of people whose heritages continue to be overlooked or outright erased. Such support can be financial or may comprise other, amplifying resources, such as people power, technological aid, venues and connecting source community organisations to wider audiences, raising greater awareness of them and their pursuits. Structurally, support can take the form of partnerships and collaborations, opportunities for which, as stressed here, can be heightened when focusing on ICH.

Because people embody ICH, as its experts and owners, its prioritisation – in heritage institutions and programming of all sorts – casts in high relief the need to centre them in all related processes. That is, to not centre, let alone involve, ICH communities would be wholly unethical, upholding the destructive legacies of colonial heritage practice and the structural inequities that have underpinned it for so long. In the museological context, prioritising ICH means uplifting living, contemporary heritage in museum missions and functions, such as collections development (including archives), curation and interpretation, as well as educational, audience-broadening and relationship-building outreach.

Opportunities, then, are opened for ICH keepers to steer museum programming, such as exhibitions, online and in-person events and presentations, and 'off-site' programming in source community contexts, to outline some examples. In essence, centring ICH keepers serves to decentre the long-held authority of museums, which has impeded community involvement in museum operations and programming. It urges a levelling of the heritage playing field, where decision-making is fully shared so as to build ethical and equitable collaborations founded on respect and trust. As with 'diversity' and 'inclusion', though, 'ethics' and 'equity', too, could remain lofty principles, or mere buzzwords, if not applied to the actual shaping of collaborative heritage practice.

Focusing on ICH offers crucial opportunities for museum professionals to meet people where they are, out in the places and spaces important to them and their heritage. These are chances to listen to and learn how possible collaborations can help meet community aims, to deepen understandings of their heritage, and to discuss together how its meanings and messages can affect wider audiences and bring about desired change. To enact ethical principles is to recognise communities' expertise and uphold their agendas as collaborators, dedicating the time and space required for their leadership in subsequent steps. In striving for equity, museum professionals play supportive roles, guided by community partners on how to best put to use their professional expertise and skills, including the institutional resources that, traditionally, they have been privileged to manage. Of course, facilitating community participation is not immune to problems, especially logistical, and mistakes – often with good intention – can be made. Yet, ethical and equitable collaboration entails transparent conversation and negotiation, in which institutional agendas and constraints are honestly disclosed, and expectations thereby discussed. As such, challenges may be weathered with greater resilience, and importantly, relationships have a stronger chance at lasting.

At the least, ICOM's Museum Definition presents parameters that shape a category of institutions and organisations operating in a wide range of economic, political, sociocultural and environmental contexts, and the missions and functions they have most in common. At most, it inspires action, spurring a growth of collaborative museum efforts that confront the mounting injustices of today, including the structural inequities affecting museum communities – and, thus, museums – across the world. In fulfilling renewed visions of what museums can and should be, raising ICH to a higher level of institutional priority just about demands collaborative practice, where culture keepers are uplifted in sharing their heritage and the vital messages it holds for this day and the next – in their words and on their terms.

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