

Transforming representations of Intangible Heritage at Iziko Museums, SA

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<http://www.museums.org.za/iziko/izihome.html>

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"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)

Down south in Africa, transformation in the heritage sector of post-apartheid South Africa is still in its transitional phase. However, over the past decade of democratic government, the heritage fraternity has assisted government to make significant strides in the formulation of policies and in the creation or re-imagining of heritage institutions inherited from earlier eras. Within this context, the paper begins with a brief overview of the creation of post-apartheid national heritage institutions in South Africa and the current status of intangible heritage on the state's transformation agenda after a Decade of Democracy.

One of these institutions is the amalgamated Iziko national museums of Cape Town, whose representations of various domains of expressions of intangible heritage from Cape to Cairo and beyond is the focus of the third part of this contribution to this session of ICME at ICOM 2004 here in Seoul.

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

An outsider's understanding of the South African discourse on transformation in the heritage sector today presupposes some knowledge of basic official policy documents like the White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage, which preceded the passing of a series of heritage related Acts of Parliament towards the end of the 1990s. The White Paper, tabled by the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology finally in 1996, acknowledged 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 structure."¹

It further recognized the potential of those museums classified as Declared Cultural Institutions in 1969 and vital role they could play in the development of amongst others heritage if the then Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology (DACST) would continue with funding these institutions. The White Paper noted however that the Declared Cultural Institutions were merely *national* in the sense that they were budgeted for by the Department 'because of *ad hoc* decisions made in the past, but they are not at all of "national" status in terms of their collections or the services they provide.'² The White Paper regarded some provincial aided and municipal funded museums, with no funding from the national treasury, to be even more national in this regard. Thus, it suggested that the Declared Institutions 'be evaluated according to agreed criteria of what constitutes "national" ' and, in the absence of a coherent national museums policy, called "for transformation through a systematic process of restructuring and rationalization."³ This call led, as will be explained later, to the establishment of *inter alia* the establishment of Iziko Museums and its sister institution, the Northern Flagship [Museums] Institution in Pretoria.

But not only the declared museum institutions of the Old Order suffered from an image problem in their sector. The national institution of memory and knowledge – the National Archives of South Africa – were not even acknowledged or mentioned in the White Paper as a heritage institution. The new National Archives Act of 1996 did however "recognise the importance of intangible heritage forms such as oral history."⁴

With regard to transformation of heritage resources management the White Paper called primarily for, firstly, a correction of the notion *national monument* in the South African context: "National monuments should not be seen in isolation, but should be identified in a systematic programme for "cultural mapping". Communities should be encouraged to locate and

mark the heritage sites important to their identity.⁵ Secondly, it suggested that the then Cape Town-based National Monuments Council be replaced as a statutory body by the National Heritage Council (NHC) still with its headquarters in the Mother City, but with its War Graves Division located in Pretoria. The ultimate legislative framework of 2000, which replaced the National Monuments Council with a Council for what is now known as the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA), made however provision for a totally different institution as what was envisaged by the White Paper.⁶

The White Paper of 1996 also suggested that the then Geographical Place Names Division of the DACST with its ministerial appointed Committee should also fall under this Council, with a focus on "terminological corrections [a]s part of the process of transformation towards democratic decision-making".⁷

The White Paper's vision of the NHC was that of an overarching statutory body with a range of tasks to advance effectively and efficiently transformation of the heritage landscape in South Africa. However, when the National Heritage Council Act was ultimately passed three years later, in 1999, with its provisions only implemented in 2003 the heritage sector was already undergoing considerable change at symbolic text level. That year a second call for nominations was made by DACST to the South African public for the appointment of new Councils by the national Minister in terms of the Cultural

Institutions Act of 1998.⁸ It was also this Act which brought Iziko Museums and the Northern Flagship Institution into being, whereas the National Heritage Resources Act of 1999 made provision for the termination of the National Monuments Council (and establishment of the South African Heritage Resources Agency [SAHRA] and Provincial Heritage Resources Authorities [PHRAs]), The call for nominations after the first Councils' three years term ended in 2003, coincided with a first call for nominations of members to the *first* National Heritage Council. It should therefore not be too surprising that the NHC Act of 1999 and its implementation in only 2003 differed significantly from the proposals contained in the White Paper of 1996.⁹

The status of intangible heritage on the South African transformation agenda after a Decade of Democracy

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 symbolism 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 heritage."¹⁰

Living and/or intangible heritage is understood as *in-tangible*, meaning it is part of the tangible. The former defines the latter; in the tangible is the intangible. Like for instance, cultural landscapes have spiritual significance. But the intangible may also be totally independent of the tangible heritage. 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 last year. 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.¹¹

At the same time of the meeting in Croatia, UNESCO adopted in its "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage" a similar definition.¹²

In its own right the Ministry and its DACST initiated, at the turn of the century, in collaboration with particularly the National Archives of South Africa a National Indigenous Music and Oral History Programme that made the promotion of living heritage a prime objective.¹³ Within the same context of a transformation agenda the SAHRA had become by virtue of its enabling legislation a leading heritage institution in the promotion of living and intangible heritage the past three years.¹⁴ In symbolic texts of the Robben Island Museum the intangible feature prominently because of its intangible message about the spirit of the place representing "the indestructibility of the spirit of resistance against colonialism, injustice and oppression" as is evident in its latest Annual Report. In the same spirit though managed differently because of its context, the Nelson Mandela Museum, spread across three historical sites (Mveso, Qunu and the Bunga Building in Umtata), have also since its opening in February 2002 a strong inclination towards promoting living and intangible heritage.

The making of Iziko, 1999-2004

Iziko Museums is peculiarly different from all the national heritage institutions mentioned above. In 1995, in an initiative to create policies and structures in post-apartheid South Africa, the national ministry of Arts, Culture, Technology and Science entered into a consultative process with stakeholders in the fields for arts, culture and heritage. Museums, viewed as 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 provisions 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, declared 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, the Michaelis Collection in the Old Town Hall on Green Market Square, the South African National Gallery in the Old Company's Garden, the South African Cultural History Museum next to Parliament and the William Fehr Collection at the Castle of Good Hope. These had formerly 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.

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 purpose management of the fifteen museums are 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 of Iziko is a process that is being continued under the present Council inaugurated in May 2003, and the incumbent CEO appointed in November 2002. Also at curatorial level the amalgamated institution have begun with a transformation process of exhibitions and an 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."

Collection and Recollection: Intangible heritage dimension of Iziko collections and education

Conventionally Iziko Museums in Cape Town tended, like all museums of an earlier era, to reduce the meanings of objects in its heritage collections to a limited set of interpretations imposed by curators. Going back to the founding of the South African Museum which started in 1825 in what is now the Cape Town campus of the National Library of South Africa at the bottom of the Old Company's Garden, and its accession records dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, Iziko Social History collections are among the earliest heritage collections in South Africa.¹⁵

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 was reduced to tradition.

Research and field collecting were aimed at building up systematic collections of artifacts and documented with information from selected informants. In museum exhibitions, material culture was treated as an end in itself, with representative artifacts 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 foregrounded.

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. Previously ignored voices are being given space in new exhibitions such as *Qe. The Power of Rock Art*, which replaced in December 2003 the dated permanent "Bushman" rock paintings exhibition. This re-imagined display of authentic original San rock art containing *inter alia* the image in the centre of South Africa's new national Coat of Arms represents a unique opportunity for understanding intangible heritage. Furthermore, they represent a link between belief systems and age-old systems and age-old practices and the expression of these images.¹⁶

Ethnographic classifications have been critically reviewed and historicised, representing a paradigm shift that is demonstrated in Democracy X, which opened in April this year 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 foreground classification. Instead, our curators allowed the objects on exhibit to evoke multiple meanings while intangible dimensions of language, poetry and song were incorporated into the narrative.

In accordance with the Iziko vision and also mission - which states the institution's core business being 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.
- With the facilitation of particularly 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-place of cultures, living heritage will be embraced and our sites will provide forums for engagement across cultural boundaries.
- As is already experimented with the descendant communities of the rock art representations at Iziko SA Museum and that which is beginning to happen at Iziko's Bo-Kaap Museum, new exhibitions will be developed in partnership with communities who are keepers of cultural knowledge and intangible heritage.
- 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, and the linguist Lucy Lloyd ethnographic work of memories on the /Xam and !Kung San, 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 it.'¹⁷ Concomitantly, though the catalogue published at the time did not use the term intangible heritage, alerted its readers nonetheless that the Bleek and Lloyd archive of 1300 pages of record contained 'the memories of cultures and traditions which were fatally threatened'¹⁸ Traces of the multiple meaning of recollection are 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 them.*¹⁹

A more recent partnership art exhibition of 2003 at the Gallery, *Coexistence: Contemporary cultural production in South Africa*, also had an intangible heritage dimension to it. Its Sue Williamson's *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 told.'²⁰

Iziko's Division of Education and Public Programmes is championing in collaboration with the other three core functions divisions – Art, Natural and Social History Collections – 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 learning.²¹ In respect of 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 Division's programmes is by and large informed by a liberatory struggle knowledge and experience. 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 opened up a range of opportunities for curators, collection managers and educators, amongst others, to confront these challenges afresh. More especially because the discourse 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 representivity of museum collections and acquisition practices. In this regard Iziko as an African museum of excellence, wishes to be among the leading agencies of charge externally and internally in both post colonial and post-apartheid contexts.

Conclusion

Transformation of intangible heritage representations has only but started at Iziko as we are about to enter the second decade of democracy as an integral part of a nation in transition. After ICOM 2004 in Seoul, Iziko faces the challenge to realize tangibly over the next three years the wishes of the Social History Collections Division listed in this paper as a commitment to the advancement of intangible heritage representations of the entire institution comprising of fifteen museums of national significance in South Africa.

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Notes

¹ DACST (Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology), 4 June 1996: *White Paper*, Pretoria.http://www.dac.gov.za/legislation_policies/white_paper_on_arts_culture_heritage.html, p.29

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*, p. 30

⁴ Harriet Deacon *et al*, *Protecting our Cultural Capital: a research plan for the heritage sector* (Cape Town: HSRC Publishers, 2003), p. 13

⁵ *White Paper*, p.31

⁶ 'The South African National Heritage Resources Act No. 25 of 1999 (NHRA)', *Republic of South Africa Government Gazette*, vol. 406, no. 19974 (Cape Town, 28 April 1999) http://www.dac.gov.za/legislation_policies/acts/Orb~National_Heritage_Resources_Act.htm

⁷ *White Paper*, p. 32

⁸ *Republic of South Africa Government Gazette*, 'Cultural Institutions Act, 1998' www.dac.gov.za/legislation_policies/acts/Orb~Cultural_Institutions_Act.htm and the 'Cultural Laws Second Amendment Act, 2001' www.dac.gov.za/legislation_policies/acts/Orb~Cultural_Laws_Second_Amendment_Act.htm

⁹ 'National Heritage Council Act No. 11, 1999', *Republic of South Africa Government Gazette*, vol. 406, no.1996 (Cape Town, 23 April 1999) See also *Sunday Times*, 2 February 2003

¹⁰ Harriet Deacon *et al*, 'Legal and Financial Instruments for Safeguarding our Intangible Heritage' HSRC Paper presented to INCP-RIPC, Croatia, October 2003, p.4

¹¹ *ibid*, p. 7

¹² UNESCO, 17 October 2003: 'Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage' <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/00132525/1325/13254e.pdf>

¹³ see Henry C Jatti Bredekamp, '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

¹⁴ *SAHRA Annual Report 2003/2004*, pp.18-23

¹⁵ The greater part of this section contains information generously provided by Dr Patricia Davison, Director: Iziko Social History Collections,

¹⁶ Personal communication of Dr Michael Cluver, Director: Iziko Property Services

¹⁷ Personal communication of Marilyn Martin, Director: Iziko Art Collections Division

¹⁸ Pippa Skotnes (Ed.), *Miscast: Negotiating the presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1996), p. 23

¹⁹ *ibid*

20 Marilyn Martin, 'Under the Cultural Microscope: Redefining the National Art Museum in a changing South Africa' in Pamela Allara *et al*, *Coexistence: Contemporary cultural production in South Africa* (Brandeis University, 2003), p. 19

21 Personal communication of Vivienne Carelse, Director: Iziko Education and Public Programmes Division

ICME - International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography

<http://icme.icom.museum>

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