

# Intangible Cultural Heritage: A New Universal Museological Discourse?

By

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## Introduction

‘Museums and Universal Heritage’ was the theme of the General Conference of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) that took place in Vienna from the 19<sup>th</sup> until the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 2007. Within this broad theme, the International Committee for Museums of Ethnography (ICME) invited papers on the subject of ‘Past, Present and Future Ethnographic Approaches to Universality’. In this context, I deemed that my doctoral research on the interpretations of the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in contemporary museology would be of particular relevance to the theme of the conference. As such, I presented the following paper that is focused on the concept of ICH and its potential to constitute a new universal heritage discourse. Since the adoption of the *2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH* by UNESCO, this subject has been widely debated. ICOM has also taken part in discussions surrounding ICH with the *2002 Shanghai Charter* and the *2004 General Conference* in Seoul on the subject of museums and intangible heritage. Drawing on the above, the aim of this paper is to assess if ICH with its particular emphasis on the recognition of cultural diversity and living culture can suggest a new ethnographic approach to universality.

Over the last hundred years, ethnographic museums have served different narratives and universal discourses. In the 16th and 17th centuries, cabinets of curiosities presented ethnographic objects as curios with the aim to create a microcosm that would enable European princes and scholars to better understand the world around them. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the first European museums were founded within the context of the 'Age of Reason'. In them, ethnographic artefacts were displayed in an effort to create a universal narrative of man and his environment. In the same context, colonial museums were established through the 19th and 20th century in European cities and their colonial capitals. Ethnographic artefacts were displayed along with products from the colonies to celebrate the greatness of their empires and to support a universal discourse of imperial strength and dominance. In the early 20th century, the emergence of the 'art negre' and 'primitivism' in modern art led to the appreciation of the aesthetic dimensions of ethnographic artefacts. As such, ethnographic objects were to be admired principally for their beauty. This aesthetic approach, also called 'aesthetic universalism' provided an inclusive appreciation for artistic expressions around the world.

While the above have constituted some of the past and present approaches to universality, in this paper, I examine how the emerging discourse on ICH can potentially suggest a new approach to the subject. In this sense, my argument is that ICH through its different translations at institutional, academic and operational levels offers a new perspective to Eurocentric understanding of cultural heritage and invites alternative approaches to ethnographic museum-work. In the course of this paper, firstly, I analyse UNESCO's approach to universalism as embodied in its policy *vis-à-vis* the conceptualisation of tangible and intangible heritage. I then present some preliminary findings from the fieldwork that I conducted at five museums in the period July 2006 – May 2007. These are the Horniman Museum in London, the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre in Port Vila and the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington. Finally, since my research is in progress, I only draw some first conclusions so as to assess the potential of ICH to constitute a new universal heritage discourse and reinvent museum-work.

### **UNESCO's Heritage Universalism**

Initial conceptualisations of universal cultural heritage by UNESCO resulted in the *1972 World Heritage Convention*. Since then, the *World Heritage Convention* has been influential in terms of sensitising governments towards the protection of monuments and sites. Moreover, it has been responsible for the establishment of the *World Heritage List* and the *World Heritage Centre*, which constitute one of the most successful fields of action of UNESCO. Despite all that, however, UNESCO's conceptualisation of universal heritage has been criticised as "Eurocentric and excluding" (Londres-Fonseca 2002), because it is primarily focused on monuments and sites and ignores a large part of cultural manifestations that inform peoples' identity around the world.

The emergence of ICH within UNESCO in the 1990s has been heralded as a universal post-colonial heritage discourse, because it extends beyond the material objectification of cultural heritage to include wider processes and practices that constitute peoples' cultural identity. As such, the *2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH* is a new framework that acknowledges the diversity of cultural manifestations as constituent of a universal heritage discourse. In this sense, a shift is made from the 'material' to the 'living' aspects of cultural heritage; from the monuments, sites and objects to the people and the practicing communities.

### **Fieldwork: An Ethnographic Approach.**

In my research I trace this shift in cultural heritage conceptualisations through the different interpretations of the concept of ICH in the practice of five museums. In order to do this I follow the method of 'cross-cultural' and 'comparative' museology argued by Christina Kreps that is the "systematic study and comparison of museological forms and behaviour in diverse cultural settings" (2003: 4). My aim is to conduct an ethnography of the five museum spaces, mainly through participant observation and semi-structured interviews,

that will permit me to assess the different negotiations of ICH and how this is translated in museum-work.

### *The Horniman Museum*

My first case-study is the Horniman Museum (HM), which is among the oldest ethnographic museums. It opened as a public institution run by the London City Council in 1901. Prior to that and since 1894, it operated as the *Surrey House Museum*, the private museum of Frederick Horniman, tea merchant and collector. Situated in Forest Hill, South-East London, the HM is nowadays an independent museum funded by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). After its recent renovation in 2002 it houses, as it did in the past, not only ethnographic, but also natural history collections and an aquarium. The HM is not primarily concerned with the aesthetic dimensions of collections, but rather with their potential to educate people about “the World and its different cultures” (HM 2006).

More precisely, from the fieldwork that I conducted in 2006-2007, it seems that ICH is conceptualised as a powerful interpretative tool for collections. This is made evident for example, in the multilayered interpretation of the ‘African Worlds’ exhibition. This exhibition presents the art and culture of Africa “through the eyes of artists, diviners, anthropologists, drummers and exiles. It does not present one, but the many different Africas...” (introductory label, HM 2002). As such, the *Bwa Plank Masks* from Burkina Faso are explained both from the perspective of Poboye Konate, a local artist and that of an anthropologist.

Moreover, ICH has also been related to the collaboration with source and diaspora communities. In this context, the HM invites indigenous artists to work in the museum and explain the meanings and symbolisms of their work. For example, in one of my visits in October 2006, I had the chance to see and meet Oswald Hussein, a Guyanese artist in residence, who had been invited by the HM to make sculptures and talk about their meanings within the context of the temporary exhibition ‘Amazon to Caribbean: Early Peoples of the Rainforest’ curated by Dr Hassan Arero.

### The Musée du Quai Branly

The Musée du Quai Branly (MQB) opened in June 2006 with the mission to “see justice rendered to non-European cultures” (Chirac 2006: 6). It is the brainchild of France’s former President, Jacques Chirac and its permanent collections are compiled of artefacts previously belonging to the *Musée de l’Homme* and the *Musée National Des Arts D’Afrique et D’Océanie*. My particular interest in the MQB lies in the fact that objects are presented as ‘art’. In this sense, the MQB is an ethnographic museum with a strong aesthetic orientation. It stands for the French approach to ‘aesthetic universalism’, whereby despite their differences all cultures share a common ‘aesthetic’ vocabulary.

What emerges from my fieldwork at the MQB is that ICH is negotiated as an aesthetic context for collections, a visual or oral perfume either as audiovisual installations or as performances taking place in the museum’s theatre. As such, ICH is translated as the anthropological perspective expressed in the video and multimedia programmes in the mezzanine, such as the recitation of myths by Native Americans, performances of Chinese puppet theatre and war practices in Papua New Guinea. Also it is related to live performances that take place in the Claude Levi-Strauss Theatre. One such event was the *Bwaba Masks Ceremony* with practitioners from Burkina Faso. However, such performances raise several concerns because they underline the institutional separation between living culture presented in the theatre and dead objects presented in the exhibition.

### The National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa

My third case study is the National Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) which opened in 1998. I am particularly interested in this museum because of its bicultural identity, both Maori and Pakeha, which has resulted in several bicultural programmes and partnerships for the interpretation of collections through indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions and beliefs.

From the fieldwork that I conducted last April in Te Papa, ICH is firstly related to Maori living culture that represents the second party to the museum's bicultural identity. Inside the museum, Te Papa's biculturalism is clearly present in the labels that are written in both Maori and English. ICH is also embodied in the physical space of the *marae*, Te Papa's Maori Meeting House that features a variety of cultural activities, performances and events, such as the traditional Maori singing (*waiata*) taking place every week. However, although traditionally there is a certain protocol relating to what takes place in a *marae*, Te Papa's meeting house keeping up with the social and cultural changes taking place in New Zealand also features non-Maori performances. Within the spirit of Te Papa's biculturalism, this demonstrates how different cultural expressions can be performed in the same place.

In terms of making exhibitions, ICH has been related to the traditional Maori knowledge systems that have replaced the authoritative voice of the curator/anthropologist. In this sense, indigenous Maori perspectives are in dialogue with academic scholarship and research inspired by Western epistemologies. Finally, ICH is also present in the community galleries that have a strong social history approach and where representatives of NZ's immigrant communities present their personal stories and culture. This gallery demonstrates Te Papa's willingness to acknowledge the country's rich multicultural identity, but at the same time reveals the weaknesses of biculturalism that fails to recognise New Zealanders that are neither of Maori, nor of English descent.

### *The Vanuatu Cultural Centre*

The Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) was founded in the 1950s after English and French initiatives, when the country was still known as New Hebrides. After the country's Independence, plans were made for the museum's renovation and in 1995 it moved to the new, purpose built edifice in which it is currently housed. Today it is primarily known for its focus on the country's rich and vibrant living culture that reveals alternative conceptualisations of cultural heritage focused on oral expressions and traditional beliefs rather than the materiality of artefacts. The VCC does not house only collections of objects,

but also of recorded performances and traditional practices. As such, the sustainability of living culture and ICH becomes the focus of museum-work.

More precisely, within the VCC ICH is related to the notion of *Kastom* that refers to contemporary practices stemming from the pre-colonial past. In this sense, one of the top priorities of the museum is to record these practices. This is achieved through the Fieldworkers' Programme, whereby ni-Vanuatu volunteers record the culture and traditions of the different islands. The participation of the local, ni-Vanuatu community in museum-work that is taking place in the VCC is exemplary and has been a model for other museums and cultural institutions in the Pacific, such as Te Papa in New Zealand (Mahina 2006) and the Tjibaoui Cultural Centre in New Caledonia (Kasarherou 2007). The philosophy of the Fieldworkers' Programme is simple. Each year a theme is chosen and male and female volunteers that have been selected by their tribes are invited to conduct research on it. These volunteers have previously been trained by museum staff in documentation and recording techniques and conduct research in their regions on the chosen topic throughout the year. The recordings that they make are kept with restricted access in the 'Tabu Room'. Often they are used for educational purposes. In this sense, the museum's conceptualisation of ICH is not related to the interpretation of collections, but primarily to the sustainability of *Kastom* and the continuation of tradition.

#### *The National Museum of the American Indian*

My final case study is the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) in Washington, DC. The NMAI opened in 2004 as part of the Smithsonian Institution. According to Rick West, the museum's director, the NMAI is not only about beautiful objects, it is also about the intangible that surrounds them. As such, it is not only a place for storing collections, but a lively cultural centre where native groups and communities interact and live their culture.

What emerges from my fieldwork in the NMAI is that ICH is mainly conceptualised as the native voice that directs the museology of the place. This voice is not only the voice of

indigenous peoples from the past, but of their living descendants. In this sense, the opening exhibitions, 'Our Lives', 'Our Peoples' and 'Our Universe' represent 24 tribes of the Western hemisphere. These exhibitions narrate the stories of different tribes through the voices of both museum, but also community curators. As such, the NMAI is a living museum that celebrates the past and present achievements of native peoples and their culture. Thus, ICH is not only translated in terms of the rich cultural performances, but also as the continuation and 'survivance' of the native past into the future.

### **Preliminary conclusions: ICH as a new universal museological discourse**

To conclude, several traits of ICH as a universal museological discourse could be summed up. In terms of understanding and interpreting artefacts, ICH is conceptualised as a potent educational and aesthetic tool alluding to the wider meaning and symbolism of ethnographic collections. ICH is also interpreted in terms of partnerships and collaborations with indigenous and diaspora communities. As such, it challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies and stands for the inclusion and presentation of traditional knowledge systems in museum processes. Moreover, ICH refers to the idea of living culture, not as a dead relic from the past, but as continuing and evolving in the future. In this sense, cultural performances while rooted in tradition are at the same time influenced by contemporary cultural trends, something which is particularly clear at the events taking place at the NMAI. Furthermore, ICH invites a story rather than an object driven approach to exhibition making. As such, new materials in the form of audiovisual recordings are used for creating stories and narratives. Therefore, museums are invited to adopt more inclusive collecting policies catering not only for artefacts, but also for living culture.

Although it is still too soon to tell whether this new global discourse will have transformative effects, the interest with which museums around the world incorporate it into their practice reveals their willingness to undertake new roles and responsibilities *vis-à-vis* the curation of living culture. In this sense, the fundamental contribution of ICH as a new ethnographic approach to universality is that drawing on the respect for the world's cultural diversity it challenges ethnographic museums to establish profound and long-

lasting relations with extra-museum communities and make cultural representations that reflect not only artefacts, but real people and their lives.

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