

Grasping the intangible

How should museums document intangible heritage?

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Abstract:

Museums are being promoted by ICOM as guardians of intangible heritage. What sense does this make, if any, and what is the impact on documentation practice?

In recent years ICOM has been encouraging moves to broaden the notion of cultural heritage to include intangible as well as tangible heritage. The theme of the ICOM General Conference in 2004 in Seoul, Korea - Intangible Heritage – clearly demonstrated ICOM's strategic interest in intangible heritage, and the ICOM mission statement now reflects this extended commitment to "the conservation, continuation and communication to society of the world's natural and cultural heritage, present and future, tangible and intangible."

Traditionally, museums have been concerned primarily with collections of physical objects –the “material evidence of people and their environment”, as the ICOM definition used to read. Current documentation standards and practice have been conceived and carefully developed over many years on the basis of this assumption. The extension of the museum's mission to include intangible heritage represents a radical change of direction, one that could – if it is taken seriously – have a profound impact on all aspects of museum activity, not least on documentation practice. How can museums come to terms with this revolution? What does “intangible heritage” mean exactly? and how do you go about conserving and documenting it? This paper aims to clarify the issues and to offer some ideas on how to get a grasp on the intangible.

Defining the intangible

The idea of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) had already been in the air for some years when in 2003 UNESCO adopted the Convention on the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.¹ The stated aims of the convention are:

- (a) to safeguard the² intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) to ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned;
- (c) to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof;
- (d) to provide for international cooperation and assistance.

The UNESCO Convention defines intangible heritage as

...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity...

This definition is generally understood to *require* the following criteria:

- *Auto-determination* (communities and groups define their own ICH)
- *Transmission* (manifestations and practices are transmitted from one generation to the next)
- *Constitutive of identity* (the expressions must reflect a strong sense of identity)
- *Living and viable* (expressions of ICH must be actively pursued, in constant transformation and have a good chance of remaining so).

The Convention lists the following examples of domains of ICH:

- (a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) performing arts;
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- (e) traditional craftsmanship.³

A few examples of ICH inscribed on the UNESCO “Representative List” can help to give a more precise idea of the intended scope of the UNESCO convention.

1. The Al-Sirah Al-Hilaliyyah Epic, Egypt. Inscribed in 2008
2. The Tango, Argentina and Uruguay. Inscribed in 2009
3. Lacemaking in Croatia. Inscribed in 2009
4. Georgian Polyphonic Singing. Inscribed in 2008
5. The “Silbo Gomero” whistled language of the island of La Gomera,. Inscribed in 2009
6. The Andean Cosmvision of the Kallawaya, Bolivia. Inscribed in 2008

It is worth underlining that the UNESCO definition of ICH is quite restrictive and does not cover everything that might be considered, in other contexts, as “intangible heritage”. The criteria listed above effectively rule out, for example, manifestations or performances of contemporary art, particularly if created by an individual rather than a community, revivals of traditional practices that are no longer transmitted, and practices that are not consciously recognised as forming part of a tradition.⁴

The UNESCO definition of ICH thus appears oriented towards protecting particular traditional forms of ICH and is perhaps not intended to be read as a definition of intangible heritage *per se*. This has led some commentators to suggest that UNESCO’s approach to ICH is motivated as much by political considerations as by scientific and intellectual concerns:

The concept of ICH is not based on a scientific approach, defining a new objective, but forms part of a political initiative linked to a redefinition of the field of international heritage. The UNESCO conventions are a response to the demand of countries from the South for the recognition of oral traditions and practices, know-how and performance, as part of the cultural heritage of humanity, to compensate for a supposed lack of material objects which are primarily owned by the industrialised countries of the North.⁵

However, it is not my concern here to enter into a debate about the validity of UNESCO’s definition and the motives that lie behind it, but rather to take it as a given, understand its implications and examine the potential impact on the museum field – particularly museum documentation.

Implementing the convention

The UNESCO convention foresees a number of measures that are designed to preserve and promote ICH. Articles 12, 16 and 17 relate directly to questions of documentation:

Article 12 – Inventories

To ensure identification with a view to safeguarding, each State Party shall draw up, in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory. These inventories shall be regularly updated.

Article 16 – Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

In order to ensure better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and awareness of its significance, and to encourage dialogue which respects cultural diversity, the Committee, upon the proposal of the States Parties concerned, shall establish, keep up to date and publish a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Article 17 – List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding

With a view to taking appropriate safeguarding measures, the Committee shall establish, keep up to date and publish a List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, and shall inscribe such heritage on the List at the request of the State Party concerned.

These provisions clearly make a distinction between the act of identifying and documenting elements of ICH, *with a view to safeguarding* and the measures needed to ensure that that ICH is in fact preserved. Creating inventories and documenting ICH are seen as a necessary first step towards preservation, not as a *means* of preservations. However, as we shall see, this distinction sometimes becomes blurred.

Impact for Museums

Based on the foregoing description of ICH, as defined by UNESCO, museum professionals could be forgiven for assuming that the impact on their institutions would be minimal. The convention makes no direct mention of museums or the role they might play with respect to ICH. Moreover, museums tend to work in a very different mind-set, one that can make concerns about ICH seem marginal or even irrelevant. A few specific aspects of established museum ‘culture’ and values are worth highlighting:

1. Museums have traditionally concentrated on building and conserving collections of *physical* artefacts and specimens, rather than focusing on intangible elements such as skills, beliefs, activities and events. This is not to say that documentation of museum collections does not refer to skills, beliefs, activities, and events, etc., but that these things are documented to give contextual background. They are referred to insofar as they throw light upon and enhance understanding of the material collections.
2. Furthermore, UNESCO’s definition of ICH is clearly concerned with practices and forms that are recognised by a given group or community as representative and *typical* forms of expression. However, with the possible exception of some ethnographic and archaeological collections, museums generally tend to place a higher value on the *exceptional* rather than the typical – the emphasis is on creative individuals rather than community productions.
3. Finally, and with the notable exception of collections of contemporary art, most museums collections concentrate on preserving and presenting items from the *past*, from cultures that may no longer be ‘viable’ in UNESCO’s sense – ones for which knowledge, beliefs and practices have long ceased to be transmitted from one generation to the next. Naturally, this sense of cultural distance, and the intellectual and imaginative effort required to bridge the gap, tends to makes the collections both mysterious and fascinating.

None of these considerations applies to *all* museums; they are merely intended to illustrate aspects of the traditional museum paradigm. However, taken together or separately, they provide a rationale for viewing ICH as being limited to certain specific categories of museums.

Despite all this, ICOM has taken up the challenge of ICH in a particularly active fashion.

ICOM's reaction to ICH

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) was in fact extremely quick off the mark. ICOM's *Comité International pour la Documentation* (CIDOC) devoted its 2002 conference to *Preserving Cultures: Documenting Non Material Heritage*; and a workshop on Museums and Intangible Heritage, held in 2002 as part of the 7th Regional Assembly of the Asia Pacific ICOM in Shanghai, resulted in the "Shanghai Charter" on Intangible Heritage,⁶ anticipating the UNESCO Convention by almost a year.

The Charter was followed in 2004, by the "Seoul Declaration of ICOM on the Intangible Heritage",⁷ announced at the ICOM triennial conference devoted to Intangible Heritage. The following clauses are of particular interest:

The general assembly of ICOM [...]

Invites all relevant museums involved in the collection, preservation and promotion of the intangible heritage to give particular attention to the conservation of all perishable records, notably electronic and documentary heritage resources; [...]

Recommends that museums give particular attention and resist any attempt to misuse intangible heritage resources and particularly their commercialisation without benefits to the primary custodians; [...]

Recommends that all training programmes for museum professionals stress the importance of intangible heritage and include the understanding of intangible heritage as a requirement for qualification;

ICOM's mission statement was also changed to integrate ICH. The ICOM definition of a museum now reads as follows:

Section 1. Museum. A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.⁸

Taken literally, these documents place tangible and intangible heritage squarely on the same footing. Museums are henceforth expected to acquire, conserve, research, communicate and exhibit both tangible and intangible heritage – the two are seen as equivalent, subject to the same recommendations, conditions and requirements. Training and understanding of ICH is presented not merely as an option, but as an obligation. At the risk of appearing pedantic, we may also note that both the Definition and the Seoul Declaration imply that intangible heritage is something that can be readily *acquired* and *conserved* by a museum. Given UNESCO's emphasis on the ICH

as living tradition, transmitted from one generation to the next and in constant evolution, this assumption appears paradoxical. How might an institution go about acquiring and preserving something like *the Tango*, *Georgian Polyphonic Singing* or *The Andean Cosmovision*?

To make sense of this apparent paradox, we are forced to conclude that ICOM's Definition and Declaration are imprecisely worded and that they are in fact intended to refer, elliptically, to the acquisition of recordings and other forms of documentation relating to *manifestations* of intangible heritage, rather than to the acquisition and conservation of actual elements of ICH.

This interpretation is reinforced by two of the recommendations contained in the Seoul Declaration: firstly, that museums involved in the *collection, preservation and promotion of the intangible heritage* should give particular attention to the *conservation of all perishable records*, notably electronic and documentary heritage resources, and secondly, that museums should resist attempts to “misuse intangible *heritage resources* and particularly their commercialisation without benefits to the primary custodians” [my italics]. These recommendations, referring to records and heritage resources, would seem to apply most naturally to recordings, photographs and other documentary assets⁹ that museums might indeed acquire.

If this interpretation is correct, it points to a misleading ambiguity at the heart of the debate: while apparently talking about the preservation of ICH, the emphasis shifts to the conservation of *documentary assets* relating to ICH. This ambiguity may well be unintentional, but it has the effect of granting museums a far more significant role than they might otherwise claim.

Stretching a point?

A considerable amount of debate and discussion oscillates between the issues of *documenting* and of *preserving* ICH, appearing to underline the significant role that museums have to play in safeguarding and preserving intangible heritage. The 2004 N°4 edition of ICOM news, “Museums and Intangible Heritage”, reproducing the keynote speeches from the Seoul conference, is characteristic in this respect.¹⁰

The late Sid Ahmed Baghli, Cultural Advisor on the Permanent Delegation of Algeria to UNESCO and one of the authors of the UNESCO Convention, advocates an extension of the museum's traditional role to encompass the safeguarding and dissemination of both real and virtual objects:

A vast field of collaboration in the task of safeguarding intangible heritage now offers itself to us as museum professionals. [...] A new and vitally important task is to integrate and disseminate intangible heritage. This is now possible with the aid of new audiovisual tools [...] we must not hesitate to use real or virtual objects as cultural tools in the service of society.¹¹

While Richard Kurin, Director for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian Institution is of the opinion that, while not ideally suited to the task, Museums are nonetheless the best hope for the preservation of ICH and that they should therefore become the *primary agencies* of the UNESCO Convention:

Should governments around the world now designate museums as the

primary agencies for the new Convention? Can museums really safeguard intangible cultural heritage? [...] One might argue that it would be better for museums not to have such a role in safeguarding culture. [...] Museums are generally poor institutions for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage — the only problem is that there is probably no better institution to do so.¹²

These comments are revealing. They depict museums as the natural or inevitable guardians and custodians of ICH. Preserving ICH is seen as an extension of the museum's traditional role: the skills needed for the preserving material heritage can be adapted and applied to the conservation of intangible heritage. However, there is a clear risk if ICH is squeezed into the material heritage paradigm, transformed from living tradition into "assets" that can be collected, documented and exploited. O Young Lee, Former Minister of Culture, Korea, for example, informs us that technical solutions now exists to the problem of storing such intangible assets:

[...]unless we actually place the intangible assets in an institution that we call museum, and store them in a special glass incubator that we call evaluation, categorisation or contextualisation, they will disappear altogether in the present globalised world. [...]With the development of semiconductor chips, we can now document and store intangible assets. And this is possible in a way that was inconceivable until now. Soon, we will see a computer memory chip becoming a museum in itself.¹³

Limits of documentation

It is important to understand the legitimate role that documentation can play and avoid getting carried away by unrealistic enthusiasm. As noted above, in reference to UNESCO articles 12, 14 and 16, documentation may certainly *contribute* to preserving ICH - in the same way that a passenger list can help save lives in a disaster. Identifying what needs to be saved can facilitate prompt and effective action:

Inventories are integral to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage because they can raise awareness about intangible cultural heritage and its importance for individual and collective identities. The process of inventorying intangible cultural heritage and making those inventories accessible to the public can also encourage creativity and self-respect in the communities and individuals where expressions and practices of intangible cultural heritage originate. *Inventories can also provide a basis for formulating concrete plans to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage concerned.*¹⁴

Inventories, by drawing attention to specific elements of ICH, can highlight their importance and stimulate the search for means to preserve them. However, documentation does not, in itself, preserve or conserve intangible heritage.

The distinction I wish to make here is an extension of one of the fundamental concepts used in the field of linguistics, the distinction between *langue* and *parole*¹⁵ (roughly, language and speech). While examples of speakers using a language (*parole*) can easily be recorded, documented and preserved, this does not capture the whole grammar and vocabulary of the language (*langue*) – no one speaker knows it all – and it does little to

preserve the language as a *living tradition*. Indeed, UNESCO devotes considerable resources to the preservation of an estimated 2,500 languages that are at risk worldwide¹⁶ – documentation is just a part of this effort. Likewise, recording a dancer or a musician – capturing a trace of a particular performance – does not thereby capture the ability to perform the dance or to play the instrument. This is particularly the case for oral traditions, where spontaneous improvisation is often used to adapt a performance to local circumstances. What forms of extemporisation are legitimate and acceptable depends on a deep, intuitive grasp of the implicit rules of the tradition.

Furthermore, creating and publishing an inventory is not a neutral act. The inventory is intended to be published and to stimulate action; otherwise it does not serve its purpose. However, unless the whole inventory process is carried out in a particularly sensitive and appropriate manner, it may actually have a perversely detrimental effect: *canonising* the particular style of performance that is registered in the inventory – granting a spurious stamp of authenticity – and effectively freezing a living tradition. UNESCO recognises the risk:

To be kept alive, intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to its community, continuously recreated and transmitted from one generation to another. [...] but safeguarding does not mean fixing or freezing intangible cultural heritage in some pure or primordial form. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is about the transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. [...] any safeguarding measure refers to strengthening and reinforcing the diverse and varied circumstances, tangible and intangible, that are necessary for the continuous evolution and interpretation of intangible cultural heritage, as well as for its transmission to future generations.¹⁷

Richard Kurin uses a hypothetical example to underline the immense scale of the difficulties involved in attempting to safeguard intangible heritage:

Consider the intangible cultural heritage of the so-called marsh Arabs of Iraq. Hundreds of thousands of people for thousands of years have occupied the marshlands of Mesopotamia, building reed houses and boats, exploiting the natural resources, and developing a way of life in a tough environment. [...] Saddam dammed the rivers and thus drained the wetlands, eliminating the ecological basis of marsh Arab culture.

Now suppose you run the museum of Iraqi marshland culture. You can acquire the region's traditional reed houses and its unique long canoes, record the memories of those who fled the marshland and remember its ways, collect and exhibit historical photographs of life in the wetlands and develop charts illustrating the complex cultural ecology. But actions on such atomised morsels of culture will not by themselves restore or safeguard the culture as a way of life. The only real way to do that would be to actually restore the marsh environment, re-populate the region, and work with cultural exemplars and practitioners to see that the community's traditions re-assert themselves. As a museum professional you would need to start by working with hydrologists and agronomists, economists and engineers. Your canvas is not the walls of a museum building, but the landscape of a large, distressed country.¹⁸

Are museums the best institutions to preserve intangible heritage?

[...] museums must consider carefully what they should and should not do, to “safeguard” intangible cultural heritage.[...] asking museums to preserve intangible cultural heritage is an inherently problematic idea.¹⁹

Makio Matsuzono, Director, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan

So are museums really the best places to record and safeguard intangible heritage?

UNESCO highlights five existing inventory programmes for ICH, in Bulgaria, Brazil, Ethiopia, the Philippines, and Venezuela.²⁰ These programmes all involve extensive national field-work over many years: researchers, students and volunteers working with communities to record and document the cultural manifestations that are valuable for the communities themselves. The descriptions of these efforts underline the difficulty of formulating appropriate methods of data collection, the immense volume of data that needs to be collected, analysed and interpreted and the extent of the resources required. Significantly, all these programmes are organised at a national level by government agencies. None of them involves museums in any direct way.

Swiss inventory of ICH

The Swiss ICH inventory programme is typical in many respects and underlines some of the problems inherent in creating a national inventory.

Switzerland ratified the UNESCO Convention in 2008. The Swiss Office Fédérale de la Culture (OFC) is responsible for the creation of a national inventory of ICH within Switzerland. Each of Switzerland's 26 Cantons submits a list of significant elements to the OFC, which has appointed a group of experts to establish a final selection of elements considered *representative* for the country as a whole. The OFC recognises that this organisation places limits on the principle of *auto-determination* – the possibility for communities to define what constitutes their ICH for themselves. The final decision is placed in the hands of experts who, necessarily, are not members of the community. There is also a real risk of creating a perceived *hierarchy* of ICH, between elements that are accepted, i.e. judged authentic and noteworthy, and those that are not. Similar problems exist, of course, at the international level, with respect to the UNESCO representative list.

In 2010 a new museum law, the *Loi sur les musées et les collections* (LMC)²¹ came into effect in Switzerland, affecting all federally-owned museums and providing Switzerland with a national museum policy for the first time.²² It commits all the museums of the *Swiss Museum Group* to respect common goals, notably to preserve ICH, in accordance with the UNESCO Convention and the new ICOM definition. There is thus now a statutory requirement for Swiss Federal museums to preserve ICH. (In principle, these museums could be held accountable if they fail to do so.) The new law stipulates that the Federal museums must cooperate with other museums and collections within Switzerland. At present, however, they are not involved in the national inventory programme.

Impact on documentation standards and practice

As you are no doubt aware, current museum documentation standards such as Spectrum,²³ the CIDOC Guidelines,²⁴ or ISO 21127²⁵ are the fruit of years of collective effort by museum professionals. Inevitably, most of these standards were conceived well before the UNESCO Convention and ICOM's revised definition of the museum, so support for ICH is not guaranteed. Furthermore, museums wishing to acquire a collections management package generally stipulate respect for one or more of these standards as a requirement. Responding to market demand, companies then use them as an integral part of the software development process. There is thus a serious potential knock-on effect if museum documentation standards are changed to deal with intangible heritage.

Helpfully, UNESCO provides some guidelines for inventories of intangible cultural heritage.²⁶ These include the following elements:

1. Identification of the element
 - 1.1. Name of the element, as used by community or group concerned;
 - 1.2. Short, maximally informative title (including indication of domain(s));
 - 1.3. Community(ies) concerned;
 - 1.4. Physical location(s) of element;
 - 1.5. Short description.
2. Characteristics of the element
 - 2.1. Associated tangible elements;
 - 2.2. Associated intangible elements;
 - 2.3. Language(s), register(s), speech level(s) involved;
 - 2.4. Perceived origin.
3. Persons and institutions involved with the element
 - 3.1. Practitioners(s)/performer(s): name(s), age, gender, social status, and/or professional category, etc.;
 - 3.2. Other participants (e.g., holders/custodians);
 - 3.3. Customary practices governing access to the element or to aspects of it;
 - 3.3. Modes of transmission;
 - 3.4. Concerned organizations (NGOs and others).
4. State of the element: viability
 - 4.1. Threats to the enactment;
 - 4.2. Threats to the transmission;
 - 4.3. Availability of associated tangible elements and resources;
 - 4.4. Viability of associated tangible and intangible elements;
 - 4.5. Safeguarding measures in place.
5. Data gathering and inventorying
 - 5.1. Consent from and involvement of the community/group in data gathering and inventorying;

- 5.2. Restrictions, if any, on use of inventoried data;
 - 5.3. Resource persons(s): name and status or affiliation;
 - 5.4. Date and place of data gathering;
 - 5.5. Date of entering data into an inventory;
 - 5.6. The inventory entry compiled by....
6. References to literature, discography, audiovisual materials, archives.

As even a casual glance at this list reveals, some of the data elements are familiar, while others are less so. Some terms, such as *Perceived origin*, *speech level(s)* and *enactment*, may even seem a little exotic and require explanation. The elements in sections 3 and 4 in particular, do not fit comfortably into existing museum documentation standards and are likely to cause problems if they are to be recorded in a standard collections management system. A naïve approach, one which requires museums to simply use their existing skills and infrastructure to document ICH, is thus likely to prove problematic.

A possible approach

It would be a great loss, however, if technical problems were to prevent museums from getting a grip on the intangible. The effort is definitely worth the candle. All museum objects, whether artefacts or specimens, are embedded in a web of knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, codes and practices: a “semantic baggage” which can be expressed in terms of ICH. It is extremely important for museums to be able to refer to this intangible background, allowing specific items to be placed in their cultural context. Without this context, interpretation and appreciation become difficult, or even impossible – objects become mute and meaningless when we lose the key to the hieroglyphs. Documentation of ICH provides museums with primary material for contextualisation: an essential aspect of all museum documentation. What I am proposing here is that the documentation of intangible heritage is best seen, from a museum perspective, not as a new initiative, analogous to and carried out in parallel with the task of collecting and conserving material heritage, but as an extension to existing documentation practice making sense of material heritage by providing a more structured and explicit link with the relevant intangible aspects. Not all museums will have the resources and the will to transform themselves and assume an active role in preserving ICH, but all can benefit from enhanced awareness of ICH in the documentation of their collections.

Documentation standards (and by extensions collections management systems) will need to be revised. Currently, some contextual information is recorded in relation to collection items, but ICH data stored in this way is undervalued and difficult to use as a resource in its own right. ICH information needs to be made more explicit and to ensure that all documentation requirements are adequately dealt with.

This investment could have both intellectual and economic benefits for museums. Libraries have for many years enjoyed the advantages of sharing data between institutions. A bibliographic notice created by one institution can easily be adapted and reused by another. Sharing data in this way enables libraries to avoid costly repetition of data entry and helps to improve quality. Museums have not found themselves in the same happy position due in large part to the highly specific or unique character of the items they collect. Sharing catalogue data between institutions has only limited

economic value and makes sense only in exceptional circumstances.²⁷ However, these considerations do not apply to documentation relating to ICH. ICH forms a common semantic background for many museum items, even for whole collections, so there is a considerable potential for sharing and exchange of ICH data between institutions. The high costs of collecting, collating and entering data could be spread and the quality of the data improved thanks to distributed input and validation.

An Egyptian example

An example from an ongoing project in Egypt illustrates the potential for integrating ICH information with material collections. Intended primarily for the Egyptians themselves, the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation (NMEC) aims to tell the story of Egyptian culture from antiquity to the present day. The museum will be housed in a purpose-built building, designed by the Egyptian architect Dr El Ghazali Kosseiba. Covering a total surface area of over 60'000 m², the new museum occupies a relatively undeveloped site in the district of Al Fustat, on the outskirts of Cairo. Unlike a traditional archaeological museum, the NMEC's mission clearly embraces all aspects of Egyptian culture, ancient and modern, material and intangible. Exhibition themes include the Nile and its role in agriculture and transport, language and writing, traditional crafts and clothing, administration and society, music, poetry and dance, religion beliefs and knowledge. The need to for detailed and integrated documentation relating material artefacts with ICH is one of the most challenging aspects of the NMEC project.

The exhibitions are conceived as a series of narratives, telling the story of Egyptian culture. The items on display, while often beautiful and fascinating in themselves, function primarily as illustrations or evidence, underlining the exhibition narrative. Unfortunately, the existing object documentation was not created with this role in mind. It concentrates on the traditional museum inventory questions of provenance, materials and condition, and makes only passing reference to the cultures that created the artefacts, how they were used and what symbolic or religious significance they might have. Trying to understand a culture solely on the basis its material vestiges is a skilled task; it is what archaeologists are trained for. NMEC could not afford to assume that visitors would be capable of similar feats of imaginative reconstruction. The problems then were both conceptual and technical.

Current museum documentation standards and software do not provide adequate support for dealing with intangible heritage in a convincing and integrated way, so while using a commercially available software package made sense for collections management, it meant that intangible heritage would have to be documented separately. In the case of the NMEC this turned out well since responsibility for documenting and archiving information about intangible heritage was assumed by the Folk Creativity Centre (FCC), a newly founded institution based in the historic *Beit al Suhaymi* area of Cairo. The information schema was thus be designed around two separate but cooperating information systems, dealing with material and immaterial cultural heritage.

The Thesaurus for Egyptian Traditional Culture

In order to ensure the conceptual and technical integration of the NMEC and FCC databases, UNESCO and NMEC sponsored the creation of a bilingual thesaurus for Egyptian Traditional Culture (TETC). Dr. Sameeh Shaalan was appointed by the Egyptian Society for Folk Traditions to organise the work. Research for the thesaurus was carried out by a team of 31 field workers who, over a period of 18 months, collected information from 14 governorates covering a representative selection of urban, rural, Bedouin and coastal areas.

The thesaurus is organised around five main topics, covering different aspects of Egyptian culture.

- 1-River Nile: Traditional methods of agriculture, animal husbandry, transportation.
- 2-Writing: Traditional calligraphy, science, literature...
- 3-Material Culture: Traditional arts and crafts, architecture, clothing and fashion...
- 4-State and Society: Traditional administrative system, jurisdiction, trade, traditional family, role of women, education, festivals and celebrations, performing arts and entertainments, diet and cookery....
- 5-Beliefs and World Outlook: Destiny, magic, evil eye...

These topics cover the broad themes around which the NMEC exhibitions are organised. Each topic is broken down into a hierarchy of sub-topics, corresponding to activities, and at the most detailed level tools, artefacts and other material items. Each level is numbered sequentially, which creates a four digit "facet number" to uniquely identify each specific concept. Ploughs, for example, fall under the classification 1.1.1.1:

1. River Nile
 - 1.1. Agriculture
 - 1.1.1. Ploughing, seeding, levelling
 - 1.1.1.1. Plough

In other words:

١- النيل

١-١- الزراعة

١-١-١- الحرت والبذر وتسوية الارض

١-١-١-١- المحراث

Terms in the thesaurus are accompanied by one or more photographic illustrations. The use of numerical identifiers has the advantage of allowing unambiguous classification in a multilingual environment. The thesaurus plays a central and novel role in enabling cooperation between NMEC and the FCC – one that goes beyond the traditional thesaurus functions of classification and terminology control. The Folk Creativity Centre is undertaking an extensive programme of field research, photographing,

recording and collecting relevant material throughout Egypt. The FCC's documentation and archives, photographic material, video and sound recordings are classified using the TETC. These resources will be made available via an Internet Web service. NMEC collection items and exhibition materials share the same classification system, allowing them to be linked automatically with the relevant FCC resources. This cooperation is immensely valuable to the NMEC's exhibition designers as it enables them to tap into a vast and constantly growing resource. It is hoped that it will prove similarly valuable to visitors, allowing individual items of material culture to be placed into their intangible cultural context.

Conclusions

The current ICOM definition of a Museum is misleading and needs to be clarified. By placing intangible and material heritage on the same footing, it gives the impression that the acquisition, conservation and promotion of intangible heritage is a simple and unproblematic extension of the museum's traditional role. This is a distortion of the complex nature of ICH and creates obligations and expectations that many museums are ill-placed to assume.

Museums may adopt different approaches to ICH depending on their resources and situation:

The most ambitious will seek to redefine their role in society, engaging actively in programmes designed to stimulate and preserve ICH through the transmission of living traditions to future generations. This will necessarily require considerable resources and will inevitably tend to relegate their material collections to a subsidiary function. The canvas of these institutions, to paraphrase Richard Karin, will lie in the landscape of their country, beyond the museum walls.

At a more modest level, other institutions will wish to contribute, in collaboration with other agencies, to national inventory programmes; applying their documentation skills to the identification, description and analysis of elements of ICH and serving as a repository for relevant items of material heritage.

Finally, all institutions can benefit from an enhanced awareness of ICH, as an important aspect of the documentation their collections – connecting each object with its “semantic baggage” allows it to be better understood. ICH documentation provides rich contextual material forming a common background to many different collections. Recognising this fact opens up possibilities for collaboration and exchange that could have both intellectual and economic benefits for the institutions concerned.

On the basis of a clarified definition of the museum's role with respect to documentation and preservation of ICH, CIDOC and other bodies can set about adapting and redefining documentation standards and practice, bringing them into line with the new requirements that museums are expected to meet. This work can, in turn, be used by software companies to ensure that museums continue to have adequate technical supports for their activities.

The notion of ICH is an important one and its development over recent years highlights some neglected aspects cultural heritage. Museums would do well to give carefully consideration to the relevance of ICH to their collections and to the impact on their documentation practices.

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- ¹ http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html
- ² Persistent misuse of the definite article in the convention may be the result of poor translation from a French original.
- ³ Despite UNESCO's insistence that “these domains are not comprehensive” in practice they are often treated as a definitive list of accepted categories which are “extended” to include additional elements. cf. the Practical Handbook for the Inventory of ICH of Indonesia, UNESCO 2009. Not all of these additional elements are strictly intangible in nature, e.g. ancient manuscripts, film, painting, sculpture and architecture.
- ⁴ This interpretation is reinforced by the UNESCO’s “Representative List” (formerly known as the “Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage”), which contains many examples of ICH from around the world. The majority of these fit into the traditional paradigm of artistic *oeuvre*.
- ⁵ Gonseth, Marc-Olivier and Hertz, Ellen *Le Patrimoine culturel immatériel comme facteur de transformations*, in *museums.ch* N°5 2010 [my translation]
- ⁶ *Shanghai Charter* http://icom.museum/shanghai_charter.html
- ⁷ *Seoul Declaration of ICOM on the Intangible Heritage* <http://icom.museum/resolutions/eres04.html>
- ⁸ *ICOM Statutes* art.3 para.1 <http://icom.museum/definition.html>
- ⁹ Resources may well be a poor translation of the French ‘ressources’, which is better rendered in English as ‘assets’.
- ¹⁰ Cf also the International Journal of Intangible Heritage. http://www.ijih.org/101_web/main.jsp
- ¹¹ *The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and New Perspectives for the Museum*. ICOM News N°4 2004
- ¹² *Museums and Intangible Heritage: Culture Dead or Alive?* ICOM News N°4 2004
- ¹³ *Preparing a Vessel to Contain Lost Life: Preservation and Successful Inheritance of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. ICOM News N°4 2004
- ¹⁴ UNESCO Website <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00080> [my italics]
- ¹⁵ The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure makes the distinction between *langue* : “un ensemble de signes utilisés par une communauté pour communiquer”, and *parole* : “l'utilisation concrète des signes linguistiques dans un contexte précis”. Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Écrits de linguistique générale*.
- ¹⁶ UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00139>
- ¹⁷ *Safeguarding without freezing* <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00012>
- ¹⁸ *Museums and Intangible Heritage: Culture Dead or Alive?* ICOM News N°4 2004
- ¹⁹ *Museums, Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Spirit of Humanity* ICOM News N°4 2004
- ²⁰ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00314>
- ²¹ Loi fédérale sur les musées et les collections de la Confédération (Loi sur les musées et les collections, LMC) <http://www.bak.admin.ch/themen/kulturpolitik/01544/index.html?lang=fr>
- ²² Significantly, the introduction of this law has led to calls for similar legislation in the UK. cf. Nick Poole *Is it time for a UK Museum Law?* <http://openculture.collectionstrustblogs.org.uk/2010/05/06/is-it-time-for-a-uk-museum-law/>
- ²³ <http://www.collectionstrust.org.uk/spectrum>
- ²⁴ International Guidelines for Museum Object Information : The CIDOC Information Categories, June 1995 <http://cidoc.mediahost.org/guidelines1995.pdf>
- ²⁵ ISO 21127:2006 A reference ontology for the interchange of cultural heritage information
- ²⁶ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00266>

27 This has created a vicious circle: the low demand for data exchange slows the development of data exchange standards in the museum field. This ensures that the cost remains high, thereby lowering the demand.