A Study on the Changing Roles and Responsibilities of Ethnographic Museums with Respect to Indigenous Peoples

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Abstract

Museums during colonial era reflected the mindset of the period. Indigenous peoples were represented as unchanging and frozen in time as they were displayed in a diorama form alongside extinct dinosaurs in natural history museums. They were classified and presented as "exotic", "savage", "primitive", "barbaric" and on the verge of extinction based on Western scientific categories which helped in legitimizing colonial rule. However, museums around the world have had to reevaluate their museological practices and roles in the light of postcolonial theory and criticism. Since the 1980's, a new museological form emerged which sought to involve the source communities in the interpretation of their culture. Moreover, the adoption of *2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* by UNESCO has contributed to the importance of intangible cultural heritage in museums which was ignored earlier. In this respect, the paper attempts to present the changing roles and responsibilities of museums as they reinvent themselves to stay relevant in the societies in which they exist.

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Keywords: Ethnographic Museums, Representation, New Museology, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Indigenous people

History of Ethnographic Museums

Ethnographic museums are those institutions that are involved in the representation of 'other' culture. Before the era of internet and mass tourism, museum was a medium through which the general public could witness the 'material evidence' of other societies studied by anthropologists. Therefore, in ethnographic museums of the colonial era, "objects stood metonymically for the distant 'other' and distant places experienced and analyzed by anthropologists" (Harris, Hanlon 8).

Anthropology as an academic discipline emerged in the late nineteenth century and was closely linked to ethnographic and ethnological collections in museums. This new discipline sought to study human ways of life mainly of non-European nations. Most objects in ethnographic museums belong to societies who were believed to be "'exotic', 'primitive', 'simple', 'savage', or 'vanishing races'" and at one point in history have encountered western explorers, missionaries, colonizers and anthropologists (Lidchi 161). The kind of representations and classification systems to be found in ethnographic museums are made according to anthropological theory of a particular historical time. As such, Lidchi argues that the science of anthropology is a "*science of invention*" rather than "*science of discovery*". In her own words:

> It is not reflective of the essential nature of cultural difference, but classifies and *constitutes* this difference systematically and coherently, in accordance with a particular view of the world that emerges in a specific place, at a distinct historical moment and within a specific body of knowledge (Lidchi 161-162).

Anthropology thus first found its institutional home in museums. Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford was one of the first important museums to emerge in the nineteenth century. Augustus Henry Lane Fox, the founder of the Pitt Rivers Museum was particularly interested in human antiquity and theories of evolution. He wanted to put up display of artefacts from different periods and places in order to trace the technological development of human kind. His collection was donated to Oxford in 1883 after making sure that it was displayed in the same manner he wanted.

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Artefacts were arranged in a typological fashion where archaeological artefacts from ancient times were arranged alongside present-day ethnographic objects in order to demonstrate human evolution. In contrast to the earlier cabinets of curiosities, ethnographic artefacts in Pitt Rivers collection, its classificatory system and the methods of display were driven by evolutionary discourse which was seen as 'scientific' (Lidchi 190).

Thus, the growth of anthropology as a discipline was very much supported by various "exhibiting activity" in museums during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain. Pitt Rivers Museum in the nineteenth century was thus involved in producing discourses of 'self' and 'other'. Lidchi makes an argument that the Pitt Rivers Museum "promoted and legitimized the reduction of cultures to objects" and the anthropological discourse employed in the museum exhibits reflected more the power relationship between those exhibited and those exhibiting it rather than reflecting the 'real' cultures of those people on display (Lidchi 191).

Many scholars have claimed that anthropology in the nineteenth century was primarily a discourse made in the colonial context by the dominant culture about societies which they thought were racially and culturally inferior. Stocking argued that anthropological scholars' attempt to collect and record data of what they thought was savage way of life in the name of science in fact codified knowledge in such a way that it acted as "a moral as well as a scientific justification for the often bloody process" of imperial expansion (Stocking, quoted in Litchi 186).

Moreover, anthropology was more object oriented because "knowledge itself was thought of as embodied in objects" (Stocking 114). Tangible material culture or human remains were means of tracing the stages of development of mankind according to the evolutionist framework. The collection and display of non-western objects is linked to the "crucial processes of Western identity formation" (Clifford 239). Therefore, during the colonial era, objects from the colonized people were collected, in most cases looted and displayed in the home countries without any context.

New Museum Theory

The former president of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), Alpha Konare in a 1983 essay remarked: "The traditional museum is no longer in tune with our concerns; it has

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ossified our culture, deadened many of our cultural objects, and allowed the essence, imbued with the spirit of the people, to be lost" (quoted in Marstine 16). In many indigenous communities, it is believed that the process of collecting rather than accomplishing the intended purpose of preserving proves destructive. Objects are considered to lose their value when they are not in use.

In order to ensure its survival in the twenty first century and also to make it socially relevant in the community in which they exists, museums are evolving and reinventing themselves. This has led to the emergence of "post-museum". Marstine clearly defines post-museum and its role:

> The Post-museum clearly articulates its agendas, strategies, and decision-making processes and continually re-evaluates them in a way that acknowledges the politics of representation; the work of museum staff is never naturalized but seen as contributing to these agendas. The post-museum actively seeks to share power with the communities it serves, including source communities. It recognizes that visitors are not passive consumers and gets to know its constituencies. Instead of transmitting knowledge to an essentialized mass audience, the post-museum listens and responds sensitively as it encourages diverse groups to become active participants in museum discourse. Nonetheless, in the post-museum, the curator is not a mere facilitator but takes responsibility for representation as she or he engages in critical enquiry. The post-museum does not shy away from difficult issues but exposes conflict and contradiction. It asserts that the institution must show ambiguity and acknowledge multiple, ever-shifting identities. Most importantly, the post-museum is a site from which to redress social inequalities (Marstine 19).

Thus, a new form of museology has emerged since the 1980's as a result of mounting criticisms of museums. It was a result of the collaboration between scholarly communities and source communities whose cultures were on display in museums around the world. According to Peter Vergo, this new form of museology emerged as a result of "widespread dissatisfaction with the old museology, both within and outside the museum profession" (Vergo 3).

Christina Kreps is one of the proponents of this new museological form which she calls "Comparative museology" which "is the systematic study of the similarities and differences among

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museological forms and behavior cross-culturally" (Kreps 2006, 458). According to her, "One of the goals of critical and comparative museology is to 'liberate' culture-its collection, interpretation, representation, and preservation- from the management regimes of Eurocentric museology" which means the emergence of new museological discourse that allows multiple voices and perspectives (459). Kreps argues that under the 2003 Convention, indigenous curation is qualified as intangible cultural heritage. She states: "Promoting the idea of indigenous curation as both a form of intangible cultural heritage and as a means of safeguarding it could liberate museums from their traditional role as custodians of tangible, static culture to stewards and curators of intangible, living, and dynamic culture" (Kreps 2005, 7). Moreover, indigenous museological practice is more suited to maintaining and representing indigenous cultures as it has a more holistic approach of preserving not only the tangible object but also its associated intangible knowledge and practices which perpetuate their living culture.

Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Earlier, an understanding of cultural heritage primarily included tangible heritage such as buildings, monuments, natural sites etc. But later the definition showed a shift from static to living and dynamic cultural expressions. The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003 passed the *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003 Convention)*. According to it, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to:

> 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. The 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 provide them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity…. It is manifested inter alia in the following domains:

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(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 (UNESCO 2003).

Basically there are three kinds of heritage, namely, tangible heritage, natural heritage and recently intangible heritage which has been institutionalized and supported by UNESCO. These three categories of heritage though part of three separate lists are however interrelated in nature. Tangible heritage is understood to be "a monument, group of buildings or site of historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value"; natural heritage is defined as "outstanding physical, biological, and geological features: habitats of threatened plants or animal species and areas of value on scientific or aesthetic grounds or from the point of view of conservation" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 52-53). In recent times, the definition of intangible heritage as a result of the adoption of 2003 Convention has broadened "to include not only the masterpieces, but also the masters" (53).

Community participation is the key component of the 2003 Convention. Article 15 of the Convention titled *Participation of communities, groups and individual* states:

Within the framework of its safeguarding activities of the intangible cultural heritage, each State Party shall endeavor to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management (UNESCO 2003)

The 2003 Convention has been seen by many as a response to the *1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural, Natural Heritage* which was criticized for privileging Eurocentric conception of heritage. Adopted by UNESCO's General Conference in October 2003 and put into force on 20th April 2006, the Convention was an attempt to put forward

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the non-western understanding and practices of heritage. Following the Convention, one sees a conceptual shift in the understanding of the idea of heritage (Smith, Akagawa 2009).

Much of the heritage policy of UNESCO and its very own conception of heritage is guided by what Smith calls Western Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith 2006). AHD defines "heritage as material, monumental and nationally significant" and "privileges the heritage of elite classes" (Smith and Akagawa 7). Smith calls UNESCO a "universalizing project" as well as "a project of legitimization" as it recognizes and authorizes a "certain expressions of culture and heritage" (Smith 111). Most of the support for the 2003 Convention has come from non-western countries especially Japan. Smith believes that the Convention has the ability to engage with and support indigenous aspirations. To deal with the challenges posed by the acknowledgement of intangible heritage, Smith maintains that there is a need to re-theorize 'heritage'.

Richard Kurin who was involved in the development of the 2003 Convention believes that the reason behind the adoption of the Convention by UNESCO is the declining intangible cultural heritage around the world. The Convention brought a shift in the conception of intangible Cultural heritage as "living heritage as itself practiced and expressed by members of cultural communities…not the mere products, objectified remains or documentation of such living cultural forms" (Kurin 12). However, ICH does not mean those cultural forms performed "in any recreated or imitative form…by scholars, or performers, or members of some other community" but by its very own community members (12). Prior to the Convention, ICH was seen as something that could be separated and preserved in archives or museums. But now with the Convention, the responsibility of safeguarding and preserving ICH lies with the community itself. To say that ICH is safeguarded by the community members implies that it is practiced and kept alive. Kurin also makes an important point that, "ICH is not something fixed in form that remains constant forever, safeguarded when only found in its pure, essential form. While various types and expressions of ICH maybe articulated at certain points in history by their practitioner communities as the 'pure', 'real' or 'authentic' form, such judgements, subject to change…If a form of ICH is living it will, by definition, change over time" (12-13). An art form or cultural practice associated with particular beliefs may change over time in response to current social, cultural or political scenario.

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Therefore, contrary to previous model which emphasized on documenting and preserving endangered traditions, now the effort is to support "the conditions necessary for the cultural reproduction" of those disappearing traditions which means supporting the "'carriers' and 'transmitters' of traditions, as well as to their habitus and habitat" (Kirshenblatt- Gimblett 53). To sustain the intangible heritage, it is not enough to just document and preserve the intangible artefacts (songs, dances, stories, customs etc.) but also support the practitioners. For many indigenous and minority communities, "intangible heritage is the vital source of an identity that is deeply rooted in history" (Kirshenblatt- Gimblett 54)

Kurin suggests that perhaps museums or museum-like organization is best suited to implement and uphold the 2003 Convention. International Council of Museums (ICOM) believes that museums have a role in safeguarding ICH. In its effort to implement the 2003 Convention, ICOM provides advisory functions to UNESCO Committee for safeguarding ICH.

Many museologists have argued that museums should look beyond their walls and into the communities that they represent. It was during 20th ICOM General conference held in Seoul in 2004 that the ICOM committees acknowledged the tremendous potential of ICH for museum work. The emergence of ICH reflected the concerns of the non-European world as opposed to previous UNESCO conventions that were informed by the Western historical tradition. The theme of the 20th ICOM's General Conference was "Museums and Intangible Heritage" with the objective to raise "awareness about the importance of intangible heritage for cultural and biodiversity" ("Intangible Heritage"). The *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* which is published by the National Folk Museum of Korea since 2006 is a result of the Conference. Another such project is the *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museum Project* (IMP) which started in 2017. It explores different approaches to ICH in museums in Belgium, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and France. ICOM contributes to this project by participating in conferences and giving its expert opinions and advices.

Concluding Remarks

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Several countries have taken necessary measures intended to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of their nations that are consistent with the efforts of UNESCO. UNESCO as an international organization with members and representatives from several nations provides the leadership and platform to deliberate upon various heritage related aspects and come to an international agreement. The guidelines and recommendations provided by various committees of UNESCO are then implemented at both international and national levels. Thus, national heritage policy of several countries is largely informed and shaped by UNESCO.

Earlier, knowledge associated with ethnographic objects presented in colonial museums was from the point of view of the curators. But that has changed as there has been a positive change in the nature of relationship between museums and source communities. The "one-way relationship" which was the norm in earlier times has been replaced by a "two-way process" where the input of the source communities in the management and representation of their cultural objects is considered important (Watson 2007).

There has also been a major shift in the way tangible objects are obtained, cared for and interpreted. Today, when a museum organizes an exhibition on any community, the museum curators consult with representatives/members of that community as to how their history and culture should be represented. The curatorial authority is thus shared between the museum curators and the source communities.

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