

Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Pacific: a Brief Report on Recent Progress at the Australian Museum

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an intangible cultural heritage forum held at the Australian Museum, Sydney, in 2007. Forum participants, including representatives from Fiji, Guam, New Zealand, Norfolk Island, Palau, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Yap as well as members of Sydney's heritage community, contributed to a debate on the question of what the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* 2003 means in practical terms to Pacific countries and how the Australian Museum might work in partnership with them in their safeguarding efforts. Importantly, the forum allowed the interests of traditional knowledge holders to be considered and for a number of concerns to be noted. These concerns are also of significance for those working more broadly in the field of intangible cultural heritage and are reported below.

The Australian Museum's Intangible Cultural Heritage Program focuses on collection-based research (linking intangible and tangible heritage) and digital access/exchange programmes for both Indigenous Australia and the Pacific region.

In May 2007 an ICOM Australia Museum Partnerships Program (IAMPP) funded workshop was held at the

Australian Museum, Sydney. This *Emerging Cultural Centres Workshop* brought together representatives of cultural institutions from across the Pacific region to discuss, over five days, topics relating to capacity building for emerging cultural centres and museums. Topics ranged from architectural and funding issues to questions of collections management and intellectual property.¹ Participants included sponsored

representatives from Fiji, Palau, Samoa, Tonga, and Yap, as well as invited representatives from Guam, New Zealand, Norfolk Island and Vanuatu.

At a special session of the workshop, a forum entitled *Intangible Progress: Myth or Reality?* provided an opportunity for the gathered cultural leaders, as well as members of Sydney's wider heritage community, to share their views and experiences in relation to their efforts towards safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. One of the main aims of the forum was to open up discussions on how the Australian Museum, in partnership with Pacific institutions and communities, could best activate its collection of 60,000 ethnographic objects relating to the Pacific to assist in the revitalisation of traditional practices.

This short report focuses on a number of concerns articulated by, or on behalf of, traditional knowledge holders that pose methodological challenges for those engaged in developing safeguarding practices. Indeed, a clear view emerged during the forum that globalisation continues to have powerfully damaging effects on traditional knowledge and skills in the Pacific and that we must guard against employing safeguarding practices that, ironically, contribute to this decline.

To borrow a biological metaphor, safeguarding culture requires an ecological approach: attention should be paid to the underlying structures and relationships that support traditional knowledge and expressions of culture (as living culture) and not simply to particular instances or de-contextualised expressions of traditional knowledge *per se*. In this way, safeguarding may be less about recording physical descriptions of objects or performances than about recording the meanings

surrounding an object or verbal expression (why, when, how, by whom, for what purpose is it made/uttered?), for example. This is an essential point for those interested in revitalising cultural practices and is a crucial consideration for sustainability. One can reproduce an object based on a photograph or a museum visit, but the complex web of knowledge and social contexts for its use may be irretrievable. In other words, there is a need for establishing procedures that produce 'thick' inventories.²

An added complexity here, however, is that while there is a felt need for thick inventories to be produced (by cultural mapping, for example) there is, among some in the Pacific, an accompanying, and perhaps growing, fear of fossilisation. The perception of fossilisation of aspects of their living culture has been experienced by traditional knowledge holders who have seen foreign archival accounts of cultural practices gain an aura of authority far in excess of that given to the living tradition in their communities. While the underlying concepts of 'purity' or 'authenticity' are derided in the anthropological literature, in some spheres (legal, political) these concepts are still influential. The important point to make here is that the effects of these perceptions may deter traditional knowledge holders from putting their knowledge on paper (or in digital format). It would be a mistake, however, to see this simply as a legacy of the colonial past. At least one forum participant complained that information gathered in villages was being held at a national cultural centre with little feedback reaching the village level. The upshot is that more work on raising awareness about the processes of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is needed to alleviate such concerns. This work would highlight the dynamic interrelationship between cultural diversity and change. It would also promote the view that partnerships are

necessary for cases in which foreign museum collections are activated for use in cultural revitalisation, and that a more open and sharing process, both between institution and traditional knowledge holders, is required.

It is exceedingly rare these days to attend a cultural heritage meeting in which the question of adequate protections for ownership and use of intellectual property and traditional knowledge does not come to the fore. It is not possible within the constraints of this short report to capture the depth of concern among participants and the complexities of legal-ethical issues involved in this rapidly evolving sphere of practice. However, it is possible to relay the emerging view that it is axiomatic that one cannot safeguard traditional knowledge without paying proper regard to the intellectual property rights of the people who hold this knowledge. From an institutional point of view, one must at the very least set proper conditions of access and use for cultural heritage materials, otherwise one potentially contributes to the destruction of that which one purports to protect. At the village level there may be problems with gathering traditional knowledge for non-traditional contexts, such as inventory making or cultural mapping. If traditional systems of knowledge transfer are operating in a particular location, then a dilemma will inevitably arise if on the one hand there is no-one suitable to receive knowledge (when for example the young men or women have gone to an urban centre for employment), and on the other hand the only option is to pass the knowledge to people who would normally not be allowed to receive it (cultural mapping fieldworkers from a neighbouring village or region, for example). More generally, problems associated with the non-traditional transfer of traditional knowledge are exacerbated by the rise of new electronic technologies, which may be seen as allowing written (or digitally recorded) accounts of traditional culture to be spirited away from the local level to increase someone else's riches (as with the case of *Deep Forest's* 'Sweet Lullaby').³ This issue of the emergence of new technologies greatly outrunning the development of standards and protocols to protect traditional knowledge and intellectual property is of increasing concern to institutions and communities across the board.

An important aim of the forum was to promote and explore the role museum collections can play in cultural revitalisation. It was pointed out during the author's presentation that while *safeguarding intangible cultural*

heritage is a new term at the Australian Museum, it is not a new activity. For many years researchers have taken copies of poorly documented objects back to source communities to gather contextual knowledge surrounding those objects, and from the 1980s the museum has been a leader in the field of repatriating objects. More recently the museum has broadened its support for Pacific communities engaged in cultural revitalisation by hosting collection research visits by Pacific cultural leaders. In 2003, Sophie Nemban visited the museum to research women's material culture from the island of Erromango (Vanuatu). After returning home she conducted a series of workshops on traditional bark cloth making. Within three years approximately 150 bark cloths had been made as result of these efforts. During her research visit Sophie 'discovered' a traditional design of which she had heard but had never seen. In 2006, Chief Uminduru Jerry Taki, also from Erromango in Vanuatu, visited the museum to research men's material culture; the museum holds the world's largest collection of early material from Erromango. Chief Jerry gave detailed information on 100 objects in the Sie and Bislama languages (including their names, functions, and designs). Many objects were photographed for him, and he returned home with a number of DVDs and copies of voice recordings. While the DVDs were subsequently shown and aroused great interest on the island, details of their role in revitalisation activities are yet to be reported back to the museum.⁴ The museum has transferred the intangible heritage to its collections databases for use by community members, researchers, and the general public. During 2007, the museum increased its support for source communities and traditional knowledge holders by expanding our *Visiting Cultural Leaders Program* and engaging with diaspora communities in Sydney.

Throughout the forum, the need for the museum and source communities to work together in researching the histories of objects was repeatedly raised. The Pacific visitors brought with them their vision of living culture; as one commented, *we live our culture, we don't lock it away*. Another participant remarked that researching the museum collections allowed them to *take back food to eat*. With memoranda of understanding with Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea and the Pacific Islands Museums Association (PIMA) and by unlocking our collections, the Australian Museum is confident that we are heading in the right direction. 🇺🇸

NOTES

1. The workshop received seed funding from the National Museum of Australia and AusAID. The Pacific Islands Museums Association (PIMA) played a role as a partner organisation.
2. See Geertz, Clifford, 1973. 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture'. *In The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York, Basic Books, pp. 3-30.
3. Feld, Steven, 2000. 'A Sweet Lullaby for World Music', *Public Culture* 12(1), pp.145-171.
4. Kirk Huffman did much of this collection-based research relating to Vanuatu.