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Conceptualising intangible heritage
in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam:
the *Layla and Majnun* story as a case study

Sadiyah Boonstra

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ABSTRACT

The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, was founded as a colonial museum in the 19th century in which experts ('outsiders') presented their view of other cultures. In the 20th century the Netherlands became a multicultural society. As a result, the museum had to redefine its function in society. In an attempt to rethink the relation between the content of its exhibitions and its audience, the Tropenmuseum refurbished all the museum galleries between 1990 and 2008. During the refurbishment the museum started to experiment with intangible heritage for which the story of *Layla and Majnun* was chosen as a case study. The museum collected four separate contemporary cultural expressions of the story, accompanied by audiovisual recordings of performances. The experiment was so successful that it functioned as a catalyst for the final refurbished gallery, entitled *Travelling Tales*, which is entirely devoted to intangible heritage. Based on research into the *Layla and Majnun* collection, I argue that the voices and views of the artists mirror the manifold perspectives that people have to various forms of intangible and tangible culture. The presentation of this multitude of views in the exhibition reflects the complexity of identification processes and therefore goes beyond notions of 'self' and 'other'. In this respect, the Tropenmuseum functions as a forum where various opinions meet and as a space for intercultural encounters.

Introduction

The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, was founded in the 19th century as a colonial museum. Like other colonial museums it functioned as a showcase for the colonies. The museum always seems to have put its material collection on display but with little or no information about the original context within which the objects functioned. Next to products from the colonies, it presented the ways of life of colonised peoples - who were later renamed 'non-Western' peoples. The practice of collection and display was thus a one-way traffic. Scholars, as outsiders, presented their view of other cultures, and, needless to say, indigenous discourse was completely absent from the displays. The ethnographic objects in the museum functioned simply as static evidence of exotic lives.¹ They referred to cultural communities and to collectables without any apparent historical or artistic merit. The resulting displays highlighted the differences between people by means of a peculiar mix of physical and cultural signs of difference in a purely colonial context.²

Nowadays, more people than ever before can experience the exotic for themselves due to growing personal wealth and cheap airline tickets. Also, in the so-called 'multicultural' society that has emerged in the Netherlands, we feel that the world has shrunk. As a result of these developments, the Tropenmuseum is no longer so important as a presenter of other cultures and it has to acknowledge that the concept of 'the other' does not exist outside the Western world. Like other ethnographic museums across Europe, it has had to rethink and redefine its function in society, and therefore to reconsider the relationship between the content of its exhibitions and its audience.³

Although the Tropenmuseum desperately tries to distance itself from its essentialist past, it cannot escape

its historic burden.⁴ Essentialism still exists in the present-day structure of the Tropenmuseum, since the museum is divided into distinct regions, each with its own curator, exhibition space, and collection. However, in its recent acquisition policy the museum claims to be aware ... *that the idea of 'regions' is essentialist and outdated* and that it has been *sharply criticised for the political ramifications of stereotyping, imposed constructions of identity and a disregard for issues around migration and cultural interactions*.⁵

Refurbishing the Tropenmuseum

The Tropenmuseum took up the challenge of rethinking and redefining itself with a grand refurbishment of all the museum galleries that started in the 1990s and was completed in 2008. At the symposium *Tropenmuseum for a change!* Susan Legêne, former head of the curatorial department and responsible for the ideas behind the museum's new image, gave an overview of the history of the museum, and of the refurbishment, which functioned both as a product and process because it took so long (some fifteen years).⁶

The most critical aspect of the renewal was, in Legêne's view, the establishment of *new connections with source communities and the various target groups* to create new relationships *between the institute, the building, the collections, Dutch society and the communities from which the collections came and come*. Also, the relationship between the objects on display and the people had to be both transparent and direct.⁷

In order to be able to work on these new relationships and interpretations the museum had to challenge its past collection and exhibition practices. It had to investigate critically how people had benefited, suffered or been affected in other ways by the former displays. In other

words, the museum had to challenge its earlier notions of ethnographic authenticity and tradition, and of representation and self-representation.⁸

Consequently, the collection policy also needed to be re-examined. From now on the collection

... was no longer [to be] viewed simply as a depository or a storehouse of material cultures, but as a source of information about historical interactions, processes of representation, collectors and the formation of ideas.

New acquisitions had to *relate to the existing collections*, but at the same time they had to *have potential and experimental meaning for new acquisition policies*. The guiding principle was that the collection, both objects and images, had to be relevant to the stories the museum wanted to present.⁹

Over the past five years the museum has thus aimed *to strengthen the existing collection profile with contemporary objects* which focus on various themes: popular art and popular culture, culture and migration, religious and folk cultures, colonial history, shared cultural heritage and intangible heritage.¹⁰ Concerning the theme of intangible heritage, the Tropenmuseum researched the meaning of this concept for both its collection and exhibition policies.

Experimenting with intangible heritage: *Layla and Majnun*, a case study

In 2005 the Tropenmuseum chose the famous, but tragic, love story of *Layla and Majnun* as an intangible heritage theme with which to experiment. The general outline of the story is this: Layla and Qays met as children and fell in love with each other. Qays got so obsessed with his love for Layla that people came to call him 'Majnun', or 'the Madman'. When Majnun's father asked Layla's father for her hand in marriage to his son, Layla's father refused. Desperate, Majnun took refuge in the desert, and while there, he recited poems about his love for Layla. The desert animals became his friends. Meanwhile, Layla was married off to someone else and died of a broken heart, and when Majnun heard the news of the death of his beloved he died too.

Research into the story's fame, and the availability of modern or contemporary versions of it in various countries, resulted in the museum acquiring two

traditional examples from Iran and Turkey, and two contemporary autonomous artworks from Iran and Azerbaijan in 2005 and 2006 (with the financial support of the Mondriaan Foundation).

***Layla and Majnun* narration and narrative painting**

The museum commissioned a narration by the traditional storyteller, 'Morshed' [teacher] Vallioallah Torabi, to be accompanied by a narrative painting by Ahmad Khalili, both from Iran. Torabi told the story of *Layla and Majnun* in the presence of the coffeehouse painter Khalili in November 2005, and Khalili made sketches during the narration. In addition, Khalili used the version of the story told by the Persian poet Nizami (in 1188) as a source of inspiration. Khalili finished his narrative painting in February 2006. Then, a second telling of the *Layla and Majnun* story by Morshed Torabi was organised to accompany the finished painting. This performance was audio-visually recorded on a regular evening in the Azeri coffeehouse in Tehran, on March 5th, 2006. Both the recording and the narrative painting are now in the museum's collection.

Torabi is an Iranian dramatic storyteller who has told his stories in coffeehouses and theatres for almost fifty years. He knows all the ancient Iranian national and religious stories and classical folk stories. In accordance with the Iranian storytelling tradition, Torabi relies on his memory for his version of *Layla and Majnun* and as far as I can tell he does not make any use of Nizami's literary work. Khalili's narrative painting supports Torabi's narration. An analysis of this narration shows that Torabi creates his own version of the story although he maintains the general story outline.

Torabi makes use of all the methods used in the Iranian storytelling tradition - such as acting, dialogue, singing, dramatic gestures and so forth - performing before an audience. The storyteller relates the story, performing all the character roles, and using appropriate dramatic techniques.¹¹

However, Torabi narrates the history of *Layla and Majnun* indirectly, which makes it difficult to understand if you do not know the general outline of the story. Scene one of Khalili's painting shows Layla and Majnun meeting at school. Torabi describes this scene by reciting *...they took me to the school of love/where I was taught the lesson of pain and grief...* He explains the beginning of

Majnun's love for Layla thus:

*An arrow shot from those charming eyes
That hit him straight in the heart.
He said: Ah! I am struck by the arrow of love.
After one glance I died woefully.
Who is she, who deprived me of my tranquillity,
Sitting in the moonlight?...I am her longing lover,
Beautiful, I am infatuated by your love.*

Torabi also draws parallels with another famous Persian love story, *Farhad and Shirin*. He tells parts of that story at the beginning and at the end of his narration, framing his story of *Layla and Majnun* and drawing parallels between the two. Throughout his narration he invokes other Iranian stories, such as *Manije and Bijan*. He says:

*The love that Farhad cherished for Shirin.
The love that Layla cherished for Majnun.
The love of the Christian girl for a prince.
The love of Manije, the daughter of Afrasiab, for Bijan.
That was real love, not just any love.*

By invoking these other Persian stories Torabi locates his version of *Layla and Majnun* firmly in the Iranian poetic and narrative tradition. Torabi takes the liberty of a professional narrator to add details to the general outline of the story according to his own taste. In an interview he stated that a storyteller is allowed to complete literary works by embellishing the story within the tradition of storytelling. This is demonstrated in his elaboration of scene seven, where Layla is shown writing scraps of notes to Majnun in accordance with the Nizami version of

the story. Torabi invents an episode that does not occur in Nizami's poem and relates how Layla got ill and how people brought offerings to help her recover. Majnun also comes to bring her an offering in his bowl, but she refuses it. To Majnun this is a good sign:

*I am aware of Layla's tenderness
Her breaking my bowl reassures me
If she had wanted anyone else
Why would she break my bowl?*

Torabi's narration shows that storytelling is an active process. He blends elements from Iranian narrative tradition with elements he personally chooses. He memorises and embellishes the story and presents his narration dramatically, as is the way of Iranian storytellers. The elements Torabi personally chooses to add come from other Iranian love stories; it is an active process of selection, interpretation and elaboration within the framework of the Iranian storytelling tradition.

The story in the narrative painting that Ahmad Khalili (born 1943) made, runs from left to right up to the fourth scene. The fifth episode is depicted in the middle of the painting since it portrays the holy Ka'ba in Mecca. From scene six (the one below the scene in the upper right hand corner) the scenes spiral clockwise like the squares on a board for playing the game of 'Goose'.

Khalili relied heavily on the Persian story by Nizami. He painted all the episodes that the famous poet related, except for the descriptions of nature and of conversations Layla and Majnun have with, for example, the stars.¹² Khalili also depicted most of the details Nizami mentioned in his poem. In scene eight, for example, Layla retreated with her girlfriends into the garden. She is



Figure 1
Ahmad Khalili, *Layli and Majnun*,
2006. Oil on canvas. Inv.no. 6256-1. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum

portrayed underneath a cypress there, a detail that comes from Nizami's poem.

There are only three instances where Khalili created elements that cannot be found in either Torabi's narration or Nizami's poem. In scenes three and nine Khalili painted Layla eavesdropping from behind a curtain on the marriage proposals of Majnun's father and Ibn Salam. His third addition comes in scene eighteen which shows the episode where Majnun visits Layla's grave; Khalili has also portrayed the tombs of Majnun's parents, whereas Nizami only mentions Layla's grave.

Khalili's narrative painting shows that its creation was an active process. He follows the coffeehouse painting tradition closely and adds elements he has personally selected. The elements he chooses to include come mainly from earlier coffeehouse paintings and from the Persian poem by Nizami, only a few minor details arise from his own imagination. This indicates that Khalili hardly makes any use of his artistic licence, but emphatically chooses to work within the coffeehouse tradition and to rely heavily on those earlier cultural manifestations he selected as his examples.

Layla and Majnun in the Karagöz shadow theatre

As another example of a traditional form of the story, the museum obtained a Karagöz version, and the accompanying puppets of Layla and Majnun, from Turkey. Both the story and the puppets were created by Metin Özlen (born 1940) in the late 1970s. The museum audio-

visually recorded a *Layla and Majnun* Karagöz show by Özlen on December 10th, 2005 in the studios of the Marmara University in Istanbul, but unfortunately there was no audience present at the performance. This recording and the set of puppets are now part of the museum's collection.

Özlen is a retired Turkish professional puppet player and puppet maker in the tradition of Karagöz. He comes from a family of Karagöz players. Özlen created his Karagöz version of *Layla and Majnun* in the late 1970s and based it on his childhood memories of the tale and on the Turkish version of the story written by the poet Fuzuli in the sixteenth century.

Özlen's version is structured as a Karagöz performance. It thus consists of a prologue, an introduction, a dialogue, a plot, and an epilogue. It also meets other Karagöz requirements: Karagöz and Hacıvat are the leading characters, the story is situated in their neighbourhood, the scene is laid in Ottoman times - and the story has a happy ending. Furthermore, Özlen uses well-known Turkish songs and music to support and emphasise the Turkish character of the show.

The content of the Karagöz version differs considerably from Fuzuli's poem. Although Özlen has followed Fuzuli's general outline, he has omitted all the more dramatic and delicate scenes. Instead, much time is spent on dialogues between Karagöz and Hacıvat who reflect humorously on the story of *Layla and Majnun* and as a result the story is reduced to a minimum. For instance, Özlen does not mention Layla's marriage to someone else or the dedicated Zayd, although he is an



Figure 2 and 3
Metin Özlen, *Karagöz and Hacıvat*, late 1970s. Dye on leather.
Inv.no. 6243-12, 6243-11. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum

Figure 4 and 5
Metin Özlen, *Qays and Layla*, late 1970s. Dye on leather.
Inv.no. 6243-15, 6243-14. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum



important character in Fuzuli's poem. The most notable difference with Fuzuli is in the happy ending of the story. In the Karagöz version *Layla and Majnun* eventually married, whereas in Fuzuli's poem - and in all other versions known to me - they both died.

The structure of the Karagöz version of *Layla and Majnun* closely resembles the story of *Tahir and Zühre*. *Tahir and Zühre* is a Turkish folk story about the tragic love between the sultan's daughter, Zühre, and the vizier's son, Tahir. They committed suicide together when they were prevented from being together. This story had earlier been incorporated into the repertoire of the Karagöz theatre where it was also given a happy ending.¹³

In my view, the principal reason for the major alterations in the outline of the story is to maintain the character, structure and requirements of a Karagöz play, which aims to entertain and arouse laughter and astonishment. As a result, the compulsory happy ending changes the story drastically. To achieve this Özlen introduced 'Witch Granny', who told Layla's father that Layla would die if she was not allowed to marry Majnun. So Layla's father set Majnun three tasks and if Majnun succeeded in fulfilling them he would be permitted to marry Layla. Karagöz and Hacivat helped Majnun so he succeeded and was allowed to marry his beloved.

Özlen not only used the story of *Tahir and Zühre* as a basis for the outline of his story, but he also borrowed some characters from it for his Karagöz version of *Layla and Majnun*. For example, besides Zühre, other female characters in the story are her mother and the 'Black Female Slave'. Özlen incorporated both these characters

into his version of *Layla and Majnun* although they only play minor roles. Another character that is also part of Özlen's *Layla and Majnun* is 'Semenbasi'. In *Tahir and Zühre* he is Albanian and chief of the keepers of the hounds, but in *Layla and Majnun* he is keeper of the camels.¹⁴

In accordance with tradition, Özlen usually makes his puppets by carefully copying older ones. For his *Layla and Majnun* version he used puppets from his predecessors and puppets from other museums as sources of inspiration. He tried to copy the original puppets as carefully as possible but has sometimes added minor details - for example, the puppet of the 'demon Zebani' is an exact copy of a puppet, possibly originating from the seventeenth century, which is in the collection of the L.A. Mayer Memorial Foundation in the United States.¹⁵ Özlen even copied the name of the puppet from the caption with which it is displayed, which reads *demon from hell, Zebani*. The only difference between the two puppets is that Özlen has decorated his version.

Özlen also created puppets that are a mixture of his own interpretation and earlier examples. For the puppet 'Witch Granny', for example, Özlen used another puppet from the collection of the L.A. Mayer Memorial Foundation.¹⁶ He copied a hunchbacked old woman puppet, but added four snakes to the image. Özlen probably derived the idea for the snakes from older puppets of old women carrying snakes on their head or on their walking sticks and applied them to his version of 'Witch Granny'.

Some of his puppets clearly have Ottoman elements -

for example, 'Majnun's father's tent' very much resembles tents depicted in Turkish miniatures and 'Majnun the madman' wears the Ottoman turban as does 'Majnun with a dagger'. Other puppets have Arabic characteristics, for example, 'Layla's house', the 'Camel caravan', 'Qays', 'Layla's father', 'Majnun's father', 'Layla's mother' and 'Layla's maid'. These are possibly references to the Arabic origins of the story.

This shows that both Özlen's Karagöz show and his puppets are actively created. In his performance Özlen mixes the requirements of the traditional Karagöz shadow theatre with deliberately selected elements from other sources. He shapes his version of the *Layla and Majnun* story within the rules of the Karagöz tradition and structures it as a Karagöz play, sticking to the aim of the Karagöz theatre which is to entertain and amuse. He specifically selected a folk story that had earlier been incorporated into the canon of Karagöz stories - the story of *Tahir and Zühre* - as the model for his version of *Layla and Majnun*. Özlen also chose to follow the general outline of Fuzuli's poem.

The design of the set of puppets shows that Özlen carefully selected earlier examples from the Karagöz tradition. In general, he copied his examples in a very detailed way, embellishing them according to his own taste. In some cases he mixed elements from various earlier puppets into a personal creation. This demonstrates that the creation of both the Karagöz show of *Layla and Majnun*, and the accompanying puppets, is an active process of selection, interpretation and elaboration executed within the framework of the Karagöz tradition.

Layla and Majnun in contemporary autonomous art

The museum commissioned Orkhan Huseynov (born 1978), from Azerbaijan, to make a painting about Layla and Majnun. Huseynov makes illustrative paintings and drawings to which he applies the old traditions of miniature painting and folk art that can be found in his environment in Baku, Azerbaijan, and elaborates them. In his work he expresses his interpretation of stories he knows.

Huseynov is familiar with both Nizami's and Fuzuli's poems, but relied on his memory for his painting *Layli Majnun*. In addition, Huseynov used the poem *An occurrence with Majnun* by the nineteenth century poet, Seid Azim Shirvani, as a source of inspiration. In this poem a traveller comes across a very sad Majnun, who carries a dog in his arms and treats it lovingly as if it is his most precious friend. The dog lives in Layla's house. Majnun was so desperate to get in touch with anything of Layla's that he was even ready to serve the dog that lived with her.

In the painting, Majnun is the largest figure. He is depicted with long hair and a beard, in tune with his ascetic lifestyle in the desert, wearing only a loincloth to cover his emaciated body. Majnun is portrayed headless, since he has 'lost his head' because of his love for Layla. He is on his hands and knees, copying the behaviour of the desert animals with which he lives. This position also expresses his wish to be like Layla's dog in the poem, and the collar around Majnun's neck is also a reference to this. Because she is always on his mind, Layla is depicted in the background.

At Majnun's right hand side we see a deer and to the deer's left stand a wild cat and a cheetah. There are two



Figure 6
Metin Özlen, *Zebani*, late 1970s. Dye on leather.
Inv.no. 6243-8. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum



Figure 7
Metin Özlen, 'Witch Granny', late 1970s. Dye on leather.
Inv.no. 6243-23. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum



Figure 8
Metin Özlen, *Majnun the madman*, late 1970s. Dye on leather.
Inv.no. 6243-16. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.



Figure 9
Metin Özlen, 'Layla's father', late 1970s. Dye on leather.
Inv.no. 6243-18. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum

birds on Majnun's back, two other birds seem to have just flown off and there are two turtles at his feet. Huseynov believed these species lived in the desert or other dry places.

The scene with an emaciated Majnun surrounded by animals depicts a well-known episode that has a lot of precedents in miniature painting. The painting is also related to the miniature painting tradition stylistically; it does not have a clear background, there is no sense of time and place, there are hardly any shadows and like many miniatures it lacks a horizon, perspective and focal points. Moreover, the animals that appear in the painting are very often found in miniatures illustrating the story of *Layla and Majnun*.

Another commission was given to the Persian artist Farshid Mesghali (born 1940) to make an art installation based on *Layla and Majnun*. Mesghali had earlier made an art installation of *Farhad and Shirin*, another Persian love story,¹⁷ and he has also always been extremely interested in the Persian art of miniature painting. Gradually his interest in Persian miniature painting has developed until they have become his favourite source of inspiration – his models are classic 14th and 15th century miniatures from Herat, Shiraz, Tabriz and Bihzad.¹⁸

In his installation, Mesghali combined two episodes that have many precedents in Persian miniature painting: *Majnun mourning on Layla's grave*, and *Majnun sitting in the desert among the animals*. As we have seen, Huseynov also used the latter theme in his work. Huseynov's art installation of *Layla and Majnun* consists of twelve coloured pieces. In the centre we see the dead

Layla, floating above her tomb which is defined by four small trees. On the middle of three steps stands Majnun, who faces the tomb and covers his face with his hands. Five freestanding trees, a deer, a bird and a butterfly surround the lovers.

In an interview I had with him, Mesghali explained that Majnun could not bear to look at the tomb but felt the need to be present. It was a tragic situation, but, according to Mesghali, also the only time and place where the two lovers were united. The stairs represent the connection between life and death. The upper level is green, indicating life, the middle step is dark blue and the deceased Layla forms the last step; Majnun stands on the middle step between life and death. Mesghali did not want to display the tomb, but decided to show Layla floating in the air above it to give the installation a transcendental feeling.

Behind Majnun, life is depicted through symbols - the trees, the deer and the bird. The butterfly on Layla's tomb is connected with Layla and pays homage to Majnun's devotion to her. The tiger print on Majnun's legs is a reference to the loincloth that he wore in the desert. Mesghali suggested that Majnun might have had a loincloth made of animal skin since he lived among the animals.

Mesghali explained that he tried to create a contemporary interpretation of the miniatures in line with his working methods, by using colours specific to miniature painting but in modern materials and forms. Also, the setting and arrangement in space are contemporary. In my view, he has succeeded in achieving

his goal. Although the art installation is three dimensional, all the figures and their individual body parts in the installation are flat. It is almost as if they are cut out from a miniature and put in a three-dimensional space. Volume is suggested in the way in which the heads of Layla and Majnun are bent and in the way their arms are attached to their bodies. This also goes for the animals: the deer has a suggestion of body volume because his limbs and ears are attached to the side of his body. Mesghali has also created a sense of volume in the bird through the horizontal way the tail is attached and by attaching the wings sideways to its body. As is common in miniature painting, cypresses with long stems indicate a high horizon and define the scene of the installation.

In contrast to the previous examples, here the story of *Layla and Majnun* functions merely as a context for the autonomous artworks. The painting and installation do not tell the story in its entirety since they are only able to display one moment, one episode, of the story. Therefore, the story serves as a context for the artworks and only helps the audience to understand what they see.

This shows that both the painting and the installation, like the preceding examples, are the result of an active creative process. They differ from the other versions in one crucial way. Neither Huseynov, nor Mesghali, work within the framework of a tradition. They use the miniature painting tradition as a source of inspiration for their personal visual language, but they do not apply the rules of that tradition to their work. Huseynov was also inspired by Shirvani's poem. The general outline of the story of *Layla and Majnun* functions simply as a context

for both their artworks. Here, *the tangible can only be understood through the intangible*.¹⁹ Both artists blend their interpretation of elements from the tradition of miniature painting with elements that come from their imagination. This shows that the artworks of both Huseynov and Mesghali are a fusion of specifically and carefully selected elements to which they personally can relate, and they translate this mixture into artworks using their own, personally-created visual languages.

What becomes clear from these cases is that the creation of artworks, whether they are intangible narrations or performances, or tangible objects, is an active process executed by the artist. The artworks are the result of the artists' interplay with many factors. It is the result of careful and deliberate selection, elaboration and embellishment. In the cases of the narration, the narrative painting, the Karagöz performance and the puppets, the artists executed their processes within traditional frameworks.

By selecting earlier cultural traditions, being inspired by them and identifying with them, the artists have developed and shaped each of the traditions in which they work. They created relationships with earlier models by interpreting and using them. Tradition in turn may be considered as a way of looking back into history, a retro-active search for precedents, a construct, a selection and an image of the past.

These processes of selecting, adapting, creating and shaping their works of art, show that the term 'identity' does not suffice in these cases of intangible heritage. 'Identity' is too static and designates a condition rather



Figure 10
Orkhan Huseynov, *Layli Majnun*, 2005. Oil on canvas.
Inv.no. 6244-1. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum

Figure 11
Farshid Mesghali, *Layli and Majnun*, 2005. Plaster, acryl, acrylic paint
Inv.no. 6257-1. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum



than a process; it is not appropriate to describe the process of creating an artwork. Following Frederick Cooper, the term 'identifying' is more applicable to the cases we have discussed since it suggests complex processes and activities. The artists are the agents who carry out the 'identifying'.²⁰

Intangible heritage in an ethnographic museum

The intangible heritage implicit in the story of *Layla and Majnun*, and its collection functioned as a catalyst for the last gallery of the Tropenmuseum to be refurbished - *Travelling Tales*. This exhibition opened in September 2008, and is entirely devoted to intangible heritage. It aims to show as complete a picture of culture as possible by raising awareness among the audience of the connection between intangible heritage and the tangible collection. The exhibition is developed for the general museum visitor to the Tropenmuseum, but specifically addresses families with young children from age two to twelve. Stand-alone activities were developed especially for these age ranges in relation to the narrative traditions on display.

Travelling Tales presents people as vehicles of intangible heritage. The artists, storytellers, and others are all recognisably presented in the exhibition in installations, films and occasionally on stage in the museum. The audience can listen to, and watch, an adapted version of the story told by Torabi alongside the narrative painting by Khalili, it can listen to Özlen's *Layla and Majnun*, shown together with a selection of his

puppets, or it can admire the artworks by Huseynov and Mesghali.

The voices and views of the artists mirror the manifold perspectives people have on various forms of intangible and tangible culture. Therefore, the display of the story of *Layla and Majnun* offers various modes of identification with one source of intangible heritage. It reflects the complexity of people's identification processes and therefore goes beyond notions of 'self' and 'other'. This way of presenting manifold perspectives is also applied to the other narrative traditions on display (stories of the spider, 'Anansi', and the monkey-general 'Hanuman' from the *Ramayana*).

There are immigrant groups in Dutch society to whom the *Layla and Majnun* collection is particularly relevant, and it therefore enables the Tropenmuseum to engage with those groups. In one of the displays, *Unbounded NL*, this point is developed further. Here, migrants from all around the world present their contribution to Dutch culture; they dance, sing, play, tell and perform stories and enact traditions from their mother countries. To this end they use all kinds of cultural artefacts from the museum collection - puppets, instruments, storyteller sticks and so on. In this display intangible heritage is a way to express others' values and views on the museum collections.

Since *Travelling Tales* presents a multitude of voices, the display appeals to, and provides meaningful experiences for, multiple audiences. In this way intangible heritage has created an opportunity to balance the multiple views presented in the museum. Here, the museum acts as a mediator and functions as a space for

intercultural encounters. As a result, the display of intangible heritage in *Travelling Tales* can be seen as a forum where various opinions meet each other. It provides a space for the exchange and sharing of stories, experiences, and cultural information between visitors. In this way intangible heritage functions as a vehicle to promote respect for other cultures and to stimulate dialogue between them. It offers a new perspective on processes of identification and an opportunity for the Tropenmuseum to function as a place for discourse on common heritage and cultural exchange. Due to the broad target audience for the exhibition, this process can take place not only among peers, but also between different age groups and generations. 🇳🇱

NOTES

1. Shatanawi, M., 2007. 'Tropical Malaise', *Bidoun*, Issue 10, pp. 42-44.
2. Legêne, S., key-note speech *Tropenmuseum for a change!* in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, 11 December 2008.
3. Shatanawi, 'Tropical Malaise', pp. 42-44.
4. *ibid*
5. van Brakel, K. and Legêne, S. (eds.), 2008. 'Collecting at Cultural Crossroads. Collection policies and approaches (2008-2012) of the Tropenmuseum', *Bulletin 381 of the Royal Tropical Institute*, p.37.
6. For an elaboration of Susan Legêne's argument, I refer to the key-note speech she gave on 11th December 2008 at the symposium *Tropenmuseum for a change!* in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam.
7. *ibid*
8. *ibid*
9. *ibid*
10. van Brakel and Legêne, *op cit.*, p.25.
11. Page, M.E., 1979. 'Professional Storytelling in Iran: Transmission and Practice', *Iranian Studies*, Volume XII, Nos. pp. 3-4, 197; F. Nazazadeh, 2002. 'Dramatic Story-telling (Naqqâli)', in *Iran Cultural Life*, 283.
12. Incidents in the narrative painting: 1. The first meeting between Layla and Majnun at school. 2. A singing Majnun passes Layla's tent. 3. Majnun's father asks for Layla's hand. 4. Majnun tears his robe out of the pain of love. 5. Majnun's father takes him to Mecca. 6. The meeting between a passer-by and Majnun. 7. Layla remembers Majnun's face and writes him a letter. 8. Layla goes with the girls to an orchard and sits under a tree. 9. Ibn Salam asks for Layla's hand. 10. Nawfal comforts Majnun and takes him to his tribe. 11. In exchange for his horse, Majnun frees the deer from the hunter. 12. Majnun, the hostage and the old woman. 13. Ibn Salam takes Layla to his home. 14. Supported by a stick, Majnun's father visits his son. 15. Majnun unburdens his soul to the animals. 16. Uncle Salim Ameri visits Majnun. 17. Salim Baqdadi visits Majnun. 18. Majnun visits the grave of his parents. 19. Layla and Majnun as king and queen in paradise.
13. Sabri Koz, M. (ed.), 2004. *Torn is the curtain, shattered is the screen, the stage all in ruins!* Yapi Kredi Karagöz collection exhibition catalogue, pp. 276-277.
14. *ibid*. pp. 276-277.
15. Zebani, plate 96 in Tietze, Andreas, 1977. *The Turkish Shadow Theater and the Puppet Collection of the L.A. Mayer Memorial Foundation*.
16. *ibid*, old woman, plate 91.
17. http://farshidmesghali.com/persian_garden.htm, consulted March 9, 2008.
18. Sims, E., Marshak, B.I and Grube, E.J., 2002. *Peerless Images. Persian Painting and its sources*, pp. 43-61.
19. Galla, A., 2008. 'The first voice in heritage conservation' in the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*, Volume 3
20. This argument has been elaborated in Cooper, F., 2005. *Colonialism in Question. Theory, Knowledge, History*, Chapter 3 'Identity', pp. 59-90.