Lecture 4: The role of museum in safeguarding ICH By Christina Kreps, Denver University

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Since the UNESCO Convention on ICH Safeguarding was put forth in 2003, there has been a lot of discussion in the international museum community about the role museums play in safeguarding ICH. Most of these discussions have focused on how museums can supplement or add-on to what they already do in terms of their core museum activities: collection and documentation.

However, rather than merely “adding on” ICH to existing museum activities, Kreps argued that museums could do more to integrate the core principles of intangible cultural heritage into all aspects of museum management. In fact, the ICH movement is also part of wider “new museological” trends that have been going on in the museum world for 20 years or more. There has been a trend to shift the focus away from objects, collections and material culture to people and visitors, as well as the stories, values, and beliefs behind the objects and collections. This is what has been happening for a long time in the museum world, especially in the West. Museum practitioners have become more concerned about responding to the needs of the communities we serve.

In her lecture, Kreps traced the changing definition of the museum, pointing out that in the 1970s, there was a shift away from the primary purpose of the museum that aims to collect and preserve things to society, people and intangible culture. Moreover, she also discussed non-Western museology and its links to ICH safeguarding.

1.0 Comparative Museology

Museology has long been dominated by Western museology. Built on a western scientific approach, the traditional concept of the museums very Euro-centric in terms of how the museum is defined, what the museum should be about, or how collections should be curated. However, recent developments in museology are increasingly interested in learning more about the ways in which people from around the world create spaces and develop methods for taking care of things that they value.

Kreps proposes a number of new terms to refer to these comparative perspectives on curation, the
including “appropriate museology” and “indigenous curation.” She maintains that if the cultural heritage practitioners understand the principles of indigenous curation and appropriate museology, the safeguarding of ICH can take place in the context of communities as well as local museums. The safeguarding of heritage need not rely on Western concepts of conservation.

1.1 Indigenous Curation and ICH Safeguarding

Indigenous curation is not only as alternative way of looking at museums and curation, but it is also a method for safeguarding. Stated differently, indigenous curation can be understood as both a form of intangible cultural heritage, as well as a way of protecting intangible cultural heritage. Kreps offers three different examples of indigenous museology:

(1) While conducting research in Dayak villages in East Kalimantan in 1996, Kreps observed how the rice barns in many villages were used to store family heirlooms such as ceramics, gongs, and drums, in addition to a family’s rice supply. The following are some examples of preventive conservation principles and measures applied in the rice barn.

“The physical location of rice barns is indicative of a concern for conservation. In East Kalimantan villages, rice barns were located outside the village on high ground to protect them from fires in the villages and the river’s seasonal flooding. Certain architectural features, such as thatched roofing, movable awnings, and vents, which control interior temperature and regulate air flow, function as a technologically and environmentally appropriate means of “climate control.” Techniques for “pest management” are also evident in the rice barns’ architecture. An ingenious and effective means of preventing rodents from entering the rice barn is the placement of curved wooden planks or discs at the top of piles that support the structure.”

Other forms of pest management include the use of repellents and fumigates. Kreps heard from one villager that the skin of a weasel-like animal that emits a pungent odor is sometimes hung in the rice barn to “scare away” rats. Peppers are sometimes smoked inside the rice barn to slow the growth of molds and fungi. Charcoal may also be placed in the rice barn to act as a dehumidifier. All of these preventive conservation measures are part of curatorial traditions that represent knowledge and skills dedicated to the care and protection of specially valued things.


2 Ibid.
(2) The monastery is an indigenous model of a traditional museum for people in Thailand. When we observe how people bring objects and donate them to monastery, we can see clearly that the Buddhist monastery has served a museological function. We can also observe that monks, particularly the abbots, often become caretakers and curators of many kinds of objects, which are valued for different reasons by individuals or by the community. Today in Thailand, we see that monasteries continue to play an active role in the curation of local cultural heritage, both in terms of documenting and safeguarding intangible culture at the community level, and in terms of developing and curating material collections of objects. This role is as extension of an older tradition of monastery curation that already existed. They have just taken the modern idea or label “museum” and applied it to the monastery.

(3) Another example of indigenous curation in Thailand can be found at the Ton Kaew monastery in Lamphun Province. There, the abbot has restored a house that was traditionally a space for textile weaving for the purposes of a textile museum. Today, the house serves as a museum to exhibit the abbot's textile collection, but it is also a space for teaching younger people how to weave and transmitting this skill intergenerationally. In this sense, it is an indigenous curation, because the traditional function of the space under the house is being used to demonstrate and transmit this skill to younger generations.

1.2 Indigenous curation as ICH

Using the three examples cited above, Kreps illustrates the point that indigenous curatorial methods can be considered as a form of ICH, inasmuch as indigenous curation encompasses traditional knowledge and skills passed down intergenerationally and also reflects the intangible meaning and values of material objects. Indigenous knowledge and skills for taking care of objects should be respected and recognized as legitimate curatorial methods.

In addition to being an example of ICH, indigenous curation is also a method of safeguarding. What Kreps stresses is that heritage practitioners must integrate indigenous curatorial methods and local concepts of cultural heritage preservation into the local community museums or cultural heritage institutions. All kinds of knowledge of how people care for heritage, how people classify them, and how people store them should be recognized. Kreps refers to these activities as “appropriate museology.”
2.0 Appropriate Museology in Safeguarding ICH

Appropriate museology recognizes that there are many museologies out there in the world. In general, museum practitioners tend to talk about “best practices” in museology. However, Kreps maintains that rather than promoting “best practices” in museology, it is important to identify the most “appropriate” museological practices in each context. This means that what may be appropriate in one cultural context in one country, may not be appropriate to another. This approach is based on cultural relativism, and some examples are given below.

2.1 Official museology in Kalimantan

Kreps conducted research in Borneo, where she looked at how the Indonesian government was using the museum as an instrument for national development and modernization. Her research examined how the museum idea was interpreted in the Indonesian context, particularly in the case of Kalimantan, located in central Borneo. One aspect that caught her attention was the display of living culture found in the provincial museum in central Kalimantan. The display had been set up by officials from the Ministry of Culture in Jakarta. The exhibition was basically a replica of the culture outside the museums, and it made no sense to the local people.

The government spent money to make dioramas and exhibits of river boat, a house on the river with a canoe and fishing net and spears and baskets. The exhibition mimicked the dioramas of foreign cultures prevalent in the traditional western museum model. This was a clear illustration of an official museum that was not developed in the context of the local community. Rather, it transplanted Western curatorial methods into the Indonesian context, which had no relevance or connection to local communities or indigenous curatorial practices.

2.2 Local museums and cultural management

Kreps mentioned the book entitled The Future of Indigenous Museums: Perspectives from the Southwest Pacific (2007) by Nick Stanley (ed.), which includes many examples of community cultural centers. The case studies in this volume offer illustrations of museums which are responsive to their contexts, where living culture is curated by local people and studied by native ethnographers.
For instance, the book discusses the concept of Pusaka.⁴ For the inhabitants of modern day Indonesia and Malaysia—Minangs, Balinese Bataks, Bugis, Manado, Moro, Pampangan, Tagalog and many others—pusaka specifically refers to the family heirlooms gifted from the ancestors which must be treasured and protected. These pusaka may have individual names, honorific titles and may have supernatural attributes and qualities. The possessor of the pusaka may be positively or negatively affected by the pusaka, it is dependent on the will or spirit of the item.

### 2.3 Involvement of the source community in museum institutions

The National Museum of the American Indian, which is part of the Smithsonian Institution in the United States, takes a unique approach to collaborative curation. This museum is curated by and for native people, the indigenous people of America, and it aims to educate the public about native cultures and histories and to respect what is called “traditional care” methods. Now, when the museum practitioners have worked with native people, they have found that the cultural bearers have their own ways for taking care of objects. They not only have developed techniques for taking care of things, but they have their own ways or ideas about how things should be stored in museum collections.

Moreover, the cultural protocols of the tribes are implemented in the care of materials, both in the exhibits and storage cabinets. For example, the masks of a female face cannot be in the same cabinet with male masks. A mask that is used in the death ceremony has to be facing up or to be facing down. So every tribe has its own curatorial method or ways of taking care of or storing things. These traditional methods of caretaking are integrated into the museum’s curatorial practices. It is revolutionary, because the museum professionals have to respect the indigenous curatorial concepts and practices. This method ensures the integrity of the object: physical, material, and spiritual.

### 3.0 Conclusion

Kreps had shown many examples of relations between museums and intangible cultural heritage. In each culture, there are different concepts and methods of safeguarding heritage. Again, community museums are a reflection of the community. Museums offer a space that can help define the identity of the community in the process of re-defining what that the museum is. Each museum can be

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different, as there are many museum methods out there in the world. That’s part of the world's cultural diversity.