

THEORIZING *Cultural* HERITAGE

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“Indigenous Curation as Intangible Cultural
Heritage: Thoughts on the Relevance of
the 2003 UNESCO Convention”

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Cultural heritage is today a rubric of ever-expanding scope. It is used globally as a basis for multinational, national, state, and local programs. Cultural heritage is also the focus of ideas and programs generated by hundreds of non-governmental organizations, community-based and advocacy groups, and businesses. Yet the *concept* of “cultural heritage” is vastly under-theorized. It has lacked an academic, disciplinary base; has generated only an attenuated theoretical literature; and has generally left the bearers of cultural heritage out of the discussion.

Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellows in residence at the Smithsonian Institution Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage are helping to expand and refine the theoretical framework for cultural heritage to include grassroots voices. Reflecting the perspectives of academic specialists, civil society groups, and public cultural organizations, fellows’ work informs dialogues and practice across social, political, and disciplinary boundaries, as well as indicates future directions for policy.

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This essay explores how indigenous curation qualifies as intangible cultural heritage under the Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage adopted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003 (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org>). It also examines the role of museums and UNESCO agencies such as the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in promoting the recognition and application of indigenous curation.

“Indigenous curation,” as I use the term, is shorthand for non-Western models of museums, curatorial methods, and concepts of cultural heritage preservation. This complex of cultural expressions can be collapsed into what I refer to as “museological behavior”—any activity, body of practices, and knowledge system that exhibits a concern for the preservation of valued cultural materials and traditions. This includes the creation of structures or spaces for the collection, storage, and display of objects as well as knowledge, practices, and techniques related to their care, use, treatment, interpretation, and conservation. Museological behavior also encompasses concepts of heritage preservation, or conceptual frameworks that support the transmission of culture through time, which is how I define cultural heritage preservation.

Western museology is rooted in the assumption that the museum idea and museological behavior are distinctly Western and modern cultural phenomena. But many cultures keep objects of special value and have created complex structures or spaces for the objects’ safekeeping as well as technologies for their curation and preservation. In many respects, these indigenous museological forms and their functions are analogous to those of Western museology (see Kreps 2003a).¹

For example, Maori meeting houses of New Zealand, the *haus tambaran* of New Guinea, and Micronesian *bai* are structures that have served as places to create, store, and display sacred objects, as well as centers for teaching younger generations about their people’s history, culture, arts, and spiritual beliefs. As Moira Simpson has pointed out in her book, *Making Representations* (1996), contemporary museums in the Pacific are not necessarily new or foreign concepts in the region, as is often claimed, but extensions of older traditions.

The Kenyan Dayak rice barn (*lumbung*) is analogous to the museum concept not so much in the sense of being a place for the collection, display, study, and interpretation of things for the edification of a public (as in the notion of a modern, Western museum) but rather in how it represents a concern for preservation on a conceptual as well as technical level through the application of actual preventive conservation measures. While conducting research in Kenyan Dayak villages in East Kalimantan in 1996, I 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 the East Kalimantan villages I visited, 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. I 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.

Indigenous curatorial methods may be intended to protect both the material and spiritual integrity of objects, reflecting a particular community’s religious and cultural protocols regarding the use and treatment of certain kinds of objects. Native American “traditional care” methods exemplify such a perspective and are increasingly being integrated into mainstream museum² collection care and management. These methods might include the separation of culturally sensitive or sacred objects from general collections, or the segregation of objects on the basis of gender. Access to certain types of objects may be restricted to either women or men, elders or religious leaders, particular clans, and so on. The ceremonial smudging and “feeding” of objects in storage areas has also become more common, as have wrapping objects in muslin and storing them in unsealed containers (see Rosoff 1998, and Flynn and Hull-Walski 2001). This is done because objects are considered animate, living entities that need to breathe. This view of objects stands in sharp contrast to how objects have been conventionally perceived and treated in mainstream museums.

These indigenous models of museums and curatorial practices are tangible expressions of the intangible or, rather, ideas about what constitutes heritage, how it should be perceived, treated, passed on, and by whom. They exemplify holistic approaches to heritage preservation that are integrated into larger social structures and ongoing social practices. The Indonesian idea of *pusaka* exemplifies this broad, integrated approach to heritage preservation.

The word *pusaka* is generally translated into English as “heirloom.” However, it carries a wide range of meanings in the Indonesian language. According to Soebadio, one Indonesian dictionary lists three separate but related meanings for the word

pusaka: 1) something inherited from a deceased person (analogous to the English word inheritance); 2) something that comes down from one's ancestors (analogous to heirloom); 3) an inheritance of special value to a community that cannot be disposed of without specific common descent (analogous to heritage in the sense of something possessed as a result of one's natural situation or birth) (1992:15).

Thus, *pusaka* is a concept of cultural heritage expressed in both tangible and intangible forms. The concept has also worked to protect and preserve valuable cultural property and transmit cultural knowledge and traditions through the generations. Consequently, *pusaka* has also functioned as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage. It is an all-inclusive, holistic approach to heritage preservation that is integrated into larger social structures and ongoing social practices (see Kreps 2003b).

Tangible forms of *pusaka* include things like textiles, jewelry, ornaments, weapons, ceramics, beads, dance regalia, land, carved ancestor figures, and houses. Intangible cultural expressions such as songs, dance dramas, stories, or names can also be considered *pusaka*. Virtually anything can become *pusaka*, although not everything that is inherited is *pusaka*, nor are objects created to be *pusaka*. An object or entity becomes *pusaka* in the course of its social life. As one Indonesian writer puts it, *pusaka* are social constructs, and it is the meaning a society gives these objects, not anything innate in the objects themselves, that makes them *pusaka* (Kartiwa 1992:159).

So, like all other cultural heritage, the meanings and values assigned to particular *pusaka* are socially and culturally constructed and contingent on specific contexts and circumstances. Because *pusaka* is a social construct, it is more appropriate to think of it in terms of social relationships because *pusaka* emphasize, express, or define relationships within a society (Martowikrido 1992:129).

Different cultural groups throughout Indonesia have their own kinds of *pusaka* and ways of assigning value and meaning to it. Hence, they may have their own, particular notions of what constitutes their heritage and approaches to its preservation. They may also have their own protocol regarding who is responsible for looking after the *pusaka*, that is, its curators. In one group it may be a village headman, in another a religious officiate, and in yet another, a member of a royal court. Curatorial work in this context is a social practice that is deeply embedded in a larger social structure that defines relationships among people and their particular relationships to objects.

These are but a few examples of indigenous curatorial practices and concepts of heritage that show how different cultures have had their

own curatorial traditions and ways of preserving aspects of their culture, which, in themselves, are part of their cultural heritage. They additionally demonstrate how approaches to cultural heritage protection and curatorial traditions are products of specific cultural contexts, and are culturally relative and particular. In this respect, what is seen as appropriate in one setting may not be another.

Indigenous curatorial practices should be recognized and valued in their own right as unique cultural expressions and as evidence of human cultural diversity. But they also have much to contribute to our understanding of museological behavior cross-culturally: how people in diverse cultural contexts perceive, value, care for, and preserve material and immaterial aspects of their culture. Ironically, while anthropologists have historically taken interest in the collection and study of non-Western material culture, they have not devoted their efforts, on any scale, to the systematic study and documentation of the ways in which people have curated these materials—despite the fact that these too are part of culture just like religion, art, social organization, and so on.

Indigenous models of museums, curatorial practices, and concepts of cultural heritage preservation did not attract the attention of scholars and museologists until relatively recently. This lack of attention has been largely due to the pervasive view (or ideology) of the museum concept and a preservation ethos as uniquely Western and modern phenomena, as well as an inherent belief in the superiority of scientifically based, Western museology. Western knowledge and models have been the primary context and referent for our practice. Due to this ideology and the hegemony of Western museology, most people have difficulty thinking and talking about museums, curation, and heritage preservation in terms other than those provided by Western museological discourse. We have been blinded from seeing museological behavior in other forms and expressed through other means (see Kreps 2003a).

The hegemony of Western museology and approaches to heritage preservation has contributed to two phenomena that pose a threat to indigenous curation: 1) the global spread and reproduction of Western-oriented models, and 2) the reliance on expert-driven, top-down, professionalized/standardized museum training and development. Both of these forces can inadvertently undermine indigenous curatorial practices and paradoxically the preservation of people's cultural heritage.

As a case in point, in my previous research on state-sponsored museum development in Indonesia, I discovered how the appropriation of both the discourse and methods of Western museology, as promulgated by ICOM, was leading to the erasure of indigenous

curatorial methods and approaches to heritage preservation. Museums and Western, scientific-based museology were seen as symbols of modernity and part of the state's strategy for modernization and development. Those aspects of traditional culture that did not fit into the state's ideology, such as traditional knowledge systems (including traditional curatorial practices), were systematically ignored or "disappeared." Attention focused on promoting professional museum training and preserving the tangible aspects of culture rather than intangible, living cultural traditions.

In my study on the Provincial Museum of Central Kalimantan, Museum Balanga I noted the incongruity of the development of a Western-style ethnographic museum (complete with life-size dioramas) in a context where the culture represented in the museum was still being lived. People didn't "get" the museum and saw no need to visit a place to see reproductions of their everyday lives. Yet beneath the surface, the work being done in the museum reflected local values, traditions, and practices related to the curation of ethnographic materials. For instance, to curate special exhibits the museum staff often invited ritual specialists, known as *basir*, or other local people they referred to as "cultural experts." They called on these people out of respect for their specialized knowledge regarding the meaning, use, and treatment of certain objects as well as rights to this knowledge. However, the ritual specialists' work in the museum was discouraged by some top administrators because it did not fit into the idea of a modern institution based on science (Kreps 2003a).

INDIGENOUS CURATION AS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Indigenous curation theoretically qualifies as intangible cultural heritage as defined in the Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. According to the Convention, the intangible cultural heritage means: "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (Article 2.1, Definitions). In addition to cultural expressions like festivals and the performing arts, i.e., musical, dance, and theatrical traditions, intangible cultural heritage also encompasses oral traditions, traditional craftsmanship, knowledge and skills, cultural spaces, and social practices related to intangible culture. A cultural expression must also be transmitted from generation to generation, be constantly being recreated by communities and groups, and provide them with a sense of identity and cultural continuity to qualify as intangible cultural heritage and for protection under the Convention. The ultimate purpose of the Convention is to promote greater respect for cultural diversity and human creativity as well as its protection.

The 2003 Convention is the outgrowth of several UNESCO safeguarding initiatives that began to emerge

some three decades ago, such as the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage adopted in 1972. The 1972 Convention focused on identifying and protecting tangible cultural heritage, defined as monuments, architectural works, monumental sculpture and painting, archaeological sites, and natural features thought to be of outstanding universal value in the fields of history, art, and science. Thus, it concerned protecting the products of human creativity and ingenuity predominantly of the past, and favored "classical" works produced by "great civilizations." In contrast, the 2003 Convention shifts attention to safeguarding the knowledge, skills, and values behind tangible culture, concentrating on the people and social processes that sustain it. The new Convention demonstrates a heightened concern for protecting living culture expressed in popular and "folkloric" traditions, acknowledging the value of these traditions to local communities in addition to the interests of history, art, and science (see Kurin 2004).

Indigenous curation is not only a form of intangible cultural heritage but also functions as a means for its safeguarding, as pointed out earlier. Under the Convention "safeguarding" means: "measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission (particularly through formal and informal education) as well as revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage." One of the primary purposes of the Convention is to foster the conditions under which intangible cultural heritage may continue to exist and that encourage communities to enact these expressions. Consequently, the focus is on helping sustain living cultural traditions. Another important requirement is that local communities and the "culture bearers" themselves be involved in identifying intangible cultural heritage and developing and implementing measures for its safeguarding. Thus, it is designed to be a bottom-up, participatory approach to heritage management and preservation.

The different articles under each section of the Convention outline safeguarding measures in more detail, as well as the role and responsibilities of state parties. One of the primary means suggested in the Convention for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, and perhaps one of the most heavily debated, is the creation of national inventories of intangible cultural heritage, and a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Many question not only the logistics of creating such inventories but are also apprehensive about the unintended consequences of this documenting and archiving project. Some fear it will objectify and fossilize intangible cultural expressions as they are translated into tangible forms, i.e., films, recordings, texts, etc., or lead to their standardization and institutionalization as they are

made to fit the Convention's criteria and definitions. Some believe this effort also diverts limited resources from nurturing sustainable environments for the kinds of heritage covered in the Convention, e.g., indigenous knowledge, traditional music, oral literature, and so forth. One author even sees it just as a "vast exercise in information management" (Brown 2003).

I do not think the creation of an inventory or list is the best approach to safeguarding indigenous curation, although identification, research, and documentation may be a prerequisite for its eventual application in some settings. Rather, I believe the Convention, as an international protection and consciousness-raising instrument, can be invoked to promote awareness of indigenous curation and help validate it as legitimate museological practice, alongside other curatorial traditions such as professional, Western museology. The voice of UNESCO carries enormous weight in many countries. Certain UNESCO agencies, such as ICOM, can refer to the Convention to encourage the recognition and application of indigenous curation.

Since the Convention was adopted in 2003, there has been a great deal of discussion on the role of museums in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Several articles in *ICOM News*, ICOM's newsletter, as well as its journal, *Museum*, have been devoted to the topic. Intangible cultural heritage was also the theme of ICOM's tri-annual conference in 2004. It is logical that museums should play a prominent role in protecting intangible cultural heritage and promoting the aims of the Convention because museums have long been devoted to curating and preserving cultural heritage, albeit primarily in tangible forms. UNESCO has been officially supporting the development of museums and professional museum practices through ICOM since both institutions were founded in 1946. Much of the discussion in the literature has centered on how museums can augment their conventional functions of curating and preserving objects and collections by also curating and preserving living cultural expressions. The curation of living culture is not an entirely new role for museums, however. Many museums around the world have been doing this all along, such as indigenous, community-based, and culturally specific museums, while large, mainstream museums have been paying more attention to intangible cultural heritage in response to changes taking place in the museum profession for several decades. Such developments include the growing recognition of non-Western or indigenous models of museums, curatorial practices, and concepts of heritage preservation. This trend can be framed within a larger movement that acknowledges

the social and cultural dimensions of museum functions and the relative nature of curatorial work (see Kreps 2003b). In this respect, the Convention parallels current trends in the museum world and can be another tool for protecting diverse museological forms.

Recognition of indigenous curation in the form of the co-curation of collections and exhibitions is becoming commonplace in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, and we are learning much from these collaborations regarding the ways different communities perceive, value, care for, and protect their cultural heritage. Such collaborations are not just adding to a growing body of literature in comparative museology but are inspiring the development of more cross-culturally informed approaches to heritage management and preservation. Approaches such as the integration of Native American methods of traditional care in mainstream museums bring together diverse curatorial traditions and heritage management strategies.

While these trends show how some museums in some places have been devoting greater attention to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, the recognition and application of indigenous curatorial traditions and alternative approaches to heritage preservation are still relatively new phenomena in the professional museum world. Museologists, as in the case of anthropologists, have been concerned with collecting, curating, and preserving people's material culture but have not, until lately, been interested in learning about how these objects might be curated from other museological perspectives. There are also some who believe the trend jeopardizes the further development of professional museum methods and standardization, which, in turn, can compromise our ability to properly care for and save valuable cultural resources. But acknowledging the value of indigenous curatorial traditions should not diminish the role of professional curatorship. Rather, recognition opens up possibilities for the exchange of information, knowledge, and expertise. The point is to give credence to bodies of knowledge and practices that have been historically overlooked or ignored. Indigenous curation and approaches to heritage preservation are unique cultural expressions that should be acknowledged and valued in their own right as part of people's cultural heritage, and as examples of global cultural diversity.

Museums are always products of particular historical and cultural contexts, and thus, in themselves, are unique cultural expressions and forms of tangible and intangible culture. Through cross-cultural studies we are continuing to learn that just as museums

are as diverse in character as the communities they represent, so too are the ways in which people perceive, value, care for, and transmit their heritage. They are expressions of human cultural diversity and creativity, which is ultimately what the Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage is intended to protect.

ICOM could become a proponent of more cross-culturally oriented approaches to cultural heritage preservation by sponsoring research on indigenous curation as well as workshops and training programs on how to incorporate it into mainstream museum practices. ICOM representatives could also encourage its continued use in areas where curation is still embedded in ongoing social relationships, as I have observed in Indonesia. When the Convention is fully ratified, a Fund for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage will be established that may be drawn on for supporting such efforts. The Convention establishes means for international cooperation and assistance, especially in the areas of research, education, and training, and outlines forms of international assistance that include help for studies concerning various aspects of safeguarding, the provision of experts and practitioners, and staff training (Article 21).

The discourse of the 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage theoretically reflects a shift in thinking from a concern for safeguarding tangible cultural heritage to a concern for the protection of the knowledge, skills, and values behind this heritage as well as for the people and social processes that sustain it. It demonstrates the need to value cultural expressions on the local (particular) level, in addition to the universal, and acknowledges the worth of popular cultural forms as well as those of “high culture.” But if the Convention is to be an effective instrument in realizing this revised approach to heritage protection, it must be used to encourage efforts that challenge old paradigms and give way to new modes of thinking and talking about heritage that lead to new forms of practice. In considering the role of museums in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, some have suggested that museums can assist in the documentation, inventorying, and archiving processes (functions that museums perform particularly well) and put more effort into sponsoring performances of music, dance, drama, and storytelling in museums. While certainly worthwhile and important, these are rather conventional approaches to heritage preservation in museums and do not exhibit a fundamental shift in thinking or departure from old paradigms. Here we may be just “adding on” to what museums already do rather than radically altering how they do it. 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. The Convention has expanded the definition of heritage, or the notion of what constitutes heritage. It could similarly be used to broaden ideas on what constitutes “safeguarding” as well as “measures” for that safeguarding. The language of inclusivity is inscribed in the Convention. The question of how it will be interpreted and operationalized remains open.

One of the main challenges to enacting the purposes and principles behind the Convention will be overcoming its internal contradictions and paradoxical position as the offspring of UNESCO—an inherently top-down, expert-driven institution. On the one hand, the Convention is advocating local participation in identifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage by encouraging the participation of the actual culture bearers who are representatives of folkloric or popular traditions. In favoring these types of cultural expressions, the Convention is also advocating for the less powerful and historically marginalized. But on the other hand, it is defining what that participation and safeguarding should entail, even suggesting “standard-setting” objectives.

The Convention, in contrast to its 1972 predecessor, the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, recognizes that “heritage,” like culture, is a process and is expressed in multitudinous forms. Yet despite the Convention’s nod to diversity, it is a global cultural policy intended to be universally applicable with certain hoped-for results, akin to the 1972 Convention. As Handler reminds us, “Cultural processes [like heritage curation] are inherently particular and particularizing, so we should not expect the application of a global policy to have the same results in all situations” (2002:144). We will not know the impact of the Convention until after it has been fully ratified, put into practice, and we have the chance to carry out empirical studies on actual projects. In Kurin’s words, the Convention “provides a tool for culture bearers and culture workers—how useful remains to be seen.”

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NOTES

1 Most of the examples of indigenous curation as well as ideas and arguments related to it are taken from my book *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation, and Heritage Preservation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

2 The term “mainstream museum” refers to museums created and controlled by members of the dominant society, for example, by people of European descent in settler nations like the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Mainstream museums are also labeled as such due to their embodiment of culturally, Western-derived, professional museology.

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