Exhibiting the intangible
Social phenomena and ethnographic collections at the MEG

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March 2009

In this paper, I want to address a few of the issues relating to the concept of "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) which poses challenges and ethical problems in ethnographic museums. I will address specifically the partial focus on only certain aspects of ICH; aspects of conservation; compliance to policies; and the development of entertainment – divertissement-- and merchandising of culture.

Has the ethnographic museum ever done anything but address the intangible? It is not because the exhibits were long limited to artefacts, photographs and text panels that the subject matter was not intangible in essence. As a matter of fact, the definition of ICH by UNESCO corresponds with the interests of most ethnographic museums:

> **"oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage", "performing arts", but also "social practices, rituals and festive events", "knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe", and, eventually, "traditional craftsmanship".**

These can be seen as selected subfields of the larger traditional categories of social practices such as "religion", "economy" and "politics", equally intangible, but not part of UNESCO's vocabulary on ICH. More interestingly, ICH categories appear to be selected salient aspects, often of an aesthetic nature, of broader institutions or systems of thought and practices. Even though they often belong to cult, to ritual or political institutions, they are presented as "culture" and given the status of "heritage", commanding steps to ensure their conservation.

What is ICH? Even though Anthony Shelton has reviewed the origins and the development of the concept of ICH in several fields, I would like to further recall UNESCO's definition for the sake of my argument. The official website indicates "…the ICH to be safeguarded by this convention" :

- "is transmitted from generation to generation"
- "is constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history"
- "provides communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity"
- "promotes respect for cultural diversity and human creativity"
- "is compatible with international human rights instruments"
- "complies with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, and of sustainable development"

"The ICH is traditional and living at the same time. It is constantly recreated and mainly transmitted orally" (ibidem)

"Many elements of ICH are endangered, due to the effects of globalization, uniformization policies, and lack of means, and to the erosion of functions and values of such elements and to lack of interest among the younger generations" (ibidem).

Needless to say I see these limitations as perfectly legitimate for the organisation, but I want to suggest here that they cannot be a model for the conceptualisation, research and exhibition of the intangible in the ethnographic museum, where the scope must remains unlimited:

- No social phenomenon or intangible cultural production should fall outside the scope of the ethnographic museum on account that it is not transmitted from generation to generation.
- Likewise, any belief, idea, knowledge, social practice or intangible creation that has ceased to exist, is intermittent, ephemeral or is not shared by a community or group, like so much of the youth culture, is also within the scope of the museum.
- Definitions of "community" and what might constitute a "sense of identity and continuity" are open for debate.
- As for compatibility with international human rights instruments, cultures of "war" and "violence", or trade for instance, are hardly ICH candidates for prizes, but should be explored in museums. The same would apply for most matrimonial practices in the world that do not recognise an individual's freedom.
- Many "social practices, rituals and festive events" in traditional cultures "structure the lives of communities" as the ICH division phrases it, but in ways that often support the subservient status of certain castes, groups of people, women, youth, etc. and exclude often dramatically deviant individuals. As such, it is debatable whether they comply with human rights instruments, mutual respect among communities and sustainable development. But again these are topics museum ethnographers should address if they do not wish to contribute to the beatification of exotic cultures.

So, is it the notion of "heritage" that distinguishes UNESCO and the museum of ethnography? Would heritage distinguish the "nicer", "non-contentious" aspects of social practice or cultural production? To put it simply, the museum of ethnography is a place to address the intangible, but without the limitations imposed by UNESCO's definition of ICH.

1990 – 2010
In Europe, in the 1990s, many secular museums of ethnography, often city museums or state institutions, reached a standstill in terms of major permanent or temporary exhibitions. Visitor counts dropped dangerously. A form of anomy, this may have had to do partly with the lack of capacity ethnography museums had to adapt swiftly to the contemporary context of media, publishing and marketing, and to the competition of world music, television and tourism which increasingly offered better 'access' to non-Western intangible cultures than the ethnographic museum ever had. The ensuing reactions and the plans for renewal in museums took on very different forms across the world, ranging from cosmetic changes, to the dissolution of museums and to the creation of new ones. The best known and most controversial museum to emerge from this context is the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris

(2006). Another example, the Museum of World Cultures, in Göteborg (2005), resulted from the fusion of formerly distinct ethnographic museums. The latter shows a comparable positioning in relation to "global-local" issues shared with the World Museum Liverpool, also recently refurbished.

The Pavillon des Sessions, in the Louvre (2000) and the British Museum's Sainsbury African Galleries, (2001), illustrates another trend, to reserve large well-restored or newly-built galleries for the exhibition of masterpieces with prestigious mise-en-scène. Other museographies for ethnographic collections, albeit seemingly very different in some German or Dutch ethnographic museums, have something in common. In the latter, topics, scenographies and nomenclatures may offer a higher degree of contextualisation, but the bottom line is always a modernist aesthetics of the mise-en-scène in the presentation of a classical selection of artefacts. The presentation is more often than not intended to represent a visual "culture" from a certain angle and at some point in history, in order to be representative of the arts of this or that place or people. Historicisation of the collection and displays are often timid, giving hints at the origin of certain objects, but rarely developing a strong historical storyline. Such museums found it opportune to set up these new permanent art galleries to depart from their public image as dusty lumber-rooms and win new audiences.

The more positive aspects of these changes should be highlighted too. Generally, they have been implemented with major conservation, inventory and digitization campaigns that make information about the collections far more accessible than ever before. New facilities mean more exhibitions and larger audiences. Generally, there is more space, there are more objects on permanent display, more temporary exhibitions, more libraries more events and more performances for more visitors than in the museums that they replaced. At the end of the day the result can, in most cases, be seen as an improvement.

In addition to the programming of actual performances, the quest for an enhanced experience of the "intangible" at the museum prompted digitization campaigns of photographs, music and films. Interestingly, many policy makers and museum authorities in Europe present these efforts as their contribution to the safeguarding of ICH. Visual databases are spawning on websites, multimedia terminals invade exhibition spaces, CDs of music and DVD's of ethnographic films are filling shelves of museum shops… Expensive to carry out and demanding equally expensive marketing, these campaigns are often not directed by independent curators for the sake of conservation, research and knowledge, but for developing attendance, income and entertainment, sometimes compromising the non-profit and scholarly status of the museum. Besides, a curious and concerning paradox shades these programs. While they are often promoted or justified as means of "conservation" or even "safeguarding", in practice they often lead to a loss of interest in the original media and their proper appreciation, and conservation. Even if a transfer to other formats or media guarantees better access, it implies losses of information and a diminished experience. More importantly, it also distracts the gaze away from the object to its image, from the image to its virtual copy, from the individual and the group's message to their moving image, from the performance to its recording, from the wide screen to the small one, from the text to the quotation, all of which are aspects of a growing cultural consumerism. On the other hand, access to visual and audio data and their circulation has been greatly multiplied which obviously has some advantages in terms of access to culture.

But this is all far from the goals of the UNESCO focus on ICH, whose purpose is to sensitize public attention to the importance of and to support the preservation of *living* intangible cultural heritage, principally in its context of origin. Can museums do that? should museums do that? Ought they be conservatories of endangered cultures? And how would the performance of ICH at the museum contribute to its salvage? Should the museum turn into a "cultural centre" for performances of all types? All these questions need to be debated in the museum by engaging dialogue with performers before establishing a politics of programming in this field.

Proponents of the "intangible" in museums want "culture" to be experienced in all sorts of ways. Thanks to the mobility and availability of performers in metropolitan cities, there is, in or around the museum of ethnography, an increasing number of out of context and de-sacralised live performances or performances that are entirely tailored for the Western audience. My concerns are many. Should we assume that performers are all legitimate "representatives" or their culture of origin when we present them as such on stage in an institution? Are we supporting the de-sacralizing of intangible traditions? Should we assume that it is entirely ethical to support performers engaged in activities that are not necessary socially and even economically sustainable? Furthermore, this raises a range of issues around migrant workers and their status that are too serious to be taken lightly.

How can we now put 21st century performers together with 19th century collections in the same museum space and, at least for the time of the performance, prevent the audience from collapsing the two into some primeval or even primitive ideal? It has been argued for decades now that the artworks of the 5 continents ripped from their time and context of use and brought to metropolitan museums, have forever lost their original meaning. Now that there has been decades of research on "primitivism" and critiques of past exhibitionary practices involving aliens at the museum, in zoos and other public places, what intellectual framework, what anthropological concepts and what ethical guidelines could we possibly advance to justify a return of living exhibits?

My question may seem extreme and one might counter that there are plenty of free and independent performers who will themselves seek opportunities for performances. Nevertheless, unless they are themselves established in a socially and economically sustainable position and unless they possess the conceptual and relations abilities required to master their relationship to the museum on equal terms, they remain in a subservient position.

My main concern regarding the intangible in and around museums, however, has to do with marketing and merchandizing. I see this as perhaps the most worrying response to what I described earlier in this paper as the incapacity of ethnographic museums to compete, at the turn of the past century with the media and tourism to give "access" to non-Western cultures. Merchandizing of visual and audio records pose many problems around adequacy, not to mention copyrights, royalties and so on. Masterpieces in the collection are made profitable in the best of cases by the commercialisation of facsimile copies. In the worst of cases their images are used for the production of myriad trinkets of dubious cultural value. Worse than that, it is the museum and collections themselves that are about to be made profitable financially.

Merchandizing and branding are today so closely associated with the notion of "intangible" that it is precisely using this term, "immatériel" in French, that the French government

conceptualised a museum reform that led to the launch of the project of the "Louvre of the Sands" in Abou Dhabi. The preliminary report ordered by the ministry of Economy and Finances had called for "a politics of management of brands, know-how and images" (the three intangible assets of the museums) and the promotion of the concept of an "economy of the intangible". It was also calling for "a dynamic management of ~~their~~ (the) intangible capital [of museums]" (Clair 2007, 56). While I will not explore here the ethical problems that this project has raised; suffice to say that it started from the notion of a profitable "management of the intangible capital of museums".

In Europe, still, many museums, recently went through assessment exercises with world-famous marketing companies to "rebrand" their institutions and develop "lines of products" around their "core business". The ensuing impact on curatorship and quality of visitors' experience is open for debate. The request to produce "blockbusters" rather that lines of lower-profile but perhaps more insightful exhibitions is one of the common consequences. As in the case of the Louvre, the economy of signs and knowledge that was mostly driven by curators is being subverted by a market economy of brands and images led by technocrats and businessmen.

Of course, museums must be made performant and profitable, but qualitatively before all, in terms of social experience, diffusion of knowledge, critical return and qualitative development of the public. If curators in most cases are their own censors, many large museums are coerced into implementing policies that do not necessarily reflect the museological and curatorial potentials of their institutions. They often reflect other agendas, among them, pressures to attract larger numbers of visitors to the museum, the implementation of cultural policies and attempts to divert the museum to showcase academic research or the activity of state departments... Needless to say, I believe ethnographic museums should remain bastions of non-utilitarian independent research.

Some European museums also feel the obligation to comply with some highly debatable concepts like those promoted by various global actors, beginning with the definition of what ought to be a "museum" and the various concepts of "culture". Of current importance are the notions of "cultural diversity", spuriously equated to the notion of "genetic diversity", "heritage", "intangible cultural heritage" and the notion of "conservation of living traditions", each in itself an interesting expression of our global intangible culture... Forward looking and independent, the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève (MEG) will consider these critically as any other cultural products and debate them in the public space.

These policies and normative concepts, together with the urge for marketing, merchandising, increasing financial returns and public image, in particular by developing performances and events cannot be sustainable and ethical if they impact negatively on long-term research and curatorship in museums and if they threaten the integrity and development of object collections. Those collections were gathered before our time and will survive us. Whether or not we understand them, interpret them or use them rightly or wrongly, it is because they are made of objects, artworks, tools, images, adornments, clothes, sacred objects and other material that embody and encapsulates human inventiveness and the adaptation of human beings to life on the five continents through all periods of time. Curators appreciate that they are the material remains of intangible activity. More than that, these collections represent a summa of human *poiesis*: the human capacity to forge for men and women the conditions of their own development through techniques and through infinite forms of social organisation.

These techniques and forms of organisation are the subject of our research and the substance of our exhibitions.

A few words perhaps on a number of projects outside of the mainstream that we are proposing at the Musée d'ethnographie de Genève… Exhibitions are seen not only as the product of scientific research but also as experiments of interaction with the public(s), as orchestrated events that generate questioning and positioning. The MEG is proactive with its public. It has agency in its own social field and this web of agencies is the stuff of its exhibitions. The recent exhibitions illustrate how we intend in the coming years to relate ethnographic collections and the more intangible social context in which they originated. "Offside", examines a myriad social epiphenomena around football culture in Geneva and elsewhere. Based on collaborative work between young anthropologists and photographers, it also gives rise to collecting of paraphernalia and life histories.

"Medusa. The African sculpture of enchantment", looks at how a museum can mesmerise its publics with African artworks from its collection to support a whole range of discourses. Using the story of the gorgon Medusa as an allegoric backdrop, it will be both an introduction to African arts and a critical reflection on the colonial practice of beheading masked characters, disassociating them from their costumes, with the intention to use their heads to other purposes.

"L'air du temps : Brailoiu revisité" in winter 2009, MEG will use the recordings of an ethnomusicologist from the first half of the XXth century to look at how Romanian popular music was successively instrumentalised to reconstruct a presumed authenticity. It traces this music through subsequent processes of folklorization of popular traditions –under Ceaucescu, through modernization and identity claims in the post-communist era, and eventually through the current attempts to turn popular music into ICH and allegedly "preserve" it, what in French we call sanctuarisation and patrimonialisation.

"Homo Sovieticus", next fall, will address the memory of popular visual and material culture from the Western fringes of the Soviet empire, ranging from nostalgia to self-imposed oblivion, based on field research, interview, life histories and the like. Supported by a major collecting campaign of, from medals to clothes, from crockery to an entire Stalinian apartment, the exhibition will benefit from a cross-disciplinary approach and a permanent workshop on "production processes" initiated by artists and made permanent by the action of the public.

A last topic and potential exhibition project is the notion of "first contact" situations. Beyond the study of "first contact collections", cabinets of curiosities and colonial museums, are ethnographic museums capable of approaching contemporary "first contact" situations like the arrival by sea of African migrants crossing the Mediterranean, who encounter a world that does rarely correspond to their expectations. How did they resolve to make the leap? What material or intangible luggage do they bring along? How do they cope with the shock of the first contact? How do they integrate new social structures? Is current museum ethnography capable of addressing these intangible issues, of researching, documenting and producing exhibitions on this major phenomenon? While contemporary arts, including African arts from the diaspora have invested this field, often with performances and ephemeral installations, what images, what objects, what testimonials, what ideas will ethnographic museums retain and what kind of understanding will they possibly develop?

Much is achieved towards exhibiting intangible concepts and social phenomena when one stops presenting or exhibiting objects with the intention to represent people or their culture, to start instead to encroach the public in a reflection on social agency: theirs, that of the museum, its collections and displays, that of all the other people outside their sphere who necessarily live in different social set ups. Museums are probably the most exciting place to do anthropology. With their continuous flow of public of all ages and of all walks of life, they are an ideal place to interact, to develop self-reflection and to contemplate and discuss the infinite forms of social interaction in the world. If human agency is eventually the focus of all museums' programs and if the diversity of individual agencies must be invited in the museum, the displacement of performers for desacralized cultic performances and a "virtual multimedia access" to otherness in a growingly consumerist context presents ethical risks that constitute a real challenge for the years to come, in which museums must strive to preserve their ethical integrity and intellectual independence.

http://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/expo11_uk.php
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