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Preserving and Presenting our "Intangible Heritage": Oral Traditions.

I Introduction: "Intangible Heritage".

Unesco defines the "intangible cultural heritage" as peoples' learned processes along with knowledge, skill and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and the creativity of humanity". Without doubt it is quite a mouthful to digest as to what it wants to point out what really is the "Intangible heritage". As explained by Mr. Gioviani Pinna of ICOM Italy, it roughly refers to three categories of aspects of cultural heritage; viz: "expressions embodied in physical forms" like "religious rites, traditional economies, ways of life, folklore etc", which "retain their value as long as they remain alive...in the community"; "expressions which do not have physical form: language, memory, oral tradition, songs and non-written traditional music etc"; and "symbolic and metaphorical meanings of...objects". May I attempt to elucidate further the categories Mr. Gioviani has given: the first category would include behavioural patterns of culture like customs, ceremonies, rituals, economic pursuits, games, entertainment and performing arts. The second are items identified by Mr. Goviani, while the third are material objects which besides are meant to fulfill their utilitarian functions, also convey and more

powerfully the latent meanings and intentions, either symbolically and metaphorically. Although the three aspects are recognisable, the items that fall into any one of them actually can also touch on the other two, for, I may add, underlying them all is the pervasive idea, world-view and social values. In other words the boundaries drawn are actually blurred because they all belong meaningfully to a particular culture.

I suspect the term "intangible heritage" applies more to museology. I hope this is the correct term, which traditionally deals with mostly material objects. From the time the museum would exhibit objects of curiosity (hence the once much used term "ajaib khanah") to the present where the emphases are on education, heritage, communication and cultural meaning and values, the role of the museum has become more complex and professional. And the museum no longer has to rely on material exhibits only, for now the whole gamut of communication media are made available for use in order to meet the multifarious demands of a modern 21st century museum.

In fact to me, the real problem is not in what constitutes "tangible heritage" or "intangible heritage", but in the communication to the public the so-called "intangible aspects of the cultural heritage". The first two aspects posited by Mr. Goviani-----the behavioural patterns in culture and expressions in culture-----with some imagination and ingenuity can surely be projected and exhibited through the use of the multi-media and other up-to-date digital and electronic resources. But the third category where the deep meaning in cultural behaviour or expressions are hidden or sublimed behind the symbolic and metaphorical forms, behaviour or expression, it then poses the real challenge: how to communicate this deep meaning which actually moulds the social values and world-view which form the real configurations of a culture ? In fact I

suspect the challenge encompasses more than just the front-end of museum work, but the whole gamut of collecting, preserving, classifying of raw data that make up the cultural heritage. Collecting data, whether in the form of artefacts and other objects, archaeological relics, behavioural forms of culture like ceremonies, rituals, customs, games and pastimes, or even expressions like language and language styles, songs and music is a continuing activity with the museum. Conserving and preserving these cultural items have also advanced with the technological and scientific innovations. But the methods of classifying and retrieving the collections need a lot thought and organisations which I believe have not been given the attention they need. Presenting the items for exhibition etc. would depend a lot on the classification and identification of the material properly organised. But as I said above, whether the deep meaning behind the exhibited cultural objects or expressions is successfully communicated to the audience will ultimately be the greatest challenge.

II The Oral Tradition

One item of "intangible heritage" specifically mentioned by Mr. Goviani is "oral tradition", on which I am supposed to deal with today. I suppose "oral tradition" is included because it is mostly non-material aspect of culture, although as I have always defined, material culture is as much an "oral tradition" as the verbal or language manifestations of it. A material object, be it for utilitarian or artistic purpose, is created or manufactured mainly through oral transmission. Take building a house or wheel-cart: no blueprint or plan is required, and yet the artisan can build from scratch the object by merely following the tradition orally transmitted from a master-builder to his

apprentice, or from a past generation to the next. What constitutes "oral tradition" is not the object or material, but rather the process of transmission in the culture, by word of mouth, either vertically, that is between generations, and that makes it a heritage, or laterally among members of a culture, at a point of time. That makes it an "intangible aspect of culture although the resulting form may be tangible, but may not be as concrete as material culture. Oral tradition at the product end would either be verbal, behavioural, material or expressional which is mainly music.

Before talking of the challenge in exhibiting oral tradition products, let us deal with the problem of collecting, preserving, conserving, and classifying them. I am sure museums in Malaysia have not been neglecting the oral tradition in the country for I have been involved in organising courses and seminars for the federal ministry of culture as well as the state units especially Sabah, Sarawak and Kedah more than two decades ago. The verbal oral traditions are the most well known and easily identified. They include narratives which may be classified as myths, legends, folktales or non-narratives like proverbs, riddles, jokes, *adat* sayings (*perbilang*) etc. Folk songs are also verbal, but they straddle between two categories, verbal and music. Behavioural tradition would include ceremonies, rituals, games, festivals etc, which form patterns of collective behaviour, conveying beliefs, values and ideas, and couched in symbolic and metaphorical gestures. Behavioural traditions also overlap with verbal and material traditions for the cultural meaning will be incomplete without the combination. Material tradition may be most visible compared to other traditions, but it loses its deep cultural meaning if looked upon from mainly its utilitarian purposes and values, for beyond that one has to unmask its true cultural meaning: aesthetic, moral or religious. The expressive tradition, which is mainly music, is more than just for

communication, for in music lies the deep-seated emotions and feelings significant to the socio-psychological configurations of a culture. Thus the whole gamut of oral tradition is like a map or a tapestry of a culture or sub-culture, and to ignore it, a substantial part of the whole culture of a people is shut out. The museum, therefore, cannot ignore but to include this "intangible" aspect of culture as part of its responsibility.

As I said above, the greatest challenge is how to convey the oral tradition, especially its hidden meanings and values, to the public, perhaps not just to impart information or knowledge, or to educate, but perhaps to try to make the audience more discerning and perceptive with regard to the culture. Visual communication, either through the object itself, a diorama, a slide or film; or aural through the playing of tape recorder or disc; or through captions or explanatory posters; are the usual methods used. Museum professionals would have to think hard as how most effectively to convey to the audience the meaning behind the "symbolic" and "metaphorical" manifestation of the material presented for the underlying ideas and values would defy the short-term and *ad-hoc* devices to elucidate them fully.

The previous paper by Prof. James Collin on the language as an "intangible heritage" has conveyed to us that it is not enough just to exhibit the "tuai" for the ideas and values behind that small object. It should teach us how our heritage, now sadly forgotten, teaches us to be in harmony with nature, a source of life for humankind. Now our tendency is to exploit nature for a short-term gain, forgetting that in the long run our life on this planet of ours will not survive without preserving our natural environment. My point is that it is easy enough to exhibit the "tuai", and to provide narrative explanation as to

its function or its meaning as related to the idea of "semangat padi", but shouldn't we also attempt to put in the deep-meaning of "harmony with nature", and the relevance of such ideology in the context of the present day delima, where in the name of development, our natural environments is pillaged?

My other example is the work-play among our people long forgotten, the "belotah" in lower Perak and "Main Pulau" in Ulu Tembeling, Pahang. The easy way is to display still-pictures, or to screen film, or to show slides, or to have a diorama, to show the "belotah" or "main pulau" in action. Explanation as to the concept of gotong-royong, having to do collective work of "merumput" the "ladang" in the case of "main pulau" or to collectively stamping to a verbal and musical chant while unhusking the newly harvested paddy on a built-up timber structure in "belotah", can be provided by the narrative on the poster. But shouldn't it be highlighted too that the work-plays are meant to be enjoyed and a kind of release-mechanism against the drudgery of peasant life, and at the same provide a drive towards corporate and communal sense of living? Many more examples from "oral tradition" can be thought of if time permits.

III Conclusion

I concur with the Unesco definition of "intangible heritage" which I believe has to do with museology. Lest the museums would concentrate on the "tangible" aspects of culture, exhibiting material objects, and explaining only the functions and utilitarian meanings attached to the objects, the call to attention for the "intangible" aspects of culture would provide more and dearer

dimensions to what culture is all about. The challenge to the museum professionals is not only to give more attention to collecting, conserving, preserving and classifying these "intangible aspects" of culture, such as language, folklore, oral tradition, oral narratives and non-narratives, customs, rituals and games, but how to present and make discernible to the public the deep cultural meaning behind the "symbolic and metaphorical" expressions of the heritage.