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Intangible cultural heritage in collections: describing ICH in collections documentation

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Abstract

As museums practices evolve, many collections departments are beginning to center source communities in their work. Much of this work includes opportunities to incorporate aspects of intangible cultural heritage within collections work and documentation. The purpose of this thesis is to describe how museum collections staff are using intangible cultural heritage to document collections. Using a case study design, qualitative interviews were conducted with four museum professionals. Additional, complementary documentation was sourced from the museum's websites, strategic plans, and toolkits. The interview results suggest incorporating ICH requires source communities' participation, involves supportive and engaging relationships with these communities, and requires time and resources from both the museum and the communities. In addition, ICH is often included through specific projects that help record intangible documentation alongside tangible knowledge and often result in modifications to terminology. The implications of this research further highlight the growing movement to center source communities in museum work, in particular emphasizing the need to further include source communities in collections work.

Keywords Intangible cultural heritage; museum collections; source communities

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Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage is gaining relevance within museum practices as institutions evolve to include the living culture and history of tangible collections (Maxon, 2010;Naguib, 2013). At the 2003 General Conference, UNESCO declared intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as an essential part of our global heritage, defining it as the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, and instruments that a community views as a part of its unique culture (UNESCO Paris, 2003). In practice within the museum world, ICH is more easily understood as the lives, stories, histories, and present-day connections of the cultural resources within collections (Alivizatou, 2012). However, the conversation around ICH was spearheaded by the work of indigenous peoples, scholars, and activists (Sullivan & Edwards, 2004b). In particular, attention should be called to the NAGPRA act, which forced museums to reevaluate their collections care and consult native communities (Guerrero & Hearst, 2004; Henry, 2004). In complying with NAGPRA regulations, concepts of cultural care were introduced into collections by presenting aspects of intangible culture as integral to the tangible objects (West Jr, 2004).

Tribal museums and cultural centers like the Makah Cultural and Research Center or Alutiiq Museum have been at the forefront of intentionally incorporating living cultural heritage into museum spaces by reclaiming traditional culture, developing cultural care protocols, and consciously working with communities (Alivizatou, 2012; Haakanson Jr, 2004; Haakanson Jr & Steffian, 2004; Sleeper-Smith, 2009). Some research has also explored the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and individual museums. In a study of four institutions worldwide, Alivizatou found that in practice, ICH emerges as a fluid dynamic practice that engages with the past and present while making traditional culture relevant to the contemporary global context (2012). Elements of ICH have also been discussed in broader research studies. In researching indigenous museology in the US, Crawford highlighted how museums are reevaluating ethical aspects of care within collections, including incorporating indigenous knowledge and practices into the care, assessment of damage, and database description of objects (2017). Furthermore, an examination of the philosophy and policies of the cultural care of collections at the Alutiiq Museum, Peabody Museum, and National Museum of the American Indian revealed that the intangible living culture of an object is a key part of an object's health (Sullivan & Edwards, 2004b).

Intangible cultural heritage is hard to define by its very nature and includes everything that is immaterial and influences human activity (Shelton, 2016). Therefore, the relationship between tangible and

intangible culture in museums is connected but involves a complex dialogue of past and present influences on cultural heritage (Shelton, 2016). This concept is exemplified in native communities' concept of objects, as much more than utilitarian things but art that embodies the living culture (West Jr, 2004). There have also been calls to incorporate ICH into collections documentation specifically (Alivizatou, 2012; Crawford, 2017; Maxon, 2010). Particularly, the word choice, language, and information provided in the documentation of an object should include more context about the objects' living culture, purpose and knowledge within a source community (Crawford, 2017; Maxon, 2010). For example, in a research project based at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, Maxon argued that language is a critical part of ICH in museums claiming that an object's cultural context is more accurately addressed by incorporating naming practices and descriptions originated and used by the source community. Maxon's position was that if language is how we express and describe our world within society, then authentic language must be a crucial part of documenting, categorizing, and preserving culture (Maxon, 2010).

Museums have begun to experiment with ICH by revaluating the purpose of heritage within their institution, incorporating participatory practices and increasing connections with source communities. For example, NMAI has been developing a culturally sensitive collections care program which uses an internal committee to address native requests for the care and restrictions of their objects (Henry, 2004). However, this process is far from mainstream, and many institutions have tried to limit the inclusion of ICH to live performance and oral histories (Alivizatou, 2012). Clearly, there is a need for more understanding of how collections professionals are incorporating ICH into their collection's documentation. The problem then is that while the conversations on incorporating ICH and discussions on decolonization practices in museums are becoming bigger, there is a lack of understanding of ways in which museum collections professionals are using descriptions of ICH to document collections.

Addressing this issue will have the most impact on the minority and Indigenous communities who were deeply impacted by colonial institutions including museums. Changing some of our practices in collections would only be one step, but it could show genuine effort among our profession to change and adapt our methods for the better. An understanding of how collections professionals are incorporating ICH within collections will show how museums can take small steps to evolve some of their collections practices.

The purpose of this thesis is to describe how museum collections staff are using intangible cultural heritage to document collections. This study is guided by three main research questions:

1. What does intangible cultural heritage look like in collections documentation?
2. What is the role of source communities in incorporating intangible cultural heritage into collections documentation?
3. How does intangible cultural heritage in collections fit in within the overall organizations' ICH strategies?

Literature Review

In the research that followed the 2003 UNESCO conference, conversations around ICH and museums first focused on the implications of safeguarding ICH in museum practices. Initial steps were to define what ICH is, why museums should be involved, and its effect on museum practices (Naguib, 2013; Shelton, 2016). Naguib reasoned that ICH in a museum context involves providing heritage sustaining opportunities for diasporic and immigrant communities highlighting that an approach to ICH in museums must include the sustainability of heritage, acknowledgement of cultural diversity, and inclusion of participatory methods (Naguib, 2013). Similarly, Shelton elaborated that the inclusion of ICH in museum methods is a way to return authority to originating communities and practitioners (Shelton, 2016). In providing clarity of the involvement of ICH within the tangible museum experience, Shelton claimed, "ICH essentially includes everything, the immaterial elements that influence and surround all human activity" (2016). Shelton goes on to describe three key differences between tangible and intangible museums practices: (i) the authority of intangible culture resides with the source communities, (ii) intangible culture is not passive but fluid, and (iii) intangible culture is not about the command of knowledge but engagement with communities (2016). However, Shelton (2016) and Naguib (2013) both make it clear that ICH cannot simply be preserved in one state but is an ongoing process of supporting the individuals and groups connected to the abstract concept of culture further emphasizing that museums must continuously think about their role in preserving/supporting ICH when considering how to incorporate and balance tangible and intangible heritage.

More recently, discussions of ICH and museums have focused on how specific institutions are actually incorporating aspects of ICH into their

practices. In one of the most comprehensive studies of ICH and museums so far, Alivizatou (2012) documented how four different institutions interacted with ICH around the world. The Te Papa Museum and Vanuatu Cultural Center used intangible heritage to transform their institution's relevance within their communities while the Horniman Museum and especially the Musee du Quai Branly only incorporated ICH to limiting degrees after engaging with Indigenous scholars over many years, (Alivizatou, 2012; Haakanson, Personal Communication). Overall, Alivizatou's findings suggest that ICH is entering museum processes through the participatory museology movement, which allows for the inclusion of customary knowledge systems, oral traditions, tribal beliefs, and cross-cultural dialogue (2012). Additionally, a US based research study explained how ICH has come from collaborations with indigenous communities (Sullivan & Edwards, 2004b). The Peabody Museum developed a consistent and flexible approach to inventorying their collection of native objects and consulting with native communities across the country, which resulted in changes in their collections practices to include the intangible (Watson, 2004). Similarly, a founding principle of NMAI is the preservation and perpetuation of living culture where the cultural risk of an object is given equal importance with its physical risk (Henry, 2004). On the other hand, the Alutiiq Museum reclaims, stores, and shares the traditional culture by combining physical stability and spiritual care of objects (Haakenson Jr & Steffian, 2004).Together these museums highlight how the inclusion of source community consultations has brought intangible aspects of care and culture into the structure of museums (Sullivan & Edwards, 2004b).

Discussions of intangible cultural heritage and language within museums often rely on the need to fix traditional museum practices that have often harmed or ignored source communities. The majority of complaints from academic research and community activist groups have centered around the lack of accessibility of collections, the lack of cultural context, and the inaccuracies within documentation (Ames, 2015; Buijs, 2016; Christe,2004). ICH research often proposes changes in both collections' methodology and philosophy. Alivizatou recommends that new museum practices include letting go of the rigid concepts of preserving objects and culture from decay, salvage, and loss, but rather focus on engaging with the fluidity of culture (2012).

This research specifically focuses on intangible cultural heritage language, such as the way museums can use word choice and descriptions to incorporate aspects of ICH. Prioritization of word choice comes from recognizing that word choice, description, stories, and

names museums have used to talk about objects, peoples, and cultures have built false narratives and caused harm to communities (Lonetree, 2012; Maxon, 2010). Scholarly contributions on the decolonization of museums like Amy Lonetree's book *Decolonizing museums: representing native America in national and tribal museums* highlights the impact of museums' language on indigenous and minority communities (2012). She argued that false narratives and stereotypes upheld in museums' use of language perpetuated the notion of indigenous communities as a dying and unevolved society. As a result, Lonetree contends that if museums use clear descriptive truth-telling language, then they can begin to deal with the false narrative and stereotypes they have perpetuated (2012). This supports the need for changes in our linguistic practices, both verbal and written. Maxon further argues that language is a part of intangible cultural heritage and an element that museums could utilize more (2010). Furthermore, Maxon claims incorporating native languages into museum collections would provide context and be an appropriate form of preserving intangible cultural knowledge into object descriptions (Maxon, 2010). Finally, if language is how society structures thought, expressions, and depicts the world, then language must be a crucial part of documenting, categorizing, and preserving material culture (Maxon, 2010). Therefore, museums must start this process at the collection level so that the information is already there before exhibits and programs are built, such as by incorporating ICH elements into their documentation processes (Maxon, 2010). Research has shown that changes in language practices within museums can help build relationships with communities, bridge gaps between material and living cultures, and provide appropriate context to tangible culture.

While the case for incorporating ICH into museums is growing, examples of how museums are actively doing this are rare. Alivizatou's work was a significant attempt to capture how museums are incorporating the intangible into their practices. However, from her own research, it is obvious that this varies considerably based on institutional culture and the larger social movements of the region. Similarly in *Stewards of the Sacred* the notion of prioritizing the living culture and communities is inspiring but takes dedication and evolving approaches to museum practices (Sullivan & Edwards, 2004b). Therefore, there is still a need for understanding how museums are engaging with the intangible, especially in smaller institutions. In 2017 a group of European museums formed a digital initiative called Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Project (IMP) with a stated goal to explore the variety of approaches, interactions, and practices museums

have taken to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (*Intangible Cultural Heritage & Museums Project*, 2017). In addition, the Museum Galleries Scotland have been building an ICH support network since 2007 to help preserve ICH in Scotland and support museums' efforts. These projects are informative and are helping build a framework for ICH in museums, but there is still a need in the museum community to describe how these institutions are actually incorporating ICH into their daily practices. Therefore, this research will specifically focus on describing how museum collections professionals are using ICH in their collections' documentation.

Methodology

This research study uses a case study approach to describe how museum collections professionals are incorporating ICH language into their documentation. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews and secondary documentation data collected from the museum's websites. For this study, ten museums were identified and contacted to participate. Sites were selected based on the following criteria: actively using ICH within their museums, historical or cultural based, and at least one employee focused on collections work. Based on Alivizatou's study, the museum type was limited to historical or cultural based institutions because these are the type of intuitions most often documented for their use of ICH (2012). These types of institutions were then screened for active incorporation of ICH within their practices by analyzing the regional ICH support networks, documented projects, as well as the websites of individual museums. Finally, it was necessary that the people involved in this study work directly with collections.

Of the museums contacted, four had a collections professional willing to participate in an interview and were chosen as sites for this study. The four museums chosen are listed below:

Museum of English Rural Life (MERL), *Reading, England, UK*

In 2016 the museum developed a project focusing on ICH in the form of storytelling, folklore, social practices, rituals, festive events, skills, and traditional crafts. The end result was a MERL's Intangible Museum Toolkit which aimed to help other museums bring their collection to life by enriching them with real, lived knowledge, and understanding.

National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) *Washington, DC, USA*

The museum's research aims to advance the understanding of native knowledge, history, culture, art, and self-determination with collaboration with native communities. The Cultural Care Center is at the forefront of inclusive practices that incorporate native perspectives as paramount.

The Museum of Culture and Environment (MCE) *Ellensburg, WA, USA*

The museum focuses on collaborative partnerships and aims to incorporate inclusive perspectives. The museum has considered and included native knowledge and concepts in their practices. However, the museum has a fulltime staff of one and a half, so their capacity to create extensive ICH projects are limited.

The National Nordic Museum (NORDIC) *Seattle, WA, USA*

The museum has an active oral history program that has been central to the institution since its inception. The museum also hosts various traditional craft workshops like papercutting, as well as community events like Jule Fest.

Interviews were conducted in February 2022 via zoom. Zoom software was used to record and transcribe the interviews. Each interview consisted of qualitative open-ended questions covering the topics of intangible cultural heritage, language, collections documentation, and source communities. Interview participants were asked about their knowledge of ICH and how ICH language is documented within collections. In addition, participants were asked about the role of source communities in their ICH practices and how ICH in collections fits in with the overall organization's ICH strategy.

The analysis process included reviewing the transcription produced by zoom for fidelity, then coding the narrative information into themes used to evaluate similarities and differences between the cases. Additionally, in February 2022 documentation source material was gathered from each site's website, published projects, and public information to further support the findings in the interviews.

Findings

Interviewees' answers will be referred to by their institution's acronym to highlight the importance of the entire organization being involved in

incorporating ICH versus single individuals. However, this should not diminish the great work of these individuals and the honest conversations they shared in this study.

Research Question One

Terminology

Respondents all noted that terminology plays a key role in documenting ICH within collections, and language or word choice is often considered or revaluated in documenting ICH. However, there was institutional variability in how it was manifested in practice. For the MERL, this means including more dynamic and fluid nomenclature and rethinking their classification scheme to include "different forms of intangible skills and knowledge" and noting that "it's sort of an active description of these contexts of use". This was further elaborated through an example,

> A harvesting scene [painting], where cereal crops are being cut by a particular agricultural tool or technology. And that painting in the context of the old MERL classification scheme have been described as domestic furnishing because it's a painting…But in reality, what it represents is that cultural knowledge and practice around agricultural harvesting processes in relation to cereal crops, so it needs to sit in both those classification schemes.

In a different aspect of documentation, NMAI focuses on how terminology affects their traditional care protocols and describes the intent and thought behind the language used to incorporate indigenous knowledge and care into the stewardship of the collection. They emphasized

> It's really important for us and we've internally talked a lot about this, not using the word restriction when it comes to cultural care/traditional care. But instead using the word like guideline or protocol or instruction, because we do as a federal institution have to balance the rights that we feel our constituents have over their collection with the civil rights that are in the law.

The Nordic referred to terminology in terms of the use of keywords as a meaningful way to highlight ICH information documented within their

oral history collection, noting, "we really want to prioritize [keyword analysis] because of course it really helps the researchers and then makes our oral histories really useful". For example, in an interview for the Nordic American Voices project, ICH related information could be pulled out in keywords such as "Ski jumping traditions, Christmas traditions, traditional food, 17th of May celebrations, religious traditions, and musical traditions". However, this is an aspect of ICH they value and work towards, but not one they have been able to habitually implement into their practices, mentioning "we are working on conducting keyword analysis… but of course it's time consuming". Similarly, the MCE struggles with implementing terminology changes but emphasizes the need for including source communities' language in naming objects, explaining it as

> We really made an effort, well, I really made an effort with that [researching objects names in source community languages]. As we put our collections online and… we're still sort of grappling with how to do that in the most respectful ethical manner. So that's when I began looking for more correct terms.

For example, in their online collections portal, a Bontoc/Kalinga backpack is also given the name 'Sangi' or an Ifugao bowl 'Patiw', to highlight the language and culture of the community who created these objects. However, similar to the Nordic, MCE sees this as a slow going and imperfect process in their documentation "If we're wrong then wrong in a way that hopefully gets us closer to the right place." In addition, as a very small institution, they do not have the capacity to work with communities to update the terminology as much as they would like, sharing,

> And we would like to be more thoughtful and more strategic about having these conversations and adding to our knowledge of Intangible Cultural heritage. But that's not where we're able to be out right now.

They are focusing instead on incorporating more accurate and community centered terminology where and when they can.

Integrated into Tangible Knowledge Documentation

Respondents stressed that ICH related information was included alongside tangible knowledge documentation in different ways. The MERL described the process as,

> Effectively cataloging them with specialist maker-based knowledge, so looking at materials techniques, describing them not quite in the form of sort of recipes of baskets but you know, giving the kind of, both historic and practical working knowledge of those object collections.

In their Museum of the Intangible Toolkit, MERL justifies the inclusion of ICH within collections documentation as "vital contextual information for object collections, with the intangible bringing the tangible to life. Museums are places of knowledge and meaning, and it is ICH which gives objects their meaning" (Bertram et al., 2019). The MCE similarly argues,

> Incorporating [ICH] into our documentation that would just give us so much more information about an object to offer to everyone… It could also allow us to better care for these objects in a traditional or spiritual way. So, the opportunities there are multitude.

For example, in their documentation of Yakama purse, they include the following information above the physical description of the object: "From a 2004 interview: Mrs. Washines: Older bag but well maintained. Hardly used (you can tell this from the handles etc.). Green hourglass sections on the bag are the symbol for woman. The pink arrow points represent energy flow and neutrality". Noting that these sorts of ICH narrative descriptions are "overlaid on our basic documentation". The MCE also admits that while they do have some ICH information included alongside tangible documentation, "we would like to be more thoughtful and more strategic about having these conversations and adding to our knowledge of ICH. But that's not where we're able to be right now".

The Nordic includes ICH within documentation slightly differently than the MERL or MCE. Since most of their efforts to include ICH comes in the form of oral histories, they document them just as if they were objects, stating that

> It's really treated like an object, for purposes of documentation. There's really no difference in how they are cataloged as compared to another archival record like a book. In Past Perfect there's an oral history category, with different field options that relate to what one might encounter in oral history interviews, so…

> those are just filled in with the relevant data for the interview.

In discussing the documentation of ICH, particularly the shared beliefs and practices of object care, the NMAI mentioned,

> We do document it into our collections information system, our database, we use EMU, so we have that native term fields, and we are constantly updating that record. And then, that the documentation in that record informs us on access, whether it's in person or to the web.

Furthermore, the NMAI argued for ICH prioritization in documentation, noting that it is not just important and useful information to an object but also finding a way to highlight its significance within metadata,

> You know, our goal is never to have it kind of buried as a note in our database…But we actually developed a whole, it's called modules in EMU, it's the same place that we put things like copyright for licensing agreements, so we internally have placed it at an equal importance to something like copyright which is by law, just a legal thing.

Recently, the NMAI has had the resources and organizational support to update their database system to make this ICH information, particularly the native handling preferences, more accessible and well known.

> We do have our own module in our database, if you select it, I call it a right records so… it's attached to the catalog record. And, depending on what category that instruction falls under it will signal an icon that will pop up in the catalog module so be right next to the thumbnail of an image of the object. There'll be a little icon that says like this is male handle only or go look at this right record as a kind of like a notification tool for staff. And that was really essential.

How ICH information is included within documentation varied, but each site saw the inclusion of shared knowledge, practices, traditions, and communities' beliefs into the tangible object documentation as a necessary aspect of integrating ICH within collections practices.

Research Question Two

Source Communities are Essential to ICH Documentation

Source communities are an integral part of the process of incorporating ICH within collections documentation, and each site readily acknowledged that as ICH comes from communities, they are essential to the process of including intangible aspects of heritage into the tangible collections. NMAI explained, "so yes, we work with source communities, yes, they inform us 100% of what we should and shouldn't be doing. Absolutely all of our cultural care information comes from the community itself". Furthermore, NMAI's 2022-2026 Strategic Plan elaborates, "partnerships with Native communities and respect for cultural knowledge have remained at the core of the museum's mission and are recognized by our colleagues around the globe as inherent aspects of all its work" (NMAI, 2022). The MERL similarly highlighted the crucial role of source communities in their interview as well as the toolkit. In the interview, the MERL remarked

> It's always been part and parcel of the museum's sort of mission and raison d'etre… there are researchers looking at our collections, to then being practitioners out there in the world and then contributing towards the sort of development of new collections and knowledge around other collections.

The toolkit supports this by arguing,

> Whatever definition of ICH is used, communities are at its heart – whether they are defined by a geographic area, a shared cultural or social background, a shared interest or practice, or are linked by their experiences. It is communities who create, carry and transmit ICH – and ICH practices are those which communities deem to be important and worthy of transmitting to future generations (Bertram et al., 2019, p.8)

Even the MCE, which has less capacity to do this work on a larger scale, notes that incorporating ICH requires access and connections to source communities, "sometimes it's just finding the right person to talk to, finding the right person who can facilitate access to other people who are willing talk and share their time and share their knowledge". In addition, the Nordic revealed that not only do oral histories, by definition, require individuals from source communities, but their oral history collecting practice, in general, was started by the local community. This demonstrates how source communities can be foundational to the process of incorporating ICH within collections,

> It started off with such a strong base of volunteers and they were really embedded within the source communities, so it really started with volunteers. The museum started out basically as a fully volunteer [local source community member] run organization in 1980, so there really is a wide pool of resources and people willing to share.

Source communities share cultural protocols

Respondents noted that source communities provide information that would not make it into the documentation otherwise through several different types of examples. The MERL shared,

> Let's face it, museums are just big sheds full of old stuff and being able to bring that to life by engaging with people who are out there in the world living and practicing some of the bodies of knowledge that are represented by the inanimate stuff we have.

They also noted that museum objects mean very little without the knowledge, tradition, and community surrounding them. In discussing their oral history projects, the Nordic remarks, "there have been really positive outcomes in terms of gathering information that maybe we wouldn't necessarily otherwise have in our collections", thus shedding light on the opportunities, importance, and information working with source communities has provided for their collection. Through the following example, the MCE considers how their collection would be lacking information and connection without communities,

> One of the objects was researched by a student who happened to be from the community so she was able to look at that. And that was a really cool process because she was excited to have access to this object and to interact with it in a way that she hadn't before and we were excited that someone with a connection was working with it.

The NMAI thought that this information would not exist in documentation without source communities but also emphasized that these communities are the source of intangible information. Since their foundation, the NMAI has been deeply involved with community engagement and consultation, so all collections practices involve source communities. They stated in the 2022-2026 Strategic Report, "in all its activities, the museum acknowledges the diversity of cultures and

the continuity of cultural knowledge among indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere and Hawai'i, incorporating Native methodologies for the handling, documentation, and care of collections" (NMAI, 2022). They further explained

> We call ourselves often like stewards and I think we often think of that as being stewards of a collection or really kind of facilitating and providing support to relationships between communities and their belongings. I really feel like at the end of the day we work for native indigenous communities first and then we work for the collection second.

Therefore, there would be no ICH to collect without communities at the center of this work, and collections processes would lack substance.

Reciprocity with Source Communities

Intangible information is centered in communities and can only be incorporated into museums through relationships between community members and the museum. Building reciprocal relationships requires supporting and engaging source communities. There is no singular method to build these relationships, and it often varies by institution and community. The MERL acknowledged that building relationships with communities involved engaging with and supporting their living heritage,

> Those kinds of relationships with working craft practitioners are incredibly important to the way in which we then understand and work with the collections, that we have to look after. So, sort of continued relationships with people who have an active and hands on knowledge of the intangible skills and practices around.

The MERL shared an example of this type of relationship in both the interview and the toolkit,

> We worked with a clog dancer and a clog maker actually from different clog related traditions, so a clog dancer who's used to dancing with clog from the north of England in the UK and a clog maker from Wales so from outside England. We brought them together to do something quite creative to tell a story about clog making and clog dancing and about that sort of

> intangible skills and knowledge around those different elements of practice (Bertram et al., 2019).

The NMAI interviewee discussed reciprocal relationships in how they structure their meetings with community members, explaining "instead of just like an interview kind of setting we're kind of exchanging knowledge and exchanging information with that tool [a structured form] and then that goes into the database for documenting that cultural care". This is an example of how they create structures in their collections practices to encourage relationship building with communities. The NMAI exemplifies this, stating, "a core principle of that [ICH work] is connecting communities to collections, so it's not just about the physical preservation of an item, it is about its relation to communities". This emphasizes how their ICH work is centered in and for communities. Furthermore, in their strategic goals for the institution, they assert, "to support its mission, the museum will establish, maintain, and expand on reciprocal partnerships that amplify the voices of Native people and the impact of collaborative programing". The NMAI also talked about aspects of hospitality,

> Things like honorariums are essential. We do a lot of hosting; we incorporate as much hosting sort of things that we can. So, if a community came to the CRC we'd have things like coffee ready, we would have all their transportation provided for, we'd have snacks throughout the day. We have a tradition of hosting potlucks for communities and so staff all bring a dish and share a meal together. And I think that those are really, really important. I think, visiting collections for source communities can be a complex experience and so, taking the time to acknowledge that complexity and having actions that clearly show support is really important.

The MCE highlighted two different examples of how ICH was brought into the museum through a relationship between the museum and the community. First, they described how,

> Each time someone comes in, it's based on a relationship. So, the beadwork artist came in because a graduate student is doing her work on some of the pieces in the collection and she wanted to find out more and the museum supports her in that, because we would also like to find out more.

Also, recounting another example in which, "the basket weaver I mentioned she's someone who's been known to the museum and have relationship with individuals related to the museum for many years". The importance of engaging in this relationship is highlighted within their core value of "fostering connections and dialogs focused on understanding and respect among local and global communities by creating opportunities to explore and celebrate rich, diverse, and changing heritages as a venue for self-representation" (MCE website, 2022). Furthermore, the MCE talked about how a lot of the discussions they have around these intangible aspects of heritage center around communities, sharing, "we talk a lot about finding out more from source communities about stories of objects or about how objects should be cared for in a cultural view". The Nordic supports and engages with their source communities by using the information in their oral histories to help support heritage-based projects in the area. For example,

> It's great to be able to capture the interviews, but we have to think about the best way to share them…there have been some books that have come out of the vanishing generations project. There was Voices of Ballard. That's a book - there's a part one and part two, and those were the original ones connected with the Swedish Finn historical society and then Ballard historical society.

So, they were not just capturing ICH but also supporting community recognition and heritage production. Additionally, the Nordic shared that their organization was founded as a volunteer neighborhood museum, so their museum grew out of the community. The Nordic further explained how, "the organization really started as a neighborhood community museum to begin with, and people were eager to share their resources and voices".

Research Question Three

Project Based

All participants described ICH work as based in specific projects or opportunities. The NMAI does differ from the rest, having the largest projects that work with ICH. Stating that ICH is incorporated into all aspects of their work,

> [ICH] it's incorporated into our regular standard operations. It's about how we collect items, how we

> manage it, how we provide access, how we care for and it's integrated into all of our practices.

Essentially every aspect of the NMAI's work is focused on projects that include intangible heritage. This is further communicated on their website, where they highlight that "in all of its activities, the museum acknowledges the diversity of cultures and the continuity of cultural knowledge among indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere and Hawai'i, incorporating Native methodologies for the handling, documentation, and care of collections".

The MERL depicts their ICH work as specific projects explaining, "there's no particular document I can point towards that spells out precisely what our strategy is but it's sort of bound up in these different project-based approaches to the concept". The MERL further explained,

> And that's not to say that that's [our institution's ICH strategy] sort of fixed or set in stone, in actual fact, there have been a number of sort of short term projects over the years that, broadly speaking, could be seen to connect to the wider idea of sort of intangible skills and the documentation of them

For the Nordic, since much of their ICH is wrapped up in oral histories programs, they are also heavily project based,

> The museum has been collecting oral histories really nearly since its inception in 1980 through various small and large projects. So, part of my job is taking the already robust ongoing oral history projects and working with the curator and museum leadership in order to professionalize the program.

The Nordic also highlights this oral history project-based work on their website, communicating, "since 2009, this group of volunteers has recorded more than 709 interviews at the Museum and in locations throughout the Puget Sound region". Clearly, the Nordic has a dedicated project that captures and incorporates ICH into their museum. With their limited capacity, the MCE similarly explains how including ICH within their museum is often only a result of specific opportunities or limited projects,

> We have had times where elders have come in and talked about objects and then we'll take notes and we'll incorporate that into our documentation with their permission. Or when we talk to people from various communities and they share something that we didn't

> know we like to try and incorporate that into the documentation, but it's very ad hoc as it comes along at this point. Opportunistic.

To varying degrees, each site incorporates ICH when and where they can, but often as a part of specific opportunities or projects.

Time and resources

Each participant shared that there are realistic challenges in doing this work in terms of time and resources. The MERL clearly stated,

> There's never enough time to properly document everything. There's never enough time to follow up on those conversations either with the researchers and asked them to contribute material that you can then add to a computerized database or other. Or there's never enough time to follow up yourself and make sure that you transcribed or added those notes.

The MERL also acknowledged that they would like better resources to support the community, "we should be better at compensating people for the knowledge that they're providing around collections which isn't always possible for us, because we don't necessarily have budgets". The time and resources required to incorporate ICH within museums then affect both the museum and the community. The MCE shared similar challenges, especially in terms of their capacity as a very small institution,

> At our institution, there's a lot of potential for reaching out to the university community and bringing them in. But we're a small staff we're a staff of you know, one and a half people who work here all the time we've got Grad students who come and go we've got student interns, who come and go, and that means that we are constantly focused on what we need to do to keep those outward facing pieces going and to provide the sort of essentials of care. And at this point, incorporating like thoughtfully and strategically incorporating intangible cultural heritage is a goal but it's a goal without a plan to get there.

The Nordic also explains that they see great value in keyword analysis for ICH documentation but struggle with implementation explaining the obstacles as "the keywords, it's very time consuming and we don't really have the funds to outsource that so a lot of that falls to me or the

volunteers". The NMAI also mentions the dedication and time integrating ICH requires arguing that effectively incorporating ICH within museum work requires commitment,

> If we really care about cultural care we really want to enact it and make it actionable across departments [then] we really have to invest in that management of information, and that is a data management thing. So we all have to kind of share that responsibility, because there is only two people so keeping ourselves accountable to that I think is really important for success to be able to successfully do this.

Clearly, incorporating ICH in their work is important to these institutions but requires time and resources, which remain points of struggle and tension in museums.

Conclusion

This research provided clear examples of how ICH descriptions are used within museum collections, filling in the gap between the push for ICH incorporation within museums and the realities of what that might look like in collections departments. The results suggest that source communities are at the center of ICH documentation, ICH knowledge and stories are documented alongside tangible information records and are currently limited to project-based work, and the process of incorporating ICH within collections requires dedicated time.

Much of Alivizatou's research highlights the significance of these results. She argued that a museum focused on ICH encourages community focused practices that move beyond preserving the tangible (Alivizatou, 2012). A process which requires museums to not just be involved in the short-term process of preservation but the continued long-term process of heritage (Alivizatou, 2012). If museums do not heed Alivizatou's and others' demands for more culturally inclusive museum practices, they will continue to be institutions that support the legacy of colonialism in which physical objects were separated from the living culture, knowledge, and stories they represent. The significance of the current research shows that ICH documentation is indeed possible and serves as a reminder to museums to continue to consider how their work can be for and with the community. A great starting place for museums to include ICH within this work is to build strong supportive relationships with their communities by using existing relationships to further engage

communities with collections work. It is important to remember that there are other institutions not interviewed in this paper that include ICH within their practices, such as the Alutiiq Museum which includes the intangible spiritual care of objects into their collection practices (Haakanson Jr, 2004).

Further research needs to be done to understand the balance between documenting and incorporating ICH, but also how museums share and care for that information. Incorporating ICH cannot be a one-way relationship. A key part of documenting ICH must be developing practices to share or restrict intangible information as appropriate to the source communities. As the Alutiiq Museum shared, gathering sacred and traditional information from the community is important but requires policies and guidelines in how information can be shared and protected (Haakanson Jr, 2004). Intangible information is meant to live and evolve, and museums must respect and honor that fact.

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