



ICME, INTERCOM, & ICOM AZERBAIJAN HYBRID JOINT CONFERENCE REPORT

TRANSFORMING
COLLECTING POLICIES
IN MUSEUMS: THE
NEED FOR LEADERSHIP
AND SOCIETAL
RESPONSIBILITY

13-15 October 2021
Baku, Azerbaijan

The conference was held in Baku, Azerbaijan at the Carpet Museum. Due to complications resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, some panelists and attendees were hosted online over Zoom, while others attended in person. 40-50 people were in attendance in total, 10 in-person. Panels were held mainly in English and translated into Azeri or, when in Azeri, were translated into English. The event was hosted and organized by ICOM National Committee in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum. Further conference organizers included the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the ICME-ICOM international committee for museums and collections of ethnography, and the INTERCOM-ICOM international committee for museum management. The conference was held to address the current state of social justice issues and the role which museums can play in this political arena. It aimed to specifically address the challenges of decolonizing museums, engagements with ethno-tourism, and the ways in which leadership could enable museums to address important contemporary issues. Some questions included: If decolonizing the museum means repatriating objects what does this mean for collecting policies? How do ethnographic museums engage with the increasing tourist demand for 'experiences' with real people? How should the management of museums plan for the future and change their practices and governance structures to respond to new expectations?

The conference aims were listed as the following:

- To open a dialogue between scholars of Ethnographic and other museums and to offer a platform for the presentation and discussion of recent research;
- To highlight the significance of the concepts of decolonizing museums, ethno-tourism management and leadership and museum management for our times;
- To facilitate a global dialogue on these themes by bringing together museum professionals from all around the world,
- To critically engage with existing theories and methodologies and to provide a platform for the presentation of new research and initiatives that will help us to tackle these core issues and the ways in which we might transform the concept of 'collecting' that has defined museums for decades.

The first day's theme was "**Decolonizing Museums: Restitution, Repatriation, and Healing**". After the conference participants registered, opening speeches were made. First, **Shirin Melikova**, Director of the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum and Chairperson of ICOM Azerbaijan welcomed the in-person and online attendees. Following her welcoming address spoke **Nargiz Abdullayeva**, head of the department for museums galleries, and exhibitions at the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Azerbaijan. She greeted the audience and remarked on the difficulties and innovations of the pandemic era, one innovation being the hybrid format of the conference. She also spoke about the recent war in Karabakh and the opening of a new museum in that area. **Goranka Horjan**, Chairperson of ICOM-INTERCOM, spoke about how there is a need for museums to step out of business conformity and reach out to serve communities in a more socially relevant manner. She spoke hopefully about the museum definition renewal and the need for a strategic plan for museums in the future in relevance to social issues. **Rema Zeynalova** from ICOM Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijan National Carpet Museum Conference lead the conference coordination. **Ralf Ceplak Mencin**, Chairperson of

ICOM-ICME, opened the conference topics. The welcoming speeches ended with a moment of silence for **Jeremy Silvester**, Director of the Museums Association of Namibia, board member of the ICOM International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography (ICME), and board member of the Commonwealth Association of Museums. He passed away due to COVID-19 in the summer of 2021.

Two keynote speakers presented on the first day. **Hans van de Bunte**, founding director at the museum consultancy group JJ Curation & Well-being, spoke first. **Van de Bunte** (in-person) spoke about his experience moving from the Netherlands, his home, to Borneo to embark on a 6-year project to bring the Borneo Cultures Museum to an international standard. His presentation focused mainly on the experience of management between cultural differences. He described meeting the staff for the first time, finding ways to reorganize management according to the staff's needs and talents, and traveling with that staff to other collections to learn from other displays of Borneo cultural heritage. He expressed the importance of including local knowledges in re-organizing the Borneo Cultures Museum management structure as well as incorporating local knowledge into object research. To conclude, he gave three major take-aways: First, museum leadership should focus on museum expertise for their staff, including technical training, without losing sight of overall staff well-being. Second, that museums should value the authenticity of their staff's methods and approaches to museum work. Third, van de Bunte spoke about the need to listen to local communities concerning their interests in cultural heritage protection, and the importance of balancing the museum's role of authority and local ownership of materials.

Pankaj Bordoloi, deputy director at the President House Museum in India (online) spoke as the second keynote speaker on the decolonization of colonial narratives in Indian museums. He gave a review of the ways in which his museum was able to expand perspectives beyond white colonization since emancipation in 1947. He expressed the idea that museums are generally always political spaces and Indian museums still hold colonial narratives. For this point he gave the unique example of a portrait of Robert Clive, the governor of Bengal in the 18th century, present in his collection. He presented the difficulty in conceptually reframing this object, as well the opportunities it presents in the construction of a decolonial museum. The repatriation of cultural objects was presented as a valuable method of nation building. He conceded that decolonization is always painful, destructive, and difficult, but also dynamic and hold many approaches. He closed with the statement that museums have an obligation to the communities from where their collections come from as well as for those they serve.

Elena Elts, associate professor of the department of humanitarian and cultural cooperation at St. Petersburg State University, (in person) and **Elena Dyakova**, leading researcher of the department of ethnography of the peoples of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova of the Russian Ethnographic Museum (not present) gave the next presentation on the role of museums in the strategies on government support to small Indigenous groups in Russia. She spoke of the ways in which governments become involved with Indigenous cultural heritage keeping, including the kinds of museums that receive state financial support. Major examples came from studies from

Vespien folk museums. She spoke of museums as the center of a social tool when supporting Indigenous people.

Ole Winther (online) and **Berit Fruelund Kjoerside** (not present), members of the Agency for Culture and Palaces in Denmark, asked in their presentation “How do we create relevant museums for the future?” They specifically referred to the conceptual movement in museums from “being about something to being for somebody”. Winther spoke to the huge changes museums have experienced, where exchange and contact has become more important than in previous museum periods. He asked how this can relate to a digital age, and what experience through a screen does to museum spaces. He shared the results of a survey that gathered data to find who comes to museums in Denmark, and why or why not. To conclude, he asked in what ways are museums relevant, and in what way this relevance is important.

Miriam Hamburger, research assistant at the GRASSI Museum for Ethnology, State Ethnographic Collections of Saxony, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, and current Master’s student at the University of Leipzig in Religious Studies (in person) spoke on the rituals involved in repatriation. She made the observation that not only do Indigenous people perform rituals in repatriation ceremonies, but museum staff also participate and create rituals. She stressed the importance for museums to consider why they perform these rituals and for whom they are for, as they offer valuable ways for museums to consider the kinds of hierarchies they deconstruct, participate in, or reinforce. She advised museums not to consider “healing” too quickly in the repatriation process, as it is only the beginning of a longer process of healing that Indigenous communities and museums face.

Rebecca Naidoo, museum officer at the eThekweni municipality Durban Local History Museums in South Africa (online) gave a presentation titled “Native of Nowhere”, speaking specifically about South African journalist and short story writer Nat Nakasa. His remains presented a case for repatriation in 2014. She presented Nakasa’s biography, which included exile from South Africa. His untimely death by suicide has been linked to the separation he endured with his homeland. He was buried in New York State, USA, and in 2014, his remains were repatriated to South Africa. Naidoo spoke how repatriation is a positive testament to nation building among previously colonized countries, as the remains become the symbol of a nation. Nakasa’s grave is now in Chesterville, South Africa.

Adriana Russi and **Marilla Xavier Cury** professors at the University of São Paulo at the Museum of Archeology and Ethnology (online and not present, respectively) gave reflections on the decolonization of Brazilian museums through projects with Indigenous people. She placed decolonization efforts within the different experiences that museums and Indigenous people have in museum related projects. Stressing the need for actions “with” or “of” communities, not “on” communities, she reminded the audience that the museum is a political body. She spoke encouragingly of collaborative museology and the further decolonization of thoughts, words, and actions.

Annette Rein president of the German Association for Ethnologists in Germany (online) closed the sessions for the first day. She asked the question “Who owns the Luf boat?”. Starting with the recent publication by Götz Ali on the Luf boat, she illustrated the difficult situation surrounding an object with a colonial history in an exhibition. She mentioned the role that the media play in museum processes and museums efforts to be more relevant socially, particularly in the decolonization movement. She reminded the audience that Indigenous communities also have an active role in their decolonization. Speaking of different understandings of cultural preservation, Rein also spoke to the individual or clan’s rights to their cultural property, which may not be capitalistic or what museums consider under a conservation standard. To conclude, the conference participants discussed the question “Why perform provenance research in the first place? Why not just give everything back, and then research the provenance?”

The second conference day was themed **Museums and Ethnotourism**. The keynote speaker of the day, **Kamani Perera**, an independent researcher in Colombo, Sri Lanka, spoke on museums and ethno-tourist management in the pandemic. He made the case that museums can be powerful facilitators for cities to become involved with local communities through ethno-tourism, of which he highlighted the positive and negative aspects. Ethno-tourism, he argued, can emphasize the people who create artefacts in the region rather than only the artefacts themselves. Ethnotourism also promotes wide community participation in museum activity. Furthermore, he also pointed out an increase in appreciation and conservation of a historic place, which leads to broader tourism in the region. He remarked that the negative aspects included increased pollution or possible destruction of historical sites. In his case, however, the positive aspects outweighed the negative, as long as measures are taken to prevent the latter. To conclude, he remarked on the challenges that COVID-19 presented to his museums and the partnership with community work.

The second speaker was **Elnur Hasanov**, chief specialist of presidium of the Ganja branch of Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences (in person). He gave a presentation on traditional carpets as samples of ethno-tourism and modern museum studies. He spoke about the ways in which the symbolism on carpets, including style, color, and design, can speak in rich ways about a specific region or culture. His presentation covered broadly the general character of artistic features in Ganja Azerbaijani carpets.

Christine Müller-Radloff, a textile conservator at the Ethnographic Museums of the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen of Dresden, Germany (in person), gave a presentation on the controversies surrounding figurines in ethnographic exhibitions. Her presentation explored historical uses of figurines in ethnographic exhibitions in Saxony as well as the contemporary problems figurines today present. Her perspective emphasized the conservational challenges in preserving clothing and other textiles, and she reminded her audience of the museum’s priority to keep an object safe as it is being displayed. Discussion questions concerned the political place of figurines in contemporary museums, especially considering questions of representation and authenticity. As elements of race and gender are portrayed in figurines, they become highly political ways to mount objects or describe a scene.

Cossi Zéphirin Daavo, a researcher in cultural anthropology at the Ministry of Culture in Benin (online), was scheduled to speak on the collection and promotion of material supports of intangible heritage based on a case study concerning the sacred Gédélé masks of Benin. These masks have been classified as UNESCO World Heritage since 2002. Unfortunately, due to technical issues, he was unable to give his presentation.

Victoria Phiri, curator for the Choma Museum and Crafts Centre in Zambia (online) gave a presentation on the Choma Museum's embrace of ethno-tourism, which began in about 2000. She spoke highly of the benefits that ethno-tourism brought to the rural museum, mainly due to the increased interaction between students, tourists, and local people in the area. She gave different examples of how tourists can interact with village residents via musical performances, basket weaving activities, tours, and even by getting involved in ceremonies. Objects seen in the museum can also be seen in the village. Questions concerned the effect of ethno-tourism on the local village population. She remarked on the boundaries that the museum set together with the village residents to preserve their privacy while creating this interactive element with the museum. Further discussion concerned the effect of the pandemic on the museum. Phiri explained that the number of tourists allowed into the village was already limited, and through pandemic precautions became even stricter. The pandemic caused the museum to be closed for an extended period, which included the temporary closure many interactive activities.

Anna Stein, Ph.D. student in the United Kingdom (online) gave a presentation on augmented reality in museum spaces to encourage interactivity and learning. She explained to the audience the kind of research she had conducted on app-use in museums. Unfortunately, due to technical issues, she was unable to complete her presentation.

Syed Aneel Ahmad Gilani, associate curator in the Pakistan Museum of Natural History (online) was also unable to give his presentation on the role of this museum in ethno-tourism for technical reasons.

The third day's theme was **leadership and museum management for our times**. The keynote speakers were **Carol Ann Scott**, ICOM executive board member and **Lizzy Moriarty**, a cultural consultant in the United Kingdom (both online). They presented the findings from the INTERCOM Global Museum Leadership Project. To begin their presentation, they asked participants what they considered "leadership". They made the suggestion that leadership reaches beyond concepts such as control, management, or responsibility. Rather, leadership means knowing how to harness the passion, purpose and resources of an organization. In this way, the organization can reach its full potential. They spoke to the outside influences that museums work with and are challenged by, including audience participation, media presence, government interaction, political situation, and financial budgets. They emphasized the importance of staff members understanding the vision of the institution as well as the role of ICOM in supporting museums and leadership activities.

Siddhanth Shah, a museum accessibility consultant in India (online), spoke on inclusive leadership, mainly on empowering a largely forgotten stakeholder: differently-abled museum

participants. He spoke of their relevance inside and outside museum-scapes. He remarked that the differently-abled are not always empowered by museum processes or infrastructures to realize their goals and plans. These perspectives, he argued, are valuable not only for other differently-abled individuals, but for the museum as whole. He gave the example of museums moving towards more tactile experiences, which are not only beneficial for blind visitors, but for all visitors. He reminded his audience that inclusivity is incremental and that building a reliable infrastructure is important to execute accessibility measures. To conclude, Shah stated that museums must avoid tokenism and assimilation in their diversity outreach. They should also be careful not to dehumanize these important stakeholders.

Next to speak was **Agnes Aljas**, research secretary of the Estonian National Museum in Estonia (online). She asked how we are to measure a museum's relevance and impact to society. She gave examples of the digital tools the Estonian National Museum has been using to keep records and track museum interest and visitation. This included data collection in the galleries, including how much time visitors spent looking at objects, taking photos of displays, or talking about specific objects. This data is only for museum use and the visitors are aware of the data collection. This kind of data collection provided a valuable resource to the museum to track and improve the ways in which visitors experience the collections.

Elfira Malikova, associate professor at the Azerbaijan State University of Culture and Art (in person), spoke about teaching the next generation of museum experts and museum management. She spoke positively of the conference's humanitarian approach and use of so many varied perspectives. In line with this multiplicity, Malikova spoke on the relationship between museum work and museum studies. She made the comment that it was important for future museologists to be immersed in both the theoretical and practical issues of museum management, including the current job market situation and international museum management. This was presented as a factor of applied museology. She suggested museums include more student work so that they gain some of the managerial skill sets they need at cultural institutions.

Dilek Karaaziz Şener, art historian and lecturer at Hacettepe University in Ankara, Turkey (online) spoke on the changing museum management in Turkey. She gave a survey history of multiple museums in Turkey and their growth into modern museums since 1990. She argued that a holistic approach is important to trace museum history, as well as one invested in museum "ecology" where the communication between staff is addressed. She further argued that one terms such as "contemporary" and "modern" must be understood separately between local and global contexts.

Serajul Islam, deputy keeper at the Ahsan Manzil Museum in Dhaka, Bangladesh (online) gave a presentation on historical museum management in Bangladesh as well as current and future paths. He spoke of the constitutional and legal obligations that museums hold, giving specific examples in Bangladesh.

Erilda Selaj, museum curator at the Studio House Kadare in Albania (online) spoke on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the museum sector in developing countries, specifically in Albania. She spoke of the kind of online events the museum produced including livestreams with curators, putting library resources online, and developing an online ticket. She expressed a new focus on local groups rather than international tourists as a result of the pandemic.

Myriam Proulx, program manager at the Canada Council for the Arts spoke last about a week of leadership training at the Oxford Cultural Leaders Program she attended. The program was led in part by the Saïd Business School. She reflected on its usefulness and transformative power for museum work. The training itself was intensely immersive experience, and involved spending 12 hours a day in creative learning situations. She shared her conclusions from the training with the audience: First, that the art of improvisation and active listening were important traits of leaders, and that these traits can be learned and practiced. Second, she spoke of adaptive leadership, which balances what is happening to the institution with what response is appropriate. She also spoke about how leaders can harness doubt in an organization to be more resilient as a whole. Overall, she concluded that the week of leadership training was very transformative, and encouraged her audience to take part in such training, both on director and middle management levels.

This conference report was assembled by Miriam Hamburger in November 2021.