

Info-Forum Museum as a Field of Formation and Sharing of the Ethnographic Knowledge : Comment

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The two contexts surrounding ethnological materials: the source community and the museum

I have been visiting Bali, Indonesia around two weeks ago. The main purpose of this trip was to collect artifacts for the new Southeast Asian exhibit scheduled to open next year. Among this collection was the mask of a lion-like creature called the *barong*. This imaginary animal with the semblance of a lion, was believed to ward off disasters and evil spirits, and is usually carefully stored inside the village temple, with its mask and costumes only to be worn for dances that take place during traditional rituals. On a previous visit, I had requested a famous mask craftsman in Bali to create a *barong*.

The driver that happened to guide me was also a traditional dancer who was knowledgeable about these things. Looking at the *barong* I purchased, he remarked: “This is splendid. If you infuse spirit into it with the ritual in Bali, this *barong* will likely become very powerful,” adding, “It might cause problems though, if you’re going to exhibit a mask which has spirit in a museum.” He then told me this story. A long time ago, a performance troupe from Bali performed in a certain country in Europe. The mask that was worn for this performance was purchased and later stored away by someone in Europe. One day, the troupe from Bali visited the same country again. It was said that at night, even though there was no one around the venue, a voice was heard. When the source of the voice was sought, it turned out to be the mask. They say the mask was crying because it wanted to be taken home to Bali. Following this incident, the troupe of performers was compelled to explain this situation and bring the mask back to Bali, where it was stored in a temple.

Ethnographic artifacts owned by ethnological museums were originally made use of in culturally meaningful ways within the source communities. The act of collection by scholars implies separating them from the cultural context of the society concerned and giving it a status of museum collection. A museum possesses artifacts derived from many other societies as well, and along with those other items, these ethnographic artifacts take on a new meaning within the context of the museum.

At the Minpaku, artifacts are referred to as “*hyohon*” resources. The Japanese word “*hyohon*” would likely suggest the meaning of a “specimen” or “sample.” As

the name indicates, these ethnographic artifacts owned by museums are recognized as objects that represent the culture of the people that created and used them. Of course, museums acknowledge the cultural significance of the artifacts, however, in many cases museums had treated their collection as if they no longer had significance within the context of the source communities.

Today, we learned about several examples as useful reference in the construction of the Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources of the World. All of these examples can be interpreted as attempts to once again put the ethnographic artifacts possessed by the museums back into the context of the source communities and make them culturally meaningful as well. All of these examples, I believe, are accomplished by connecting the strong will of the people from the source communities to learn about their traditions within the ethnographic artifacts in museums with the effort by the museum to make the ethnographic artifacts culturally meaningful.

Minpaku has various artifacts collected from around the world. It is our important mission to preserve them properly as the museum's collection. In addition, learning from today's examples, we should establish a method to give them a life as artifacts bearing cultural significances.

The Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources of the World as a venue of discovery

For the past few years, I have been conducting a project that examines possibilities of audio-visual ethnography of performing arts. One of our findings in this project is that people with different backgrounds elicit different things when viewing the same footage. For example, people who have been maintaining the performing arts in the community tend to pay attention to people who appear on the footage. In contrast, researchers of the performing arts are more likely focusing on the process of the ritual including the performing arts, and also on the choreography, lyrics etc. Presumably, it is because they watch it while comparing it to other related performing arts in the neighboring region.

I have been shooting the performing arts of the small island of Iou Jima, with a population of 120, in Kagoshima Prefecture for four to five years. Last year, due to the deaths in families of core performers, they were unable to join the performance. When we were about to leave the island, one of the locals mentioned: "This year's dance was the worst performance I have ever seen so far." Indeed, anyone from the island watching this video would realize at once who are on the footage and who aren't. And noticing the absence of the core members, they may remember the reason.

So even though we were examining the same footage, the islanders and our

entourage were focusing on totally different points. This fact also proves that we can learn about the knowledge possessed by one another through video. While watching the video and listening to the island people's stories, we could probably learn about the personality of each of the performers. We may also be able to learn something about the human relations on the island. Conversely, the island people could also obtain knowledge pertaining to the performing arts in neighboring regions from us. In other words, through conversations while watching the same video, each party can exchange the knowledge and information they possess, and through this exchange, further their understanding of the performing arts onscreen.

Although the materials stored in a museum have been separated from their original cultural context, they have been given a new significance by representing the world's cultures alongside the other collections in the museum. As a result of their being exposed to many people, they also have the potential to collect various kinds of information and knowledge. It would be desirable for the Info-Forum Museum to be presented as such a structure, which gathers and exchanges the knowledge of many people, thereby giving birth to new forms of awareness.

Remembering the history of the collections

During the latter half of the twentieth century, when globalization was becoming deeply widespread, the Minpaku was an engine that was gathering ethnographic artifacts on an unmatched scale. For the community members, many of these artifacts still bring back vivid memories and possess the power to evoke strong emotions such as nostalgia and loss. I believe that making the museum collection significant again within the context of the source community, and deriving a new sense of awareness through the accumulation of diverse knowledge and experience of people, should be the aim of the Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources of the World. Making the artifacts accessible to wider public in this manner also entails revealing the history behind the acquisition of the artifacts itself.

The Minpaku was established in 1974, and the museum was built upon the collections acquired from around the world by many cultural anthropologists. I believe that the scholar of Minpaku, based on the spirit of cultural anthropology, sincerely built good relationship with the people from the source community and collected the ethnographic artifacts. However, all of this happened at the height of Japan's rapid economic growth, and the Minpaku was established as a result of this economic power. As well, after its establishment, in addition to the artifacts collected by the scholars of Minpaku, there were many collections purchased by Minpaku through various circumstances. We are responsible for carrying on the history of these various materials as well.

There is a particularly interesting artifact among the Minpaku's musical

collections. It is a collection related to gramophone records produced and sold for Korea, Taiwan and China by a record label called Nippon Columbia in the first half of the twentieth century. The metal masters used for the pressing of these records at a factory located in Kawasaki, Japan, were left at the company. The significance of these masters that had long been forgotten and were about to be disposed, however, was recognized by an engineer at the company, which eventually led to the acquisition of these artifacts by the Minpaku.

The records produced for sale were hardly distributed in Japan. For this reason, they had been ignored even inside the office of Nippon Columbia. However, they are nonetheless important artifacts that cannot be ignored when trying to understand the musical development that took place especially in Korea and Taiwan. As well, research into these materials made it apparent that due to circumstances regarding recording facilities and performers at the time, many of the recordings took place in Japan and that many Japanese composers, arrangers and performers were involved. Although the respective musical markets were being shaped separately, background ties existed between each region's music and musicians despite these differences.

The information on the circumstances of acquisition of the collections and the historical background of them were part of the information that must be accumulated by the Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources of the World. That information, along with the recognition of the historical relationship with the source communities, leads to giving new life to ethnographic artifacts in the present world.