An Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources of the World : A New Development at the National Museum of Ethnology

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Introduction

Cultural anthropology examines the diversity of human cultures. Ultimately, cultural anthropology is an academic discipline that pursues through original fieldwork the question of "what does it mean to be human?" In 1871, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, the founding father of cultural anthropology, defined "culture" systematically for the first time. However, the last 30 years of its 150-year history have witnessed drastic changes in both the discipline of cultural anthropology and in the social and political environments surrounding it.

Two distinct movements have emerged in contemporary cultural anthropology. The first is change in the concept of culture, on which researchers build hypotheses about the subject(s) of their research. Compared to the concept of culture prevalent in the 1960s and earlier, a distinct trend toward excluding "things" from the definition of culture has emerged. Since the 1970s, the study of "culture" in cultural anthropology has often excluded things produced by humans. Furthermore, a greater emphasis has been placed on the symbolic and non-material aspects of human subjects. This is reflected in definitions of culture like "a system of meanings and symbols" and "discourse and practice constructed by human beings." To offset these shortcomings, new research is emerging to bring our attention back to "things". This includes studies like actor-network analyses, focused on the "agency of things", and those on materiality, focusing on the relationship between objects and humans.

A second change is seen in the way that culture is studied and represented. Since the mid-1980s researchers and anthropology/ethnology museums have been criticized for unilaterally "speaking for" other cultures. This led to a movement that placed the focus on the practice of cultivating knowledge through multilateral exchanges of ideas among researchers (those representing the culture), subjects (those represented), and the general public (those who read and watch the representation). Our understanding is that fieldwork and representation of culture now are becoming a collaborative undertaking between researchers and the represented, and are evolving into a "forum" that also involves the participation of third parties.

Under such circumstances, what is required of cultural anthropology and

ethnology museums? For the last 40 years, the National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) has specialized in studying cultures and societies around the world, and has collected physical and non-physical ethno-cultural materials and information. Minpaku researchers consider it vital to organize and manage the collections as cultural resources that belong to the global community, and to pass them on to coming generations. The idea of an "Info-Forum Museum" emerged from the search for an innovative way to implement these ideas.

The following text presents an overview of the concept. It should be noted that the concept is still being developed, so what follows is only a rough sketch of the Info-Forum Museum. It is not a final document.

The achievements of Minpaku and the new museum concept

Minpaku has amassed a large collection of ethnological materials from around the world. These include approximately 340,000 individual objects, 70,000 audio/video recordings, and 600,000 documents/books. The research staff have been studying, managing, storing, and exhibiting these collections since the inception of Minpaku. Minpaku was long positioned as a research museum, using the museum as a way to communicate research results to the public in general. In 2004, Japanese national universities and research institutes, including Minpaku, underwent government-led reform through which they became corporations. This compelled Minpaku research staff to reconsider the role and positioning of the Museum. One focal point of discussion at that time was whether Minpaku should focus on research or on its museum function.

After incorporation, it was decided that Minpaku, as an inter-university research institute, would be as "a research center with a museum." In 2010, when Minpaku entered its second plan term as an incorporated institution, it began seeking opportunities for collaborative research, with both Japanese and international counterparts, and for disseminating research results globally through publications, exhibitions, and symposia.

Also in 2010, the Center for International Academic Exchange was established to facilitate exchange among academic organizations and promote international collaborative research. To date, Minpaku has concluded academic exchange agreements with 19 research institutes, such as the A:shiwi A:wan Museum and Heritage Center, in the Pueblo of Zuni, New Mexico, in the United States, and has conducted collaborative research projects and exhibitions with them. Various collaborative projects have been carried out in Japan and elsewhere. These include the "Special Exhibition Back to 1936 Dal-ri, Ulsan," with the National Folk Museum of Korea, and "History and Culture of the Plains Indigenous Peoples of Taiwan," with the Shung Ye Museum of Formosan Aborigines. Both were based on

Minpaku collections related to these regions. Also, among its Core Research Projects Minpaku research staff conducted studies on the relationships between people and things in this era of globalization, between cultural heritage and local communities, and between disasters and cultural assets. These included projects entitled "The Cult of Things" and "Anthropology of Cultural Heritage," which fall within the field of the anthropological studies of materiality. The preservation, restoration, and management of cultural resources have also been a focus of Minpaku Core Research Projects.

The renewal of Minpaku permanent exhibitions, a museum-wide undertaking that began in fiscal year 2008, is scheduled for completion in June, 2016. With the new exhibits nearing completion, Minpaku staff began exploring the kinds of research project that should come in the years ahead. After various discussions, the following idea emerged.

Since the 1980s, lifestyles have changed drastically as people, material items, information, and capital began crossing borders and moving on a global scale. Globalization has had an impact on local communities; positively in some respects, but not without adverse effects. Throughout history, people around the world have produced various tools, ceremonial artifacts, buildings, songs, dances, and oral traditions. However, now many are threatened with disappearance in the face of rapid globalization. Ensuring both the continuation and creation of ethnic cultures, or humanity's shared assets, is urgent.

What could Minpaku do to preserve these objects and associated cultural knowledge, based on its achievements to date? The idea emerged in response to this issue. That is to conduct research on endangered ethnic cultures collaboratively with local societies, universities, research institutes and museums; and to establish a digital museum for sharing Minpaku collections of cultural resources and information, so as to use them collaboratively.

Minpaku has always been an avid promoter of multimedia databases. Since the time of its first Director-General, Tadao Umesao, Minpaku has been conceived of as a "museum and information center," capable not only of exhibiting artifacts, but also of providing information about them, peoples, and regions, based on multimedia technology. Minpaku has been one of the pioneers in Japan in creating databases for museum collections, as well as video programs on the activities of different ethnic groups. Researchers at the Museum have accumulated through first-hand fieldwork around the world a large amount of data on cultural resources and related information.

However, the Museum's methods of archiving and organizing information for the databases have not been without problems. At present cultural resource information is scattered across different media (websites, publications, etc.), which makes searching and cross-referencing difficult. To solve this problem a platform is

required that allows integration of Minpaku's information so it can be used by various groups. To this end, Minpaku has been submitting budgetary requests to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to finance creation of a virtual museum (or "Info-Forum Museum," as we have named it) that would leverage its academic accumulation. This digital museum would help connect Minpaku with the world and thereby enable multilateral exchange of information.

As a result of these requests, a special budget was allocated by the Ministry. These funds enabled Minpaku to embark in April 2014 on an eight-year project to build the "Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources" as a first step.

What is the Info-Forum Museum?

The Info-Forum Museum is a database of cultural information that will be shared with Minpaku by people, universities, research institutes, and museums around the world. It will permit sharing and use of the information on a global scale. Using the Internet, this database will be accessible to culture-bearers, researchers, media, teachers, students, and the general public. In this way it will encourage commentary and the free exchange of ideas, and thus generate information, as well as functioning as a forum.

Establishment of this museum requires two major undertakings to be completed inter-relatedly and concurrently. These are the creation of database contents and the building of a multilateral dissemination system that enables commentary and cross-searching. The project will not be complete unless these two undertakings are
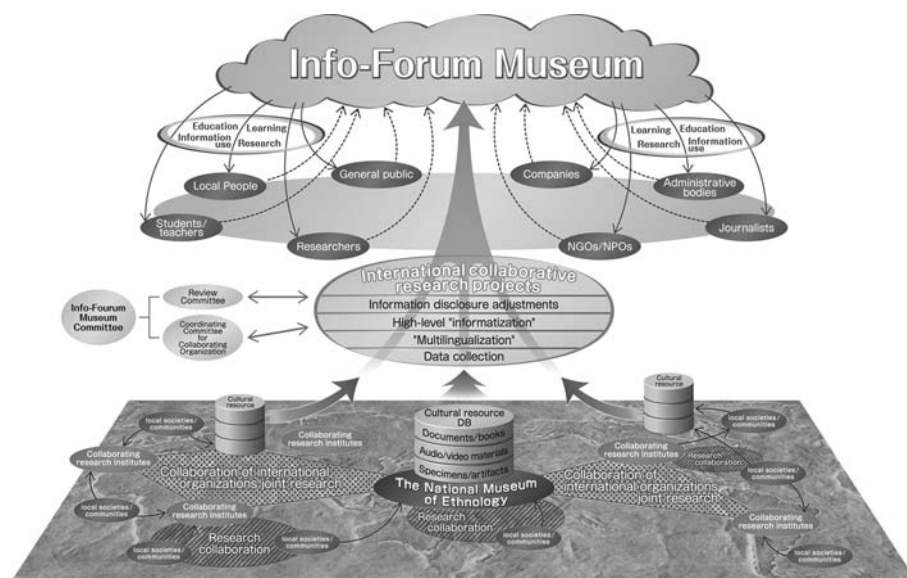
combined.

Creating content through international collaborative research

To create the Info-Forum Museum, in conjunction with Japanese and international collaborating institutions and local people, Minpaku will conduct a four-year ("Project for Database Establishment") and a two-year ("Project for Database Improvement") collaborative research projects on cultural resources of specific regions. The object of the "Project for Database Establishment" is to create content through sharing the cultural resources and information managed by individual partner institutions, and also by conducting collaborative research. Designated project leaders will coordinate/manage each project. As one Database Establishment project, in fiscal year 2014, Minpaku commenced the "Documenting and Sharing Information on Ethnological Materials: Working with Native American Tribes" project, based on what staff had already been studying and collecting. Three more projects was launched. These were "The ecological adaptation of material culture in Taiwan and neighboring islands" to be launched in fiscal year 2015, "Building a Database for Cultural Heritage of the Ainu", scheduled for fiscal year 2016, and "International Collaborating Projects of Cultural Resources with African Museums", to be launched in fiscal year 2017.

"Projects for Database Improvement" will study Minpaku's existing cultural resources, adding new information and refining the overall content to both enhance the existing database and create new databases. A project "Building a comprehensive database for "The George Brown Collection" of the National Museum of Ethnology ("Minpaku")" which began in fiscal year 2014, is one such Database Improvement project.

Database Establishment projects will be conducted as follows. Teams for selected projects will determine the type of international collaborative research that could be conducted and sort of database that could be built. Also, they will review the items and information to be included in the database. The uniqueness of each team will be respected, and each will decide on the type of materials to be used (images, audio recordings, etc.) and the method (e.g., multimedia technology), provided that each incorporates common items shared across all projects.

Collaboration with partner organizations in Japan and elsewhere is especially important for Database Establishment projects. Project leaders will work with co-researchers and local people internationally, conducting studies on specific topics, such as ceremonial artifacts of the Zuni and Hopi people of the Southwestern USA. A principal characteristic of the contents of these Database Establishment projects is that they are based on the results of international collaborative research by project teams.

Some research results, however, cannot be disseminated through the Info-Forum Museum, as when information disclosure is restricted to particular people or groups. For example, the Kwakwaka'wakw, an indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest Coast of North America, has oral traditions and dances that are performed solely among specific extended family groups or secret societies. Some Aboriginal peoples of Australia have special myths that may be passed on only to male members of a specific clan. Because of such restrictions, each project team must be selective regarding information collected, and set different levels of accessibility to it. Copyright and portrait rights for documents and images are among the other issues that must be cleared when disclosing research results via the Info-Forum Museum.

After deciding what from the collaborative research can be disclosed, the basic information will be presented in Japanese, English, and the local language(s), to benefit local people, researchers, and other users. "Multilingualization" of the basic information is a prerequisite to operating the Info-Forum Museum as a forum.

For creating a specific presentation format, each project team will consult the Info-Forum Museum's system development team (see below). The resulting completed database will be accessible via the Info-Forum Museum. Also, Minpaku will promote dissemination of results from collaborative research projects through international symposia, collaborative exhibitions, scientific articles, and other publications.

The work of each project, however, does not end at the launch of the database. It is expected that a variety of people who access the Info-Forum Museum will post comments about its contents and suggest adding to and modifying information. Therefore, each project team will need to continue its research based on such newly acquired information, and constantly modify and update the contents of the database. This implies that new information will be generated continually by diverse users of the Info-Forum Museum. In that respect, the database is not the end of the project; rather it is the beginning of a new phase of research.

System development for the Info-Forum Museum

Another important aspect of the Info-Forum Museum is the system now being developed by which the database contents will be disclosed. The Info-Forum Museum will be linked eventually to the databases of collaborating institutions, as a "cloud type" database with multiple hubs. In the meantime, however, Minpaku will focus on developing the system for the Info-Forum Museum, and function as a base for disclosing database contents and collaborating with other institutions.

The following describes the outline for development of the system. First, the

Info-Forum Museum consists of multiple databases and also is linked to external databases managed by collaborating institutions. Therefore, the system to be developed must comprehensively link and integrate those databases and allow cross-searching.

Second, the Info-Forum Museum should provide a commentary function that allows users who access each database to write comments freely. This will serve as a forum for makers and users of cultural resources, successors of cultural resources, researchers, and other users to exchange information and views, and generate new knowledge.

Third, the Info-Forum Museum will be disseminating many different kinds of information. As already noted, some such information may be shared by all people, some is relatively private, and some should be disclosed only to specific families or groups. Therefore, different levels of accessibility should be assigned according to the nature of the database content. For example, one level could be allocated to data to be accessed only by local people or a particular family group, and another exclusively to co-researchers. To do this, the system should have an access authorization feature.

The Info-Forum Museum system development team will be responsible for driving the research and development of the system in partnership with the National Institute for Informatics and private-sector corporations. At the moment Minpaku staff are considering how this forum feature could work for each database, and how to achieve a user-oriented database to provide a superb user experience.

Organizational structure for creating and operating the Info-Forum Museum

To implement the concept of the Info-Forum Museum and to oversee its operations, an Info-Forum Museum Committee (officially, the "Info-Forum Museum Committee") will be established. A Coordinating Committee for Collaborating Organizations, an Evaluation Committee (third-party), and project teams will be formed under it. The Info-Forum Museum Committee will be responsible for the overall management and operation of the museum projects, and other groups under it will work in coordination with related sections to carry out the projects.

The following describes the operational structure of the committees/groups other than project teams:

The Info-Forum Museum Committee is responsible for overall operation of projects. Its activities include:

1. Planning and managing projects,

2. Finalizing the basic design and structures of the Info-Forum Museum's system and databases,
3. Making project proposals and performing assessments,
4. Performing the maintenance, management, and operation of the Info-Forum Museum,
5. Considering plans for international symposia and other collaborative events,
6. Collecting external reviews and offering advice for project teams based on those reviews, and
7. Determining the scope of information that can be disclosed,

The system development team is positioned under the Info-Forum Museum Committee, and will work with each project team to build its individual database. It will also be responsible for the construction and operations of the Info-Forum Museum that will house all individual databases.

Because various Japanese and international organizations will be involved in the Info-Forum Museum project, coordination among projects will be necessary to resolve project-related issues and schedule collaborative events, like international symposia. These tasks will be performed by the Coordinating Committee for Collaborating Organizations.

Regular third-party reviews and corrections/adjustments based on the review results will be required for the entire project to progress smoothly. The Evaluation Committee, comprised of third-party experts, will review the progress of each project at the end of each fiscal year, and will offer advice for improvement.

Prospects and challenges

The mission of a museum is to collect "things"/artifacts, audio/video materials, and related information, to study them, and to make them available to the general public. It is also responsible for managing and preserving them. In addition, restoration of materials is an important part of a museum's mission. Although it is best for researchers and local people to see the actual materials first-hand, there are often constraints on travel. One way to overcome such a constraint and to fulfill a museum's mission is to make materials available online.

Databases have been created in collaboration with indigenous people for particular ethnic groups or regions. These include Alaska Native Collections: Sharing Knowledge, by the Alaska Branch of the Smithsonian Institution's Arctic Studies Center, and Reciprocal Research Network, First Nations Items from the Northwest Coast, by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. However, aside from the electronic version of the Human Relations Area Files Databases (eHRAF database), no other conglomerate of databases covers the cultural resources of different ethnic groups and regions across the

world. Even with eHRAF, users can browse only specific ethnographic information, and no commentary feature is available. The Info-Forum Museum will be one of the first attempts ever to launch a database of cultural resources from all parts of the world and that also serves as a forum.

The following are three benefits expected to accrue from the establishment and operation of the Info-Forum Museum. First, the Info-Forum Museum will make "global-scale" amounts of research on cultural resources available for sharing and use. Once the Info-Forum Museum is launched, collecting and comparing global information on masks, for example, such as that on their shapes, materials, production methods, functions, social meanings, videos, will be possible without spatial/temporal constraints. By implication, this will broaden the horizon of research on culture, including research on "things". In such a way it is highly likely that the Info-Forum Museum will generate a new frontier in research on cultural resources.

Second, the Info-Forum Museum will advance forum-style anthropological studies. Discussion and exchange of ideas on specific topics or cultural resources by researchers, the groups of people being studied, and other users, will drive these studies. The interactive nature of these discussions will be a major advance over the "generation of knowledge solely by researchers," and the involvement of diverse people will facilitate creation of a new type of knowledge.

Third, the Info-Forum Museum will have an impact on society. By using the Info-Forum Museum, not only researchers and students at universities, research institutes, and museums, but also other people from any local community, in many countries, the media and corporations interested in knowing more about the peoples of specific places, about the regions themselves, and the status of international affairs can obtain accurate information. Those facing the problem of finding successors to maintain traditional knowledge, in particular, will benefit from obtaining information on the creation and continuation of their own and other cultures' resources. Bearers of culture can use the information to promote the creation of "things," the intergenerational succession of intangible cultural assets, and the creation of new culture.

There are technical issues to be resolved, and Minpaku needs the cooperation of all researchers, both inside and outside the Museum, as well as support from the Japanese government to launch "the Info-Forum Museum for Cultural Resources of the World". Although the amount of funding available will naturally affect the scale of the project, Minpaku is committed to advancing it, at least for the next six years.