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Indigenous and Transnational Values in Oceania: Heritage Reappropriation, From Museums to the World Wide Web

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Abstract

What is the value of heritage? A source of explosive emotions which oppose the “value” of so-called Western expertise – history of social and human sciences and constant reevaluation of the heritage market – versus the values in “becoming” of the people who recognise themselves in this heritage and who claim it as a foundation for an alternative and better life? In this paper, we examine some of the ways in which different groups in the Pacific reinterpret their heritage in order to redefine their singular values as cultural subjectivities: individual, collective and national, diasporic or transnational in the case of some Indigenous networks (Festival of the Pacific Arts, Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, etc).

How can societies deal with different value systems in a way that does not lead to the total domination of one system by another?¹ The framework of our discussion builds on a trend of engaged French scholarship in the Pacific that is evidenced in a number of recent conferences and publications (Dousset, Glowczewski & Salaün eds. 2014). Our concern is to explore ways to “decolonize” the gaze we use in social sciences, to conceive of a paradigm that shifts the scientific values associated to the foundation and filiation of anthropology as a discipline in the light of the values promoted by the people whose practices and discourses we study in the field and, increasingly so, through a variety of new media such as the Internet.

Over the last decades, in the wake of their countries’ access to independence and the national and international struggle for the recognition of Indigenous rights, many Oceanian people have developed strategies to promote the value of their cultural heritage, in relation to their colonial history but also to current issues and concerns. Their undertakings are both local and national and involve networks covering the broader Pacific region. Established in 1971, the **Forum of the South Pacific Islands**² for instance, regularly brings together representatives from 16 member countries to find common responses to conflicts generated by the wild development of tourism, the uncontrolled exploitation of mining and logging resources, water

¹ One of the questions of the *Value and Dominance* conference (Cairns Institute, 2010) where a first version of this paper was presented; a longer version has been published in French (De Largy Healy & Glowczewski 2014).

² <http://www.forumsec.org/pages.cfm/about-us/member-countries/>:

pollution, climatic change and sea level rise threats. The Festival of Pacific Arts is another stage from where these sovereign voices can emerge and be broadcasted (Glowczewski & Henry 2007, 2011, Le Roux 2012). Creatively drawing on the relation between inherited traditions and cultural innovations, these trans-oceanic solutions reveal how local singularities have become important forces in the political reappropriation of these issues by the actors.

The descendants of many formerly colonised Peoples are also investing museums and online platforms as tools for the transmission of memory and heritage-related knowledge in land and places, material culture and performance, or written and audio-visual archives. They are using exhibitions and digital media to choose and control how to transmit their heritage within their groups, to their diasporas and to outside audiences whose view they are increasingly confronted to. Three levels of reception are questioned by the multiplication of museums, cultural centres, art exhibitions, festivals and other platforms of diffusion, the rise of social media, but also of transnational forums of exchange and discussion on memory, experiences of the past and present, and the search for solutions to current problems : how, why and for whom is heritage being transmitted ? Another issue at stakes is the inalienability of some knowledge (Glowczewski 2002) and various forms of traditional ownership and copyright with regards to local, national and international laws (De Largy Healy 2012).

Valorisation of Intangible Heritage and Colonial History

Heritage is understood here not as a material inheritance of monuments and places but as a cultural process of knowledge and practices as listed in the Article 31 of the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* which was ratified by the UN in 2007 – with a belated support from the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Australia:

Indigenous Peoples have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their cultural heritage, traditional knowledge and traditional cultural expressions, as well as the manifestations of their sciences, technologies and cultures, including human and genetic resources, seeds, medicines, knowledge of the properties of fauna and flora, oral traditions, literatures, designs, sports and traditional games and visual and performing arts. They also have the right to maintain, control, protect and develop their intellectual property over such cultural heritage, traditional knowledge, and traditional cultural expressions.³

Social sciences are challenged by this international movement which contextualises the process of patrimonialization with the aim to affirm new forms of transmission and value regimes. By shedding light on the agencies, subjectivities and ambiguities at work in the individual experiences of the colonial past, recent research trends have afforded a new, previously overlooked value to aspects of various groups' historical heritage. Between 1800 and 1958, for instance, some 35 000 people were exhibited by various impresario in theatres, circuses, colonial exhibitions and zoos throughout the western world. Recent studies have shown that, far from being passive victims of their tour managers, many of the exhibited people took action, by exchanging with the public, going on strike or leaving their group to make a life for themselves (Bancel et al 2004, Blanchard et al 2011, Vergès 2012)⁴. Roslyn Poignant's book *Professional savages. Captive lives and western spectacle* (2004) retraces

³ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/indigenous-peoples/related-info/undrip/>

⁴ "The invention of the savage : exhibitions", 2011-2012, musée du quai Branly, Paris:
<http://www.quaibranly.fr/en/programmation/exhibitions/last-exhibitions/human-zoos.html>

the story of two groups of Aboriginal people from Palm Island, who toured the world for years. Out of the nine first individuals who were captured in 1883, only 3, known as Billy, Jenny and her son, survived. The survivors were photographed with striking dignity in Paris for the Prince Roland Bonaparte anthropological collection. Poignant (2004) also documented the return to Palm Island in 1994 of the remains of Tambo, an Aboriginal man who died in the USA: her involvement in that process is exemplary of the conflicting values at stake in the process of human remains repatriation, as well as the return of objects and intangible heritage (Garond 2011 & 2014, Glowczewski 2008 & 2013, Leblic ed. 2013)⁵.

In order to understand the complexity of contemporary social relations, anthropology has to hold together the critique of the discipline's former colonial applications and the many sources of enunciation of subjectivities which crisscross the changing values of history in the mainstream media and among formerly colonised people. Patrimonial objects, both material and intangible, crystallize complex emotions which reveal the conflicting values held by different audiences. Such emotions can oscillate between admiration and indignation: "One can see the axiological fertility stemming from the "heritage" object, which requires at the same time two opposed regimes of qualification (community and singularity), two axes of extensibility (space and time), several registrars of value (pure, domestic, aesthetic, hermeneutic, civic) and the different values that rely on it (authenticity, presence, beauty, significativity, general interest...)" (Heinich 2012 : 31, our translation).

In Oceania, this tension is particularly illustrated by the asymmetry between, on the one hand, the Western appropriation of what is supposed to be an expert discourse on the world's heritage and, on the other hand, the subjective responses – individual and collective identity quests and national construction discourses – of the descendants of the Indigenous peoples who – often unwillingly and sometimes in a process of violent dispossession – have provided a large part of this heritage.

Anthropology cannot "think" heritage without taking into account the contradictions which oppose different "valorizations" of the past: the choice of what to protect or to promote is highly political. By determining what should be archived, anthropologists as producers of a scientific validation, Indigenous peoples as care holders of values of "tradition" and "authenticity", and institutions as promoters of both (science and culture), put forth a certain view of the world and of the place of regional history.

Indigenous Reappropriations of Culture and History

Scientists are not the only ones practicing selective valorisation. The Internet has provided a powerful forum to the civil society, many groups using this unprecedented opportunity to promote old and new values. These value producers are not necessarily doing so intentionally, but the way in which they broadcast themselves on the net can become contagious (like the Arab Spring) and sustain world-wide solidarity through the growing consultation of the sites or networks which host and dispatch the relevant information. The didjeridu for instance – a musical instrument from Arnhem Land – has been widely popularised on the web. Interestingly, this popularity has not necessarily disappropriated the Yolngu people of this region: on the contrary it has benefited some remote communities who have developed since the 1990's small family businesses, promoting the sale of locally

⁵ <http://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/features/2012/06/the-strange-tale-of-aboriginal-circus-performers>

produced instruments and workshops with masterplayers⁶.

Another well-known example of global cultural circulation and reappropriation is the Ka Mate haka, which was popularised by the famous All Blacks rugby team. Since February 2009 however, the New Zealand government has recognized intellectual property rights over this specific form of haka – a Polynesian form of dance performed with vigorous hand and foot actions – to the *iwi* Ngati Toa, a Maori tribe of the Northern Island. This political decision was made to protect their cultural heritage from forms of commercial exploitation considered insulting, such as an Italian car manufacturer television advertisement that showed a group of business women performing a haka in the street, despite this particular form of dance being traditionally restricted to men (Connolly 2009).

The mobilisation of tradition in the process of creativity has been criticised as a form of “invention of tradition”. In the Pacific, the debate is old (Wagner 1981, Keesing & Tonkinson, 1982, Jolly & Thomas, 1992, Linnekin & Poyer 1990, Wittersheim 1999) and still polemic (Babadzan 2009), despite research undertaken with Indigenous peoples in recent years demonstrating a change of paradigm (Glowczewski & Henry eds 2007, Gagné et al eds 2009, Bosa & Wittersheim eds 2009) especially with the flourishing of contemporary art forms which value the reinterpretations of historical and anthropological archives (Le Roux 2010, Morvan ed 2013). According to many of us, the current question in anthropology does not consist in evaluating the authenticity of traditions but in analysing the existential efficiency of the new assemblages (*agencements* in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari 1987) that patrimonialization gives rise to. These complex assemblages are constantly recomposed and emerge from the heritage making process initiated by the groups who claim to be the caretakers of a tradition and of a patrimonialized history, but also by their diaspora or by outside audiences – from the same culture or another, living in the same country or elsewhere, visiting as tourists, researchers or even as virtual travellers in museums collections, through books, films, media and on the Internet.

Many inaccuracies can circulate on these platforms however, through the publication of dubious information, reductions or stereotypes, which can be perpetuated by the outside as well as by the concerned groups who reinvest old sources which may have been otherwise criticised for their colonial, ethnocentric or other interpretative bias. In our view, the most interesting is that under certain conditions – in this workshop of communication “bricolage”, to which anthropology participates intentionally or not – productive assemblages take consistency, favouring curiosity and recognition. Ideally, these assemblages can deconstruct stereotypes, crystallise singularities, enrich the social fabric and emulate creative processes. The result is a dynamic reconfiguration of heritage and knowledge expressions, in which the past is afforded new values according to contemporary issues and to speculations about the future that motivate the concerned groups as well as other users, including researchers in our disciplines.

Many groups in Oceania seek to reformulate their local history, for themselves and for others, should it be anchored in ancestrality, the result of a movement, a displacement or fashioned by a diaspora. As formerly colonised groups and “subjects” of scientific enquiry increasingly reclaim authorship over their historical and cultural heritage, including over the material collections and archival records held in institutions world-wide, their actions have come to challenge contemporary practices of museology and anthropology. While in most settled

⁶ See the Yolngu world reknown masterplayer Djalu Gurruwiwi’s website www.djalu.com

countries, institutional protocols in relation to the conservation, exhibition and public access to indigenous material have evolved in response to the source communities' concerns, other issues have emerged with the digitization of these materials. The determination of access rights to these collections, both material and digital, should thus be understood as a process of constant negotiation. These sensitive questions underline the academic and institutional responsibility in understanding societies and cultures, their knowledge and its many expressions, as well as heritage transmission and the conditions of its preservation, in dynamic, contextualised and meaningful ways (Clifford 2004, Karp, I. and Levine, S. D. eds. 1991; Peers, L. L. and Brown, A. K. eds. 2003; Stanley, N. ed. 2007).

The Value of Digital Tools for Indigenous People

In 2000, Joe Neparrnga Gumbula, who has since become a well-known Yolngu scholar, was inspired to make a music clip with his rock band Soft Sand, using footage from a ceremony directed by his father 40 years earlier for ethnographic filmmaker Cecil Holmes (*Djalumbu* 1964). At the time, the filmmaker's widow was opposed to such a use of the film sequences (Torsen & Anderson 2010). This example of conflicting interests questions the nature of intellectual property law that applies to such audio-visual records and the distribution of rights on such images. As a founding director of the Galiwin'ku Indigenous knowledge centre, Joe Neparrnga Gumbula initiated in 2003 the Gupapuyngu Legacy Project, a vast documentation program led in museums and archival collections in Australia, Europe and North America to create his own clan archive (De Largy Healy, 2011a). His main objectives were to locate, identify, document and digitally repatriate the thousands of objects, paintings, photographs and audio-visual recordings from his and other related clans to his home community. Importantly, the chosen term of "legacy" referred both to the knowledge that had been inherited from the ancestors, both mythical and historical, and to the transmission of this heritage to the young generations. Inspired by his and myriad other collaborative initiatives, a number of Indigenous knowledge centres funded through the Northern Territory government and local agencies (including mining royalties) have sprung across northern and central Australian Indigenous communities, to offer adapted solutions for digital archiving and media production (De Largy Healy 2011b).

Internet presents a new medium to render the ways in which civil society, specifically here Indigenous communities or representatives, wish to promote and preserve their heritage: how they represent themselves, commercialise their art and craft, call for political and financial support and circulate the videos they produce. Since the creation of online content sharing platforms such as YouTube in 2005, hundreds of videos have been uploaded by different groups from the Pacific to share aspects of their culture, raise awareness of their political situation or denounce social and economic injustices and inequalities. The possibility offered by many websites to respond to other users' publications with written comments or video responses has led to the broadcasting of many alternative versions of stories and events, creating a space for debates and call for actions through petitions or political campaigns. For instance in February 2011, Dhalulu Ganambarr, a Yolngu woman from Yirrkala, recorded a video showing aspects of social disadvantage in her community such as poor housing and overcrowding. Posted on YouTube, the video called for viewers to sign a petition against the Rudd Labor government's decision to pursue the controversial Northern Territory Emergency Response implemented by the former Howard conservative government. As a result, a

petition of some 42 000 signatures was presented to the Senate⁷.

In January 2008, a group of Central Australian policemen, which included a female officer, walked into a restricted ceremonial area, where young Aboriginal men were waiting to go through an initiation ceremony. The Warlpiri used YouTube to explain in their language and in English why they condemned this intrusion as a form of cultural violation, which broke the Law they shared with other Aboriginal groups across Australia “both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people need to recognise each others’ law... The government people need to recognise our law (*ngalipanyangu kuruwarri*, our Dreaming stories and songlines)”. The visibility of this public condemnation pressed the police to launch an enquiry and, eventually, to make an official apology (Glowczewski 2013).⁸

In 2006, a Warlpiri literacy worker from Lajamanu, Wanta (Steven Jampijinpa Patrick) elaborated a complex cognitive system encompassed in the concept of *ngurra-kurlu* “belonging to land”, which he promotes as a teaching tool and a strategy “to work with Warlpiri” language and people in many ways. In a YouTube video, we hear his voice in Warlpiri, subtitled in English, and see his hand tracing a sand design where five circles embed Warlpiri cosmosociological concepts – land (*ngurra*) in the middle, and around, law (*kurruwari*), ceremony (*purlapa*, *jarda-wanpa*, etc), language (*jaru*) and family (defined as four interrelated “skin” father/son groupings : *Yarriki* group where one can marry, *Wurruru* group of the speaker’s mother-in-law, *Kirda* group of the potential spouses, *Wapirra-jarra* own group of “skin” brothers, sisters, fathers and fathers’ sisters). The five circles are linked by lines as an expression of the interconnections which hold together this Warlpiri system of knowledge (Wanta et al 2008, Glowczewski forthcoming).⁹ Following this model, he also developed the Milpirri concept and festival with the theatre company Tracks and, in 2012, he was awarded an Australian Research Council fellowship.¹⁰

With the global advent of a “read/write culture” (Lessig 2008), which allows communities of users everywhere to actively participate, as producers, in the creation of culture, Indigenous contents have multiplied in an exponential manner on the Net, allowing for an unprecedented new visibility in the public space. This was the case in 2007, when a short amateur video entitled “Zorba the Greek Yolngu style”, which was filmed during a local festival in Arnhem land, became viral on YouTube within a few months – with more than 3 million viewers to this day. It shows a techno remix of sirtaki, the Greek dance popularized by Anthony Quinn, performed by a group of ten young Yolngu men dressed with loincloth, the “Chooky dancers” (a formation now called the Tjuki mala). This Yolngu Zorba contests with humor many fictions existing about the unchangeable and unchanged nature of Aboriginal performative traditions and the supposed passivity of Aboriginal people in the face of changes. This parodic performance was inspired by a style of comic dance that Yolngu use to entertain and amuse participants during some public ritual sequences such as young boys’ first initiation, but it has touched viewers across the world, including the very large Greek Australian community (De Largy Healy 2013). The choice of the iconic Zorba was a homage to the nurse of Greek origin who took care of the daughter of one of the members of the dance

⁷ <http://www.greenleft.org.au/node/50391>; <http://indymedia.org.au/2012/03/18/wgar-news-responses-to-senate-committee-report-on-stronger-futures-new-nt-intervention-la>: replace note by

⁸ ‘Lajamanu and the police’: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsJBTEC_i8c.

⁹ ‘Ngurra-kurlu by Steve Patrick Jampijinpa, Wanta’, 2008: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iFZq7AduGrc&feature=related>

¹⁰ <http://music.anu.edu.au/people/mr-wanta-patrick>

group¹¹. Since the Zorba the Greek Yolngu style video was posted, other viewers in the Philippines, in the Czech Republic or in Fiji have responded with their own interpretation of the dance. The analysis of images circulating on the net has become a field site in itself and given rise to a new digital anthropology (Wesch 2008, Horst & Miller eds 2012).

Ethics of Digital Anthropology

In parallel to the Indigenous reappropriation process of old ethnographic sources is a global trend encouraged by various institutions to make scientific research data digitally available. In France, the Online Digital Sources and Annotation System for the Social Sciences (ODSAS) was conceived in 2008 by French anthropologist Laurent Dousset as a participative platform to safeguard online collections from Oceania (48 authors in 2014) and to allow the users – researchers and members of local communities – to annotate the data. While some collections can be accessed publicly, the consultation and annotation of restricted data requires the use of a password that can be requested from the author. Anthropologists can annotate their own data and create hyperlinks between different media; they can share transcriptions and translations with linguists in collaboration with different generations of the sources communities who can add their own comments in their language or in English. The patrimonial archive is enriched, beyond geographical boundaries and disciplines, to become a space of transmission in constant evolution. A workshop was organised in 2011 in Lajamanu, in Central Australia, by Barbara Glowczewski (2013) who photographed and filmed Warlpiri people of different generations learning how to use ODSAS, to annotate old recordings from her audiovisual collection (1979). These photos and videos were added to the author's collection, showing Elisabeth Ross Nungarrayi transcribing in Warlpiri a myth told by a deceased ancestor or Jerry Jangala dictating the transcription and translation of a ritual song to the linguist Mary Laughren. Such a participatory tool can stimulate reappropriation in other ways too, as was the case when Henry Cook Jakamarra, 80 years old, listened to the 1984 recording of a ceremony he hadn't performed in years. With a contagious enthusiasm – his memory reactivated – he continued singing the song cycle long after the recording had stopped.¹²

Such platforms encourage interactivity, exchange and debates and, importantly, respect the signature and intellectual property of all the contributors, taking into account the author of the recorded data and the people from whom the data was collected. In stark contrast, the intellectual property and usage of data, knowledge and cultural expressions held in images, sound records or texts can be highly problematic once they are posted on the centralised commercial platforms such as YouTube, which attract indigenous peoples, minorities, political critics and any person wishing to express themselves through the new forms of visibility they enable.

The announcement in 2009 of the creation of a Google UNESCO portal, which would enable virtual visits of natural and cultural sites listed as World Heritage, illustrates well the issues at stake in this centralisation. Under the pretext of universal access to knowledge, Google advocates a free access to all the data initially published online by individuals, groups or institutions and increasingly centralised on these new specialised portals owned by the enterprise. This corporate move concerns for instance indigenous languages or films made as part of tangible or intangible heritage campaigns anywhere in the world. This process is

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-MucVWo-Pw&feature=related>.

¹² http://www.odsas.fr/scan_sets.php?set_id=752&doc=78224&step=6 .

problematic, as it masks a logic of dis-appropriation of both the Peoples involved and the researchers whose intellectual property and data usage cannot be protected according to an ethics of selective access: it also questions the appropriation of the work of all the people who classify, index and document these archives. The “free” content made available on YouTube and competing digital platforms centralised by Google or other corporations allows these businesses to fund themselves and generate substantial incomes through the sale of advertising spaces, while the original owners – indigenous people and or researchers – do not benefit financially from this worldwide distribution of their images and knowledge. The original creators thus lose all control over the usage of their cultural expressions and ultimately relinquish the possibility of turning them into commercial resources on their own platforms and in their own terms. Such a reappropriation of the distribution networks would be very useful for communities from Oceania who are under pressure to find ways to sustain their economy and have to fight biopiracy.¹³

In the past ten years, we have witnessed an institutionalisation of patrimonial procedures through international and non-governmental agencies which work for the protection and preservation of cultural heritage, especially indigenous. While on the one hand, the recording of World heritage can seem to fix traditions in a reified form, on the other hand the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage* clearly insists on the Indigenous creative process: “Recognizing that communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and recreation of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and human creativity”. For the purposes of this Convention, the intangible cultural heritage is defined as “constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.”¹⁴

The material and immaterial aspects of heritage cannot be dissociated because media (objects, places, written expressions) are inseparable from various knowledge, usages (patrimonial, ritual, economical) and reinterpretations (scientific or others) that accompany them. The knowledge of plants for instance can only be reproduced if those plants are not destroyed, the issues of biodiversity and of the preservation of cultural diversity being inextricably linked.

In this paper, we have presented and discussed a variety of ways conceived by Oceanian communities to reappropriate their objects and knowledge. Their innovative use of museums, archives, visual and performing arts, films, social networks and participatory media demonstrate the new creative practices of heritage making. We have also pointed to some limits to this patrimonialization: conflicts of values, evaluation and intellectual property, ethical and political problems of interpretation, misinterpretation and inappropriate usages, dispossession by institutions, or private corporations in relation to contents and expressions initiated by the concerned societies or scientists.

¹³ The exploitation of indigenous environmental knowledge by the pharmaceutical industry who licence exclusive usage of plants to the detriment of the concerned people. See the battle for smokebush in Australia: <http://www.waccglobal.org/fr/19992-key-issues-in-global-communications/826-Biodiversity-patents-and-Indigenous-Peoples--.html>.

¹⁴ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00006>

In 2010, the World Intellectual Property Organization (Torsen and Anderson 2010) proposed a series of concrete options for museums, libraries and archives, all institutions which manage different media and expressions of knowledge: audio-visual collections, art and material culture, scientific data. The complex translation of intellectual property legal and philosophical concepts, in relation to succession rights, the protection of authors and the supposedly free access to data, aims at protecting heritage and recognising its cultural depositaries. But it still implies pragmatic limits to their applications according to the States and the concerned people and their economic and political relations of power as well as recent devices generalising the digital disappropriation of any peoples' knowledge and images for the commercial benefit of a happy few. The challenge for anthropologists is to analyse what is at stakes culturally, technically, ethically and politically in the forms of transmission, accessibility and control of the patrimonial process.

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