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**From closed museum spaces to inclusive cultural meeting points:
connecting indigenous heritage collections and communities in the
Dominican Republic**

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CHAPTER 1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Through their collections, museums have the ability to safeguard cultural connections that can cut across generations, physical spaces, and disparate social characteristics. As rural and urban zones throughout the world have their own collecting institutions, whether, under public or private care, there are diverse opportunities for target communities to engage with and appreciate varied cultures and points of view through the heritage objects in these collections. The Caribbean is no exception to this. Museums in this culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse geographic area provide rich opportunities for understanding today's globalized world. As a multicultural region, the Caribbean serves as an arena for observing the complex cultural components of different societies and how traumatic histories have forged local and regional narratives from adaptation, resilience, and innovation. Museums, however, with their traditional top-down approaches to generating knowledge through their exhibitions, cannot create the opportunities to showcase these narratives on their own. Instead, local communities should ideally be at the heart of any such endeavor, developing a sense of connection with the cultural heritage and diversity of the Caribbean and within each of its nation-states (Jean et al. 2020; Ariese 2018; Sankatsing Nava and Hofman 2018; Siegel et al. 2013; Londoño Díaz 2019; Cummins 2004).

Globalization and open, international collaborative channels have brought about opportunities for Caribbean nations to participate in projects with international institutions to examine the history of the region, while also contributing to making local participation more dynamic. These projects adopt a revisionist focus, highlighting the role of Indigenous peoples in globalization narratives. This dissertation research has been conducted in the context of the international project Nexus 1492, funded by an ERC Synergy grant which takes a pan-regional and transdisciplinary approach. The project has brought together local Caribbean and international researchers and communities to examine one of the most painful cultural and economic transformations in human history: the conquest and colonization of the Greater and Lesser Antilles. Conquered by brute force, this geographical area became the gateway for the colonization of the Americas, laying enduring paths for a globalizing world (Hofman et al. forthcoming; Hofman, Valcárcel, and Ulloa Hung 2020; Hofman and Ulloa Hung 2019; Hofman et al. 2012,). The project examines the transformations of native societies from the time of contact, including how Indigenous heritage is perceived in Caribbean societies today

and how different nations have taken to care for its material culture as both a legacy and a living cultural force in their societies (Hofman et al. 2012)

As venues for the cultural preservation of objects collected under many different circumstances and for various motives, museums became models of cultural display in the colonized nations of the region (de Varine 2005a). In the Dominican Republic, located on an island it shares with the Republic of Haiti and where Christopher Columbus set up his first conquest base, enthusiastic collectors spent decades accumulating Indigenous heritage objects based on the model of European and American museums (Álvarez, Hofman and Françaço 2021; Prieto Vicioso 2013; Curet 2011). Founded on these collecting activities, public and private collecting institutions in the Western hemisphere began opening to the public throughout the twentieth century. As permanent exhibitions became outdated and many institutions grew stagnant in their acquisition and programming activities, public disinterest set in (Boyland 1997). Institutions with Indigenous heritage collections in the Dominican Republic followed this trend: they suffered from their reliance on strictly object-centered approaches, which have proven inadequate for connecting with younger generations and communities overall. These institutions also failed to adapt to new museological considerations that place people—not only objects—at the heart of the sustainable preservation of heritage collections (Navarro 2019; Weil 1999; 2000). Under such a museological approach, public and private collaboration can begin creating inroads for communities to connect with Indigenous heritage collections. The connections will contribute to the multivocal engagement and inclusive empowerment for communities to identify with their cultural heritage in ways that are important to them, and to contribute to increasing heritage preservation and protection in the Dominican Republic.

1.2 Aims of the study

The present research aims to explore how Indigenous heritage collections in the Dominican Republic can be connected with communities. It is argued that communities can connect with museum collections to learn about traditional knowledge systems and gain knowledge about the tangible and intangible cultural heritage through inclusive approaches. Fostering connections between heritage institutions and communities will address the need to be more inclusive in the construction of Caribbean histories (Chan 2010; Laguer Díaz 2013). Community connections can also contribute to improve preservation and protection efforts and provide insight into how communities, private collectors, and public and private

heritage managers view these connections. These connections can be achieved despite the traditional structures in Dominican museums and the passive visitation models.

A literature review revealed that the topic of Caribbean heritage collections has seldom been studied: specific research on archaeological collections in the Dominican Republic, the earliest hub of the European invasion, conquest, and colonization of the New World, has remained mostly outside the academic spotlight. The specific objectives for this study are: first, identify the scope of Indigenous heritage collections in the Dominican Republic in the context of heritage legislation and management. The second objective is to provide insight of how museums can connect with the educational, heritage, governmental, and local communities through a critical museology approach that will lead to multivocal engagement and the creation of inclusive meeting points for cultural self-determination.

These objectives can be subdivided as follows:

SO1). Determine the scope of archaeological collections in the Dominican Republic in terms of where they are located, who has custody of them, who uses them and what information about them is available to the public.

SO2). Study the influence of current heritage laws on community access to archaeological collections.

SO3). Studying the ways in which communities' access archaeological collections.

SO4). Determine the role of mapping and technology in community access and protection of Dominican indigenous heritage.

SO5). Identify strategies for connecting communities to indigenous heritage collections.

1.3 Research questions

Studies on Indigenous heritage collections in the Caribbean are scarce. Literature that specifically addresses connections between collecting institutions and communities is even more limited. To a large extent, the existing literature is descriptive and focuses on overviews of the nature of collections. None of the available studies on Indigenous heritage institutions in the Dominican Republic can attest to having improved ties with their communities. In this research context, framed within the global scope of the transdisciplinary Nexus 1492 project, furthering this underdeveloped area of study in the Dominican Republic will help contribute

to the body of knowledge on heritage management in the Caribbean and on contemporary Dominican culture.

The research questions that guide this qualitative study explore how Indigenous heritage institutions, both public and private, can facilitate community connections to their collections:

RQ1). What is the scope of archaeological collections in the Dominican Republic in terms of where they are located, who has custody of them, who uses them, and what information about them is available to the public?

RQ2). How do current Dominican heritage laws hinder or foster community access to archaeological collections?

RQ3). How do communities access Dominican Indigenous heritage collections?

RQ4). How can collection mapping and technology play a role in community access and protection of Dominican Indigenous heritage?

RQ5). What can be done to connect communities with Indigenous heritage collections?

1.4 Research design and context

The current study focuses on Indigenous heritage collections in the Dominican Republic and what communities have to say about their wishes to connect with the collecting institutions, become empowered, and aid in preservation and protection efforts. The research took place across several provinces in the eastern, central, and northwest regions of the Dominican Republic, where Indigenous heritage collections or archaeological sites are located.

Qualitative studies, such as the one employed for this research, provide strategies for researchers to detect instructive patterns in the data they collect (Creswell 2009; Bernard 2006). Furthermore, a critical museology framework was used to obtain new insights toward developing groundwork for connecting museum collections and communities (Shelton 2013). The theoretical framework for this study was developed from the review of museological literature and was used as the data collection began taking place and was analyzed.

The scarce research on Indigenous heritage collections in the Caribbean, particularly in the Dominican Republic, means that there are many aspects of the collections that can be

studied. It was considered that developing a quantitative research representative of the population would be time consuming and expensive to carry out. The design based on a random sample required a significant investment in time and resources beyond the capacity of the researcher. An exploratory qualitative approach allowed for greater flexibility in the way questions were addressed, and how data was collected. This approach worked particularly well for the purpose of administering surveys to accessible groups of people in different locations, and for conducting interviews where open-ended questions permitted more exploratory than descriptive research. Participants were asked to answer questions without having to identify themselves. All of their answers were kept confidential and discussed only in the context of data analysis for the study. The analysis and interpretation of the data generated by document review, surveys, interviews, and participant observations were an ongoing process. Although a specific period of time was set aside for data analysis once all the data would be collected, the analysis took place throughout the data collection period.

Groups of people were surveyed and interviewed as representatives of the different communities in which Indigenous heritage collections are found; these individuals were approached near Indigenous archaeological sites in different regions in the Dominican Republic. The surveys were conducted based on the availability of participants willing to complete the questionnaire; because factors of convenience limited these samples, generalizations are modest. Nevertheless, the interviews, surveys, and observations provided a greater understanding of how different communities view and access Indigenous heritage collections under public and private care.

Participant observation was employed to help document community responses to Indigenous heritage collections in an archaeological context through a series of activities that took place during the implementation of the Nexus 1492 project in the Dominican Republic, especially in the northwestern part of the country and in the capital of Santo Domingo. Since time constraints due to the researcher's full-time employment extended the data gathering period and conducting the surveys, interviews, and observations took place over five years. Nevertheless, the extended time afforded an opportunity to establish communication and repeated interactions with members of communities near archaeological sites.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study contributes to understanding the connections between Indigenous heritage institutions and communities in the Caribbean context, moving away from the tourism-oriented framework in which museum collections are marketed. It explores the nature of Indigenous heritage collections in the Dominican Republic and the creation of these collections. The study evaluates the access to the collections beyond the current tourism framework.

Museological practices that place community participation at the heart of their approach can expand an institution's capacity to carry out educational and preservation initiatives (Watson 2007). This study provides future scholars with a foundational reference to help deepen their knowledge of Indigenous heritage institutions and their role for the educational, heritage, governmental, and local communities served by museums. The research offers practical suggestions for developing and incorporating critical museology approaches to the creation of community connections with Indigenous heritage institutions in the Dominican Republic.

The present research may also assist heritage managers and public officials in improving how heritage education programs are designed to make the collections more relevant to the communities they aim to serve. Under ideal conditions, this effort would call for a unified approach at the managerial and even legislative levels. The information obtained and analyzed in this study can help in adapting various resources from different organizations' structures, budgets, and personnel capacities to facilitate access between heritage collections and communities, starting at the most basic levels. Future researchers can also use this study to identify patterns in community involvement that may further demonstrate the value of critically framing heritage institutions' efforts to improve preservation initiatives.

1.6 Ethical considerations and limitations of the study

The study did not face any particular ethical issues since there were no vulnerable persons involved as participants. Nonetheless, steps were taken to ensure ethical participation and preemptively addressed any potential ethical issues according to the standards set by the Nexus 1492 project. This entailed obtaining consent from the relevant parties at different stages during the research. As will be discussed in the methodology and presented in the appendices, oral consent was solicited before recording each interview. The survey form

included an explanation asserting that participation was voluntary and that answers would remain anonymous.

The present research is based on the voluntary participation of the survey and interview respondents. As people were approached because they were readily available, the participants' responses do not represent the Dominican population at large. A future study with a greater number of participants based on a random sample may provide more representative findings. Moreover, it is acknowledged that professional conscious and unconscious biases from active work in the museum field was likely reflected in the implementation of the research and the analysis of the data gathered.

The study's exploratory nature was based on the perspectives of the communities that participated in surveys and interviews. Its findings are not appropriate for making inferences from the data to the general population. A random and amplified study would yield a more comprehensive overview of how communities feel about Indigenous heritage collections. The research is not intended to make generalizations in the museum field because of museums' unique characteristics in the Dominican Republic and the communities that were studied.

This exploratory study has limitations due to the lack of comprehensive research on Indigenous Caribbean heritage collections, and specifically those in the Dominican Republic. Nevertheless, this research will hopefully lead to more extensive studies in the future. It is intended for the present study to serve as an initial discussion on how community connections can contribute to empower people to become involved in improving efforts to preserve and protect Indigenous heritage collections.

Like qualitative research, the present study faced limitations based on ethical concerns, the number of participants, and financial costs and time. The number of participants was not large: 22 people were interviewed, and 515 were surveyed. The research was also limited by area of work (heritage, governmental, educational), and by local geography, to obtain participation from people living in places with a museum or collection of Indigenous heritage objects or an archaeological site nearby. The local geographical focus was also selected based on the assumption that survey and interview respondents would easily accept to participate if they had a museum or archaeological site close to where they live, considering it a cultural asset in their community.

One ethical consideration taken into account during interviews was the shyness the participants might feel when confronted with an unfamiliar subject. Questions posed aimed to stimulate dialog and not to make the participants feel as if there was a “right” or “wrong” answer. However, as with all qualitative research, this study was also limited by researcher bias. Potential participants were approached in different settings and getting people to participate was sometimes easier when there were many people around. Whenever possible, notes were made on-site and immediately after collecting information in order to and reflections capture the experiences that could provide information for later analysis.

The interviews were time-consuming. The distance of potential interviewees from the geographical area of the researcher’s full-time job contributed to scheduling issues. As a last resort to get a reply from those who did respond to the request for an in-person interview, written answers to the interview questions were presented as an option.

1.7 Main concepts and definitions used in the study

The terms used in this study—those necessary to describe, interpret, and analyze the data— were selected based on the essential concepts in the relevant literature. Within the context of this study, terms used intended to describe the creation of a collection inventory, the review of archival documents, the formulation of questions for the interview and surveys, the identification of participants, and analysis and discussion:

Access. Within the context of museological discussions, access is used to refer to a flexible set of strategies, services, and communication channels employed in approaching, contacting, or using cultural heritage resources—which in this study focuses on Indigenous heritage collections.

Collections. A defined set of classified, selected, and preserved material objects assembled by an institution or person (Desvallées and Mairesse 2010).

Community. Because there is no agreement on the definition of “community” in museological literature, the Spanish Royal Academy’s definition is used for this research project as umbrella loosely defined term to mean: a group of people linked through characteristics or common interests. Based on this, and within the museum context, the term will be associated with Eilean Hooper-Greenhill’s (2007b) definition of *interpretive communities*, which are recognized “through the common repertoires and strategies used in interpretation” (78). Furthermore, the segmentation of communities based on the common

repertoires and strategies used for interpretation will be made using Rhiannon Mason's elaboration of the concept of interpretative communities (Mason 2005; Watson 2007) as defined by:

- shared historical or cultural experiences;
- specialist knowledge;
- demographic/socioeconomic factors;
- identities (national, regional, local, or as related to sexuality, disability, age, or gender);
- visiting practices; and
- by their exclusion from other communities.

Depending on the context of the discussion, it will be pointed out when the specific communities are referred, since a community's 'linking characteristics and common interests' are not necessarily exclusive of each segmented group. The common repertoires and interpretation strategies (Hopper-Greenhill 2007b; Mason 2005; Watson 2007) from one type of community, as defined above, may repeat in another type of community. For example, education community will be used to refer to researchers, teachers, and students. The heritage community will be used to mean heritage managers or administrators, as well as collectors. The governmental community will be used to mean government public officials with incidence in public affairs and legislation. Finally, local community will be used to refer to people with common values and social cohesion living near museums with Indigenous heritage collections or archaeological sites. These communities, although they have been segmented based on the type of current interaction with Indigenous heritage collections, they all have characteristics or common interests that overlap, placing respondents into different types of communities at the same time. Therefore, based on the previously listed characteristics, interviews and surveys were completed by people from the education, heritage, governmental, and local communities.

Cultural heritage. This includes "all the goods, values and symbols tangible and intangible cultures that are an expression of the Dominican nation, such as traditions, customs, and habits, as well as all goods, including those immersed in water, material and immaterial, movable and immovable, that have a special historical, artistic, aesthetic, plastic, architectural, urban interest, archaeological, environmental, ecological, linguistic, sound, musical, audiovisual, film, scientific, technological, testimonial, documentary, literary,

bibliographic, museographical, anthropological and the manifestations, products, and representations of popular culture” (Congreso Nacional de la República Dominicana, Ley 41-00, Art. 1, paragraph. 2).

Cultural policy. The “set of operating principles, of social practices, conscious and deliberate, of administrative or budgetary management procedures, intervention or non-intervention, which must serve as the basis for the state’s action to meet certain cultural needs of the community through the optimal use of all the material and human resources available to a society at any given time” (Congreso Nacional de la República Dominicana, Ley 41-00, Art. 1, paragraph 3).

Culture. The set of “distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features of a society or social group that encompasses not only art and literature, but also lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs” (UNESCO 2001). This UNESCO definition, as a global term, is complementary to the definition of culture found in the current Dominican constitution, which was considered as a local reference in this study:

a set of distinctive, spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional traits that characterize human groups and that in addition to the arts and letters, they include lifestyles and ways of living together, rights value systems and symbols, traditions and beliefs, assumed by the collective consciousness as their own” (Congreso Nacional de la República Dominicana, Ley 41-00, Art. 1, paragraph 1).

Exhibition. The display of objects in a place or container for public viewing (Desvalées and Mairesse 2010).

Indigenous heritage. Tangible and intangible cultural material created by or inherited from the native people of the Caribbean. This definition stems from the concept of “*heritagescapes*” introduced by Siegel et al. (2013, 374), which describes cultural heritage as it “relates to issues of identification, management, and conservation of heritage resources that are embedded in or reside on the landscape.” However, as Dominican museums still have old fashioned structures and are seen as existing to show and conserve objects, the present study focuses on the Indigenous heritage objects held as collections by public and private museums, and private collectors. Nevertheless, the study recognizes the importance of the intangible heritage context when studying cultural material and intangible heritage aspects of collections are undeniably related to the tangible characteristics of collections and individual objects.

Indigenous heritage collections. Sets of archaeological artifacts, created by the Indigenous population of the Caribbean that settled the region between 6,000 and 500 years ago, whose cultural legacy is still found in modern-day Indigenous practices in the Dominican Republic.

Mapping. The identification of cultural assets in a geographic area that communities can use to inform collective strategies (Duxbury, Garrett-Petts, and MacLennan 2015).

Museum. An institution that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity” (Desvalées and Mairesse 2010). This definition is presented in the widely used publication *Key Concepts of Museology* created by the International Council of Museums—ICOM (Desvalées and Mairesse 2010). The current definition is considered as more suitable for the purpose of this study rather than the alternative definition proposed by ICOM’S Executive Committee in 2019 for international members to vote on. The alternative definition proposed is still facing long and heated discussions without hopes for agreement in the near future. The 2010 definition is still relevant to collecting such as the ones long established in the Dominican Republic.

Museology. The study of the museum at the theoretical and managerial levels (Desvalées and Mairesse 2010).

Preservation. Acquisition, management, and conservation of material and intangible heritage (Desvalées and Mairesse 2010). In the case of the Dominican Republic, where archaeological artifacts are declared to be the property of the state, the acquisition would equate to custodial care.

1.8 Overview of the chapters

Chapter 2 identifies previous research and studies that have been done on collections of Indigenous heritage that deal with community dynamics along the same line of inquiry as this dissertation, in order to understand how museums have addressed community engagement with heritage collections.

Chapter 3 lays out the theoretical framework and methodology used in this study under the lens of critical museology.

Chapter 4 provides the developmental trajectory of the heritage legislation in the country and addresses the current state of legislative heritage affairs in the Dominican Republic.

In Chapter 5, Indigenous heritage collections are presented through an inventory based on information gathered through visits and the review of available institutional documentation.

Chapter 6 details the results of surveys, interviews, and observations conducted to learn how communities access Indigenous heritage collections in the country and the ways in which they are being managed. The findings are described, and patterns in responses both from the survey and semi-structured interviews are analyzed.

Chapter 7 discusses these findings in the context of the research questions to determine how to connect Indigenous heritage collections and communities and improve the way people engage with heritage institutions and a more inclusive care of these collections.

Lastly, conclusions are presented in Chapter 8. This chapter addresses recommendations and the way forward, hoping that these will allow public and private Indigenous heritage collecting institutions to conduct further critical analysis and determine how they can connect with communities interested in the collections' cultural knowledge. This chapter also presents suggestions for future research and a path forward for management practices related to Indigenous heritage collections and community connections in the Dominican Republic.