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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 8. Conclusion and way forward

8.1 Critical community connections for preserving and protecting Indigenous heritage collections

This study contributes to the field of heritage management by highlighting the connections that can be made between collections and communities. The research contributes to the groundwork for a practical approach for the creation of multivocal engagements and inclusive meeting points for cultural self-determination that seeks to connect with the Indigenous heritage in the Dominican Republic under public and private care.

Under-documented collections and poorly implemented heritage legislation have contributed to continued disconnect from both public and private Indigenous heritage collections. Integrating communities in order to involve them in enriching object histories is one meaningful mode of connection with collections under public and private custody. It is also a way to create a community-based working structure that can be used to incorporate more African collections and in an inclusive manner, contribute to the reflection of the current invisibility of another important aspect of Dominican heritage.

Access to Indigenous heritage collections is currently limited to individuals in the collections' geographically centralized locations but focusing too narrowly on physical visits to museums limits the possibilities for connections between collections and communities. Technology provides a simpler, creative method for disseminating heritage information in ways that can allow communities to determine the type of access and connections they wish to have based on specific and general interests.

The transformation of the current educational and display models used in public and private collections represents the main pathway for creating more viable and realistic connections between communities and Indigenous heritage collections. If heritage managers think of museums as existing beyond their own walls, communities can work with museums to choose their own display models. The support of public officials could even fuel the creation of spaces for heritage displays while communities are working with museums to create exhibitions. The key would be to work in collaboration with communities to incorporate local narratives.

The use of a critical framework to create community connections can help in the design of future Indigenous heritage management strategies and policies through the

meaningful incorporation of a community's opinions and conditions. These collaborations centered on community connections can produce more implementable actions that respond to the realities of the different communities that desire more access to the collections.

This study has investigated some significant and influential factors that can be leveraged to develop community connections. By exploring community concerns and the opinions of heritage managers, public officials, and collectors, a model for the creation of community connections with Indigenous heritage collections can be collaboratively designed to contribute to multivocal heritage engagement and inclusively designed meeting points for cultural self-determination and greater appreciation and protection of these collections.

Adopting a form of Caribbean museology that increases Indigenous heritage appreciation based on a critical museology framework could become a valuable strategy for heritage managers, public officials in the heritage sector, and communities with a nearby Indigenous heritage collection or archaeological site. Within a critical museology context, multivocal engagement and inclusive structures in museums can also help frame the connection of communities with Dominican museums that exhibit Indigenous heritage collections. The examination of historical narratives in museums with Indigenous heritage collections can help challenge the long-established stereotypes of Indigenous cultures as they have been portrayed in schoolbooks (Con Aguilar 2018). This examination can pave the way for establishing educational structures that address historical trauma and grief, as Amy Lonetree (2012) proposes.

A drive to make it evident how museum practice has shaped colonially based interpretations of history in the Dominican Republic will be a major step toward changing how these institutions help shape knowledge. Critical museology can create the conditions to allow connections between communities and Indigenous heritage collections to shape inclusive multivocal engagements that contribute to better preserve and protect archaeological sites and objects, while helping shape the cultural identity of communities by reconciling the past with the future of their cultural heritage and manifestations.

Having the benefits of connecting with collections, highlighted as primary forces in cultural preservation and appreciation, could be transformative for locally developed heritage management initiatives. It can aid in clarifying the role communities and collections play in the preservation of the centuries-old object and cultural repertoire. Museums can benefit from taking action to identify local community members, heritage managers, and heritage public

officials that can help motivate the creation of connections with collections, define the role these individuals will play, and bridge theory and practice to form a concrete path of action. Such a collaborative approach to Indigenous heritage collection programming would benefit those interested in connecting with more collections. It would offer better opportunities for communities to improve their cultural knowledge, lead to more funding sources, and create better mechanisms to collaboratively define achievable initiatives to better protect Indigenous heritage collections and sites while contributing to the shaping of their cultural identity.

Participants in the study expressed concerns over poor educational content, poor protection, lack of personnel, lack of political will to implement policies, and people's poor understanding of the value of Indigenous heritage collections—and hence their history. Yet the expression of these concerns has taken place in a few behind-the-scenes conversations, with scarce media coverage of such complaints. Heritage managers, public officials, and communities need to work together to better articulate the benefits of connecting with collections for the improvement of cultural life and the development of communities. Heritage managers could benefit from dialogs with communities to reflect on what has been done and what needs to be done to address issues of access to collections. The research participants believed that the educational community should have more substantial participation in identifying those actions that contribute to improved access to collections. Their opinions reveal that they see the formal education sector as being at the helm of developing curriculum standards for teaching about Indigenous heritage, and critically reviewing educational materials used in the classroom.

As should be clear, heritage education needs fundamental improvement, and it needs to improve at all academic levels and with input from different types of communities. Improvement requires establishing heritage and archaeological studies at a higher academic level in the Dominican Republic. A collaborative effort should identify the educational and institutional weaknesses of the primary education system and provide an initial academic platform for addressing the shortcomings that communities believe affect them the most. Politics aside, an honest, collaborative assessment of the educational content of Indigenous history teaching will help establish curricular goals for heritage studies in the primary education system as well as at the university level.

The benefits of increasing community access to Indigenous heritage collections will impact both managerial and legislative actions, as more culturally conscious citizens can be

more involved in the development of local initiatives to preserve their local heritage resources. Public officials and heritage managers can benefit from developing better ways to make heritage legislation understood through accessible communication. Although interview participants had a general understanding that legislation to protect Indigenous heritage objects exists, many of these officials could not articulate any opinion about implementing the legislation and the monitoring regulations that protect archaeological collections. Until this situation improves, there will be no capacity for effective institutional communication between the state, museums, and communities. Unless all stakeholders understand the implications for preserving and protecting Indigenous heritage collections, it will be difficult to communicate how everyone must contribute to the critical examination and contestation of traditional museum narratives.

8.2 Indigenous heritage collections and communities in the Dominican Republic

This study sought to describe the scope of Indigenous heritage collections; how legislation impacts access to collections; how communities access collections; how technology may play a role in this access; and what can be done to connect communities with Indigenous heritage collections. The creation of an inventory of Indigenous heritage collections, interviews with heritage managers and collectors, surveys of community members on the perceived value of and access to these collections, and participant observation in community-led cultural activities led to research conclusions that had always felt were issues familiar to heritage institutions. It was not expected to find these issues in the magnitude that the present study revealed.

Under-documented collections and poorly implemented heritage legislation have contributed to the continued disconnect between Indigenous heritage collections, both public and private, and communities. The locations of Indigenous heritage collections are restricted to geographically centralized areas, and contemplative physical visits to museums limit the possibilities for connections between collections and communities. The transformation of current educational and display models used in public and private collections represents the main strategy for creating more implementable and realistic connections between communities and Indigenous heritage collections.

The present research has documented the concern for preserving and protecting Indigenous heritage collections on the part of different types of communities in different provinces throughout the country. This concern can be found among public service officials

within the state-led heritage sector, heritage managers from the private sector, and collectors. All the groups consulted were concerned with the need to improve education on Indigenous history and the care of the collections under public and private custody. As Indigenous heritage collections can become a means to foster critical reflection for members of the educational community, the education sector is a key player in the task to forge connections with cultural material from the past and make it part of the present.

There are few outdated standard archival systems in use for the heritage sector to accommodate the limited information on decontextualized objects. These inadequate systems, coupled with poorly trained personnel and a lack of academic programs in archaeology contribute to the deficient supervision of the heritage departments dealing with archaeological issues. The current archival systems by most heritage institutions limit the ability to investigate the conditions that have led to the heritage laws and regulations described in Chapter 4. With such limited infrastructure for cultural heritage management, it is difficult to understand the levels of threat that Indigenous cultural material has been exposed to since colonial times. Without proper object documentation, the loss of artifacts cannot be accounted for or adequately traced.

Private collectors have been recognized as essential contributors to the formation of collections in the Dominican Republic. They have made some of the country's most important collections accessible, including the creation of nonprofit educational institutions for national and international visitors to enjoy. Some private collectors have followed the regulations published by the Ministry of Culture and have managed to do inventories according to legislation—in some cases by government agencies—and have offered educational programs to improve the understanding of their collections. But even with these established legal parameters and best intentions, no collection in the country that has objects bought on the heritage market has been free from the impact of looting, counterfeiting (copies of museum objects), or invented objects with contemporary designs.

There is legislative opportunity to improve the status of Indigenous heritage collections' preservation efforts through the state's educational mandate for the development of Dominican culture under Law 41-00 (Congreso Nacional de la República Dominicana, 2000), specifically through the following articles:

Article 100: The Secretariat of State for Education shall promote the development of culture [...] to help spread it, to help preserve its best manifestations, and to bring it to

the attention of the general public [...] It shall also, to the extent of its scope, contribute to the enrichment and preservation of universal culture and, in particular, that of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Article 101. These are the functions of the Secretariat of State for Education in this field: to rescue and keep alive the national traditions and the diverse manifestations of education and popular culture, and to investigate their roots; to encourage the development of the fine arts; to promote reflection on the Dominican existence on the meaning heritage gives to life, and on Dominican history and social reality.

Monitoring the implementation of laws and regulations requires attention. Disagreements between public officials and private collectors should be set aside to permit discussions of heritage conservation necessities and measures to improve preservation. Heritage actors in both the public and private sectors should make proposals for adjustments to the regulations based on a more realistic notion of the state's capacity to supervise collections. For the custodians of private collections to better understand the legislation and create viable reporting mechanisms that reduce bureaucracy, better communication needs to be established to work in compliance with heritage legislation and regulations. This could also help heritage managers and public officials better articulate the responsibilities and duties of those who oversee the care of Indigenous heritage collections and communicate them to the public through educational and heritage awareness campaigns.

Such campaigns can also serve as a basis for highlighting how communities can contribute to the preservation of Indigenous heritage collections and the roles they can play. This could eventually lead to more diverse groups of people being actively involved in caring for their local Indigenous heritage.

8.3 Recommendations and implications for future research and practice

As the theoretical framework of this study revealed gaps in the literature regarding research on Indigenous heritage collections in the Dominican Republic, critical museology provided an opportunity to establish initial discussions about the need to incorporate a multivocal engagement structure in museums to connect communities with Indigenous heritage collections. This research demonstrated that communities consulted believe Indigenous heritage collections can play a role in how the Dominican Republic's Indigenous history is taught beyond the brief tours during school visits to museums. Education impacts access, engagement, expression, and identity formation. It can be considered one of the most critical areas to address theoretically and with in-depth research, specifically in formal education settings at the elementary, high, school, and university levels. Local engagement

and inclusivity need to be at the heart of all aspects to be examined when museums with Indigenous heritage collections want to connect with their communities.

On the level of practice, heritage management in the Dominican Republic requires a transformation. Best practices need to be incorporated as a standard for the management of Indigenous heritage collections. Nevertheless, such best practices need to be analyzed to determine if they can be implemented realistically, considering the political characteristics of state-led heritage management and legislation. Political coherence and consensus on legislative needs are of great importance if the legislation becomes a real tool to be used to protect Indigenous heritage collections under public and private care.

8.3.1 The role of museums in deconstructing the remoteness of the Indigenous past

The resources needed to care for and conserve archaeological collections in remote communities in the Dominican Republic can be cost-prohibitive for most locally led initiatives, especially if they are bound to current museum-like structures. The construction of spaces to display and adequately care for collections can be a daunting task, as it requires operating personnel and subsidies that tend to be concentrated in large urban cities and mostly in Santo Domingo, the capital of the country. It is pertinent to consider alternative ways of presenting information regarding Indigenous heritage in rural areas. New forms of educational and cultural displays can be managed by local communities and used by schools to support local teaching efforts. Indigenous heritage information can be incorporated into local histories and localized educational curricula to contribute to the valorization of objects and archaeological sites, as local communities in rural areas may be able to directly access these often-buried heritage resources in their localities; sometimes, even their homes are on the sites. The incorporation of local voices in the development of cultural self-determination initiatives aimed at better supporting identity-making engagements could help raise awareness of the importance of leaving archaeological sites intact, as well as prevent looting alongside monitoring initiatives led by local communities. Shifting the interest from gathering objects to creating museums or selling to collectors can significantly contribute to the conservation of archaeological information that may be obtained when scientific research capacity improves in the Dominican Republic.

Moreover, shifting the repository mindset toward a mindset focused on knowledge-generation scenarios within local geographic zones may improve the sense of geographical pride generated by an in-depth understanding of one's local history. Creating links with

information derived from heritage objects throughout a locality helps diversify the use of these heritage objects, moving away from the accumulation practices that have turned museums into stagnant deposits of archaeological materials (Wood et al. 2018).

Although outreach activities remain essential to museums that aim to connect with communities at large, collaboration with local people concerning archaeological sites or museums with Indigenous heritage collections (based on an in-depth understanding of the local capacity to sustain cultural heritage conservation efforts) can guarantee productive and sustainable cocreated projects.

Dominican museums with Indigenous heritage collections under public and private care are vulnerable to decreases in visitors and engagement. How public officials, heritage managers, and private collectors respond to the need for change depends on their disposition and abilities to understand the heritage management demands that have emerged in the museum world.

8.3.2 Critical areas of responsibility for the care and connection of Indigenous heritage collections

Whether Indigenous heritage collections are in public or private custody, people related to the heritage field must reconsider how to honor national heritage objects within a framework of greater access to the cultural information collections can generate.

Community members surveyed for the present study showed an interest in both the care and value of collections. They want to know about objects in Indigenous heritage collections beyond what is addressed in the history recounted on school tours. As museum displays of Dominican collections can last 15 to 30 years without any museographical modifications, considerations of adaptable content in the programming that supports the exhibition of objects need to be incorporated in designing strategies to connect collections with communities. For this, heritage custodians should consider how to promote the value of collections for generating knowledge through research, improved documentation efforts, and collaboration with the educational system to improve the way Indigenous history is taught.

Few archaeological research projects have addressed how excavated materials are used after classificatory activities have taken place. In the Dominican Republic, only a handful of projects from the past ten years can be cited as having incorporated specific activities to use objects beyond the “show-and-tell” of exhibitions to display the materials

found on excavations. The Nexus 1492 project has established an innovative, collaborative approach to developing such exhibitions. These exhibitions present the projects' scientific and social results by creating low-cost, attractive displays that reflect the environment of the local communities where the research has taken place. Archaeologists have co-created the exhibitions together with the local community, incorporating present-day crafts done by local community members. This cooperation between archaeologists and local community members has led to increased local community participation in activities. The collaboration has also contributed to researchers often presenting in activities outside the communities how the collaborations work and what is co-produced with them.

The country does not have the academic resources to train archaeologists. There are currently no plans to create an academic program that could build the capacity of people interested in this area of study to incorporate public archaeology best practices for community engagement. Without local archaeologists involved in archaeological projects or the care of sites, it is sometimes harder for local museums to become involved with communities near archaeological sites over the long term. Despite taking place in different locations within the country, most archaeological research depends on foreign university resources, which does create opportunities for the local population to get involved. Still, very few volunteers commit to the laborious activities that are a central component of archaeological fieldwork. Raising awareness of the need for local archaeologists and the importance of local volunteers in archaeological fieldwork would be an initial step toward promoting the value of archaeological research. Such visibility would also highlight the local initiatives that are part of the public outreach efforts to conserve, access, and help interpret collections that end up in museums.

Strengthening volunteer efforts at different levels of research activity can help improve prospects for long-term care of collections. Nevertheless, the lack of museological training for collection care and management in the country also contributes to the degradation of the collections, limiting their use, and often results in a significant number of objects being forgotten as they sit in storage without documentation to account for their existence beyond the shelf space each occupies. Without proper training in collection care, volunteer involvement may prove counterproductive to connection efforts, as volunteers also need training as they become systematically involved with most aspects of collection care.

Poor conservation standards have also resulted in the accumulation of cultural material suffering from years of neglect, as museum personnel or private collectors do not tend to have the resources or updated knowledge to improve the way objects are preserved. The poor conservation of Indigenous heritage collections also limits the development of educational and interpretative links, for which there is also a meager capacity to implement best practices.

This dissertation research confirms that the most important aspects to consider in connecting communities with Indigenous heritage collections in the Dominican Republic are:

- To document as extensively as possible how the collections were formed, and to enrich the biographies of the objects by expanding cataloguing practices if they have not been studied in their context;
- To design a collaborative structure that helps identify who the different museum communities are, their needs and interests, and how they are interested in the co-creation of content and activities that could connect them better with collections in a way that makes them feel included, heard, and that shows how their input is reflected in what is exhibited and the way it is exhibited.
- To identify ways to involve community members at all levels when working on interpretive projects, recognizing that large investments of time are needed, both from staff and local community members.
- To create many different options for participation and show how local community participation impacts the implementation of activities or projects.
- To explore how technology can play a role in transmitting information about Indigenous Dominican heritage from different areas and through different types of digital access; and
- To engage in critical reflection on the connections between museums and communities, especially when these are linked to interpretation strategies that are designed by museums to make sure the interests of the communities are represented.

The responses of the members from the different communities consulted yield data that force museums, managers, and officials involved in the care of Indigenous heritage to consider more useful and practical measures to ensure better engagement with and access to

collections and impart better knowledge of them. Based on their answers, a clear message is formed, namely that the participants of the present study all agree that education on the history and heritage of the island's Indigenous people needs to improve. This improvement, however, is not the sole responsibility of the state. It is also the responsibility of Indigenous heritage custodians as a national duty to provide opportunities for expanded physical and intellectual access to collections through more reliable connections.

Even though younger people have expressed the least interest in museums and Indigenous heritage collections, the majority of members of the educational, heritage, governmental, and local community members consulted agree that the knowledge collections generate is vital to better understanding Dominican society, and by extension, who they are. It is here that museums and communities find the most significant niche that can be exploited. The avenues for connecting with Indigenous heritage need to be more dynamic based on the participants' stated main interests:

- Having access to more collections.
- Understanding the origins of the objects.
- Understanding Dominican history in depth.
- Having more access to research on Indigenous history and Dominican culture; and
- Breaking away from traditional visits in order to enjoy activities that engage the senses while learning about scientific and artistic processes.

8.4 Final thoughts

More than just the relics of a lost past that merely confirm its disappearance, the heritage objects in museums have become tangible links to a possible recovery of shared meanings through narrative and performativity (Andermann and Arnold-de Simine 2012, 4).

Interaction with an audience or stakeholders provides opportunities to co-create new narratives that would help Dominican museums develop more inclusive and multivocal engagements that lead to more opportunities for cultural self-determination by connecting to the Indigenous heritage collections available to communities. This dissertation shows how several centuries of neglecting to maintain detailed historical documentation of Indigenous heritage collections has obscured their significance and created a disconnect between objects and both their place and communities of origin.

In a generally encased and decontextualized environment, the Dominican Republic's Indigenous heritage collections are still displayed in glass-enclosed boxes. Individually, the objects in the collections tell stories of the practical needs, design acumen, and manufacturing techniques of the Indigenous people of the Caribbean. As archaeological evidence, artifacts collectively project knowledge of production and networks of economic exchange systems, beliefs, and values (Hofman et al. 2011). Just as heritage sites cannot be considered static, heritage collections (with or without having been scientifically studied) are not static either. They must be reconsidered as opportunities to connect with local communities and generate a greater appreciation of the past. The multidisciplinary study of individual objects, collections, and heritage activities could become a tool to help foster critical thinking in the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean islands. Enhancing studies of Indigenous heritage collections can help audiences reflect upon heritage practices and improve how the Indigenous history is taught, appreciated, and reflected in modern cultural practices.

The possibilities for creating connections between Indigenous heritage collections and communities in the Dominican Republic are both vast and fundamental, with positive outcomes for both communities with limited resources and organizations with different types of structures and budgets. At first glance, these recommendations might seem to be common sense or even reminiscent of approaches that have been implemented in the past. However, until the underlying concerns expressed by the different communities in this study are addressed, attempts to adopt more elaborated and modern museological strategies run the risk of being perceived as fragmented, disorganized, and even elitist.

The creation of heritage management road maps depends on the outcomes desired by the different communities. Different communities require different approaches and actors in tailoring the multivocal strategies for connecting with Indigenous heritage collections. By addressing each community's concerns for multi-vocal identity-making engagements and opportunities for cultural self-determination, many paths can be laid out for addressing personnel issues to help implement the care of heritage collections and the political will needed to manage them better. This process leads, in turn, to an increased appreciation of how Indigenous heritage collections help generate knowledge that contributes to understanding who Dominicans—and Caribbean people—have been, who they are, and who they can be.