Monetary valuations of cultural artefacts are becoming increasingly frequent in the twenty-first century, leading to the advent of culture and heritage as commercial commodities. Debates rage over the ethics of charging admission to museums and the cost of membership to heritage organizations. Cultural representations in print and on the media generate economic profit. Ecotourism ventures to sites such as the RMS Titanic and the recent suggestion of floating the Terracotta Army on the stock market are all indicators of the increasing economic emphasis in the management of cultural resources. This chapter is an attempt to focus on some of the economic issues surrounding the presentation and management of cultural heritage resources and the role of the anthropologist in the privatization of culture and heritage. It considers the issue of ‘ownership’ within heritage and questions the methods and circumstances of economic valuation of cultural resources.

The definition of ‘culture’ is often situation dependent. For the purposes of this chapter, culture is defined as any form of belief, history, archaeology, oral histories, literature, art, music, skills or traits attributable to a specific group. The term ‘cultural industries’ exists in reference to ‘the commercialization and the economic value of the arts and culture’ (Gratton and Richards 1996: 76) which suggests that public focus has shifted from the idea of culture as a representation of a way of life to the use of cultural traditions and objects as commodities to be sold for economic gain.

Culture may be commercialized through a variety of approaches, and for different reasons. These include heritage and/or cultural tourism and the adaptation of cultural elements to appeal to a tourist market (Atkinson Wells 1994). The development of objects or behaviours that resemble those of a specific culture for a commercial purpose has been
referred to as ‘fakelore’ (Atkinson Wells 1994: 54). The marketing of culture may be the decision of a specific group, or it may be involuntarily thrust upon a population by external forces. Examples of all of these situations are discussed below.

Ownership of culture and heritage

The ‘ownership’ of a cultural tradition or a heritage is frequently contentious. Ethnic resources may be commodified by governments or private companies, possibly without consultation with designated groups that are to become part of a tourist event or with little regard for their specific cultural needs or beliefs. All forms of culture are open to political manipulation by the state for both economic and nationalistic reasons (Robinson 1999: 13). There may be a genuine intention to improve the quality of life for members of a specific group through tourism. Along with that intention is an inherent ethnocentric assumption that the group itself desires changes to its lifestyle or wants economic compensation for the intrusion into their lives. The goals of a state or private company, however, may not be the same as the goals of a cultural community, which may lead to conflict and ill will (Morales Cano and Mysyk 2004).

Issues surrounding the ownership of artefacts include debates about the return of specific objects, such as the Elgin Marbles/Parthenon Frieze currently curated at the British Museum. Repeated requests for repatriation of the material have been made by Greece, although the British Museum has remained firm in its decision to retain the items in question. When major international museums, such as the British Museum, were established, their primary role was in the collection and preservation of international cultural objects for research, education and public access, and especially for display. Nearly 500 years later the inevitable has occurred – the role of these social, educational and public institutions has changed drastically, much to the dismay of many in the museums profession. As stressed by Simpson (1997: 93): ‘[T]he basic ideologies which underlie museums – systematic collecting for the preservation in perpetuity and dissemination of information – are being challenged. All museums need to address these issues ... accept such concepts as shared custodianship ... and recognize the validity of traditional, indigenous laws and customs’. Museums will have to accept that requests for repatriation of cultural items will increase in the future and these requests cannot be dismissed as being contrary to museum policy forever.