Lecture 7: Identification and Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage by Dr. Michelle Stefano, Program Coordinator, Maryland Traditions, Maryland State Arts Council and Folklorist-in-Residence, Department of American Studies, University of Maryland Baltimore County

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In this lecture, Stefano provides examples of the identification and inventory of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. She cites two cases which illustrate community involvement in the inventory process: the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC) and the ICH in Scotland Wiki. She discusses both negative and positive aspects of the ICH inventory process, and emphasizes the role of communities as the primary custodians of intangible cultural heritage. At the end of the lecture, Stefano closes with some critical questions for cultural practitioners, particularly on the prominent role of technology in safeguarding intangible heritage.

1.0 Identification and Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Stefano provides a critical assessment of the inventory process in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003. In fact, inventory-making is only the “first step” for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage. Through the process of listing intangible cultural heritage, there is a tendency for culture to become itemized as it is isolated from its—broader cultural, social and political context. Thus, in the identification and inventory process, effort must be made to avoid severing cultural practices from their social and cultural milieu.

Concerning the importance of cultural context to heritage safeguarding, Stefano cites an example of the Rapper Dance in Northeast England. In this part of the country, coal mining was one of the biggest industries since the 18th century, and coal miners were mostly male. The Rapper Dance was a male tradition. However, since the 1970s women have been accepted by the Rapper Dance community network of performers. This change came as a result of community-based
decision making.

As a consequence of this change, the Association of Folk Dance refused to recognize the Rapper Dance on the list of the association, on the grounds that the dance was no longer authentic. Nevertheless, the community of tradition bearers maintained that the dance should change with the times. This openness to adaptation reflects the vitality of tradition because the community decided for themselves what was “authentic” in the present-day context. Stefano uses this example to illustrate the problem of the ICH inventory. Whenever an element of culture is identified and listed, it is as though the tradition is frozen in time at the moment of its listing, rendering a living practice inanimate. In the case of the Rapper Dance, we can see how the process of “listing” imposed criteria of authenticity which would seek to preserve the folk dance as a representation of the past rather than dynamic, evolving tradition that responds to the contemporary context.

2. Community Involvement in ICH identification and inventory

2.1 Community Involvement

In 2006, UNESCO-ACCU (Asia/Pacific Cultural Centre) hosted an Expert Meeting on Community Involvement in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. This meeting specified important approaches for encouraging the Involvement of communities in inventorying their ICH (Section 3.2) as follows:

- ‘Exclude exclusive top-down approaches’ (Since national governments have considerable amount of control),
- Identify communities/groups/representatives (Only ICH that is recognized by communities/groups is inventoried),
- Permission granted,
- Receive consent when the safeguarding involving non-community members
• Respect access issues to ICH (e.g. privacy, secrecy, etc.)
• Obtain consent for international lists (negotiation between all stakeholders), and keep in mind: UNESCO can only negotiate with national governments
• Involve local / regional administration, they may help to promote a bottom-up approach,
• Regard code of Ethics? (reduce possible conflicts between stakeholders),
• Involve advisory bodies / support teams (community members, NGOs, researchers, civil society, etc.)

2.2 Empowerment for community involvement

“It is important that communities themselves define and identify their own ICH, and governments, institutions and NGOs should be ready to assist them in doing this.”¹ However, community empowerment is a prerequisite for communities to undertake their own inventories. So the first step in a genuinely bottom-up inventory process is to empower communities through training in cultural documentation (methods and technology). Moreover, forums/centers for ICH expressions should be created, as these offer venues for discussion and sharing of knowledge.

This is bottom-up participatory methodology. The pilot workshops for inventorying ICH could be conducted in order to determine ‘best practices.’ The benefits of inventory-making are that the process can raise awareness of ICH, and it can become part of school projects by utilizing all forms of media. In addition, it can be used for national awareness-raising campaigns.

2.3 Cultural Mapping (2004 UNESCO-ACCU workshop)

Another approach that can be used for ICH identification and inventory is cultural mapping. This method relies on ICH attribution to geographical locations of communities identified, and it draws upon existing data (scholarly research, fieldwork, etc.). The work of cultural mapping is an

open-ended exercise – data can be re-evaluated to reflect the ‘dynamism of ICH.’ The mapping can also assist governments in understanding the ICH and their territories; it can result in helping establish time-line, budgets and strategies for working with communities.

2.4 Database Development

Technology allows for up-to-date information to be exchanged. It should reflect the dynamic nature of ICH, especially ICH that is threatened (e.g., Urgent List). (see an example of Database and Network Project, Vanuatu Cultural Centre)^2

3. Case Studies

Stefano cited two examples of the ICH identification and inventory process: Vanuatu Cultural Centre's (VCC) and the cooperative work of Scottish institutions to develop the ICH in Scotland Wiki. Both use different methods for the ICH safeguarding, as this is dependent on the social and cultural context.

3.1 Vanuatu Cultural Centre's (VCC) Fieldworkers Program^3

The Vanuatu Fieldworkers Program was launched in the 1977 by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC). Community volunteers were trained in ethnographic methods of recording and documenting cultural information and principles of cultural heritage management. Since its establishment, the fieldworker network has grown to over fifty volunteers. A workshop is organized annually to compile what the fieldworkers have recorded during the year.

Community-based fieldworkers in Vanuatu are helping to identify, document and archive Vanuatu's rich cultural heritage, including languages (cultural concepts, worldviews and knowledge), oral histories, and practices. This information is being used to develop a map and national database of Vanuatu’s languages and cultures. The information consists of audio, audiovisual media, and photographic documents about rituals, practices and traditional knowledge.

^2 http://www.vanuatuculture.org/site-bm2/projects/20070802_database_project.shtml
^3 http://www.vanuatuculture.org/site-bm2/fieldworkers/050517_fieldworkersprogram.shtml
The network of community fieldworkers is vital for database development. VCC recognizes their expertise and ability to identify record and, eventually, help to inventory the ICH of Vanuatu. This approach assists to establish trust between officials and communities, and it fosters pride and empowerment among culture bearers. THE VCC Fieldworker Program is an ideal example of an ICH research and inventory process which is bottom-up, involving local volunteers across the country to identify and safeguard their own living heritage for future generations.

3.2 ICH in Scotland Wiki

The ICH in Scotland Wiki project began in January 2008, with the aim of identifying, mapping and safeguarding ICH in Scotland. It allied many Scottish institutions, i.e. Museums Galleries Scotland, Scottish Arts Council, UK National Commission for UNESCO, Napier University to create ‘Routes’ for weaving a network with communities. It comprises 32 Local Area Authorities (routes).

The fieldwork findings were presented to Museums Galleries Scotland. The report covers practical steps needed to safeguard the ‘richness and diversity’ of ICH in Scotland. The information is available in an online database in the form of a customized wiki since August 2008, which launched with UNESCO support (see at Living Culture in Scotland Database). The network also uses social media online (i.e. twitter and facebook).

4. To Think About

Does the use of new technologies and social media democratize the identification and inventorying of ICH? The more that information grows, how can this information be managed effectively? How does the wiki page (or similar inventories) translate into actions that aim to safeguard ICH? (What’s the next step after inventorying?) Should inventories be divorced from the idea (or burden) of safeguarding ICH? These critical questions were raised by Stefano to encourage cultural practitioners to think critically about how to engage in a genuinely community-based approach for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.


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