Debates and Critiques of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible Cultural Heritage Field School, Lamphun
August 24th, 2010

Michelle Stefano
International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University
United Kingdom
How can museums effectively safeguard intangible cultural heritage of North East England?
The North East of England
NORTHUMBRIAN SMALLPIPE (BAGPIPE)
RAPPER DANCE
(SWORD DANCE)
• How are these three expressions currently being safeguarded?

• What really is being safeguarded?

**Significance:** senses of belonging, pride, place and self (identity)

**Values:** teamwork, altruism, respect
ICH is embodied by people

ICH consists of ever-changing, interconnected relationships between people, their heritage, and the places in which it is expressed and has evolved...
Overview:

- Introduction to the current framework for safeguarding ICH worldwide
- ICH Precursors and inherent uses
- Parameters of the ICH concept
- Selecting ICH
- Legal Perspective
- Museological Considerations (fossilization)
- Anthropological Considerations (folklorization)
- Benefits of ICH/2003 Convention
- Summary
Current Framework for Safeguarding ICH

• **Structured** by the 2003 Convention
  • ICH is conceptualized
  • ICH is promoted – inventories, lists, etc.
  • ICH is ...safeguarded

• **Propelled** forward by traditional museological values and functions (Identification, Inventorying, Documenting, etc.) (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2006)
The Current Framework for Safeguarding ICH
127 States Parties (as of June 30th, 2010)
Key Aspects of the Current Framework

As opposed to the 1972 World Heritage Convention, states parties hold the power when it comes to safeguarding the ICH of their territories...

Although, how national governments are to implement the 2003 Convention has been left in vague terms (Blake, 2006; Kurin, 2007).
Community Involvement?

The extent to which communities are involved in the safeguarding process is…

…VAGEE!

“Each State Party shall endeavour to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management” (UNESCO, 2003: Article 15).
Guiding Questions

1. What are the limitations of this current framework (the official ICH conceptualization)?
2. Can this framework safeguard ICH effectively?
3. What are the benefits/strengths?
Overview:

- Introduction to the current framework for safeguarding ICH worldwide
- ICH Precursors and inherent uses
- Parameters of the ICH concept
- Selecting ICH
- Legal Considerations
- Museological Considerations (fossilization)
- Anthropological Considerations (folklorization)
- Benefits of ICH/2003 Convention
- Summary
Precursors of ICH

ICH is the “practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003: Article 2)

Main examples of ICH (UNESCO):

• **Oral traditions and expressions** including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;

• **Performing arts** (such as traditional music, dance and theatre);

• **Social practices, rituals and festive events**;

• **Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe**;

• **Traditional craftsmanship**.
Precursors of ICH – Categorizing Diversity

- ICH is not new!
- Early anthropological and folklore studies
  - ‘cultural traits’ / ‘trait complexes’ / ‘survivals’
    - ‘exotic’, far-off locales (i.e. outside Europe)
    - peasant classes of Europe (folklore)

‘Measuring blocks/units’ used to compare cultural practices and beliefs from around the world
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wissler’s Universal Culture Pattern (1923)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Speech</strong>: Language, Writing Systems, and the like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Material Traits</strong>: a. Food Habits; b. Shelter; c. Transport and Travel; d. Dress; e. Utensils, Tools, and so on; f. Weapons; g. Occupations and Industries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Art</strong>: Carving, Painting, Drawing, Music, and so on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. <strong>Mythology and Scientific Knowledge</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. <strong>Family and Social Systems</strong>: a. The Forms of Marriage; b. Methods of Reckoning Relationship; c. Inheritance; d. Social Control; e. Sports and Games</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. <strong>Property</strong>: a. Real and Personal; b. Standards of Value and Exchange; c. Trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. <strong>Government</strong>: a. Political Forms; b. Judicial and Legal Procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. <strong>War</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. **Speech**: Language, Writing Systems, and the like
   - Oral traditions and expressions including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage

2. **Material Traits**: a. Food Habits; b. Shelter; c. Transport and Travel; d. Dress; e. Utensils, Tools, and so on; f. Weapons; g. Occupations and Industries → **Traditional craftsmanship**

3. **Art**: Carving, Painting, Drawing, Music, and so on
   - Performing arts (such as traditional music, dance and theatre)

4. **Mythology and Scientific Knowledge**
   - Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

5. **Religious Practices**: a. Ritualistic Forms; b. Treatment of the Sick; c. Treatment of the Dead → **Social practices, rituals and festive events**

6. **Family and Social Systems**: a. The Forms of Marriage; b. Methods of Reckoning Relationship; c. Inheritance; d. Social Control; e. Sports and Games → **Social practices, rituals and festive events**
Continued:


9. *War*

→ *Social practices, rituals and festive events*
ICH as a Categorical Tool

ICH

MORE GENERAL

SPECIFIC

DIALECTS
CULINARY SKILLS
INTERNET ACTIVITIES
FASHION SHOWS
RAP MUSIC
ANIMAL HERDING

UNIVERSALITY

DIVERSITY

DEEP SEA DIVING
HORSE RACING
FORESTRY
BASKET WEAVING
ICH as ‘Metacultural Production’

“...lists arise from operations that convert selected aspects of localized descent heritage into a translocal consent heritage: the heritage of humanity” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004)

ICH is an official “seal of approval”, a label placed upon selected cultural practices that then become “intangible cultural heritage”. (Hafstein, 2009)
‘ICH’ as a Valorizing Device

“World Heritage is first and foremost a list. Everything on the list, whatever its previous context, is now placed in a relationship with other masterpieces. The list is the context for everything on it” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004)
How do we make sure that local diversity – the meanings, nuances and specificity – remain intact whilst safeguarding ICH?

(How can we keep ICH invigorated/local?)
Overview:

• Introduction to the current framework for safeguarding ICH worldwide
• ICH Precursors and inherent uses
• Parameters of the ICH concept
• Selecting ICH
• Legal Considerations
• Museological Considerations (fossilization)
• Anthropological Considerations (folklorization)
• Benefits of ICH/2003 Convention
• Summary
Parameters of ICH

As conceptualized by UNESCO, ‘ICH’ means:

Cultural practices/beliefs “that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003: Article 2).

• It’s transmitted from generation to generation;
• It’s constantly recreated by communities and groups, in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history;
• It provides communities and groups with a sense of identity and continuity;
However...

- Cultural practices/beliefs that abide by human rights accords and promote respect for each other

- Neo-Nazism
- Female genital mutilation
- War

...any other parameters?
New YAWK  (↩ ‘typical’ accent)

The “New York Pizza Slice”: the passed-down knowledge from generation to generation of Pizzeria owners and workers on how to make that delicious, greasy slice of the city!
Hidden Meanings?

Does ICH mean:

‘Pastness’
‘Exoticness’/‘Beautiful’
‘Indigenous’
‘Threatened’…?

Can ICH be:

Contemporary
‘Ugly’
Widespread
Thriving…?

(From UNESCO website)
‘Non-western heritage’

‘Having the 2003 Convention, as separate from the 1972 World Heritage Convention, may perpetuate the idea that the heritage of the West is tangible and, thus, the heritage of the ‘non-West’ is intangible’ (Deacon et al., 2004)
The Current Framework for Safeguarding ICH

127 States Parties (as of June 30th, 2010)
‘Exoticist Bias’

“The policy is oddly reminiscent of early anthropology, which was driven by the conviction that primitive cultures should be documented in their entirety – from basketry techniques and healing arts to kinship systems and religious beliefs – because their extinction was inevitable” (Brown, 2005).
“Recognizing that the processes of globalization and social transformation ... give rise... to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003: Preamble).

“I have argued that the threat posed by globalisation is in fact so closely intertwined with the intangible heritage — so centrally involved in its discursive construction — that the two cannot be disentangled: the menace of globalisation must be considered intrinsic to the concept of the intangible heritage” (Hafstein, 2004).

ICH = GLOBALIZATION
Your ICH:

Would you, or others, define it as ICH?
Would it fit within the UNESCO parameters?
Overview:

• Introduction to the current framework for safeguarding ICH worldwide
• ICH Precursors and inherent uses
• Parameters of the ICH concept
• Selecting ICH
• Legal Considerations
• Museological Considerations (fossilization)
• Anthropological Considerations (folklorization)
• Benefits of ICH/2003 Convention
• Summary
Applying the ICH concept / Selecting ICH

Key Questions:

1. Which cultural practices/beliefs get the ‘ICH’ label (in inventories, lists, etc.)?  
   - Beauty contest!

2. Who designates this?

3. Where are the limits to the selection process?  
   (What gets excluded?)  
   - Phone book!
“What is remarkable here is the acknowledgement that traditions have to be recognised as intangible cultural heritage, that they are proposed as such but that in order to be given recognition, authorities must assess their importance and adjudicate among them” (Hafstein, 2009).
Paradoxical Criteria

(Proclamation of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity)

- Outstanding Value
- On the brink of extinction (Nas, 2002)

Same criteria for national inventories +
international Representative and Urgent lists?
Overview:

• Introduction to the current framework for safeguarding ICH worldwide
• ICH Precursors and Category-making
• Parameters of the ICH concept
• Selecting ICH
• **Legal Considerations**
• Museological Considerations (fossilization)
• Anthropological Considerations (folklorization)
• Summary of critiques
• Benefits of ICH/2003 Convention
From the Legal Perspective

• Originally, World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) was consulted (1960’s – 1980’s)
  – ICH as intellectual property/knowledge
  – However, there usually isn’t one ‘author’ or owner (public domain)

• 1973 Bolivian letter to WIPO/UNESCO concerning the protection of traditional culture
  – Simon and Garfunkel’s *El Condor Pasa*

Protection of ICH from appropriation, exploitation and commercialization (by others)
Overview:

• Introduction to the current framework for safeguarding ICH worldwide
• ICH Precursors and Category-making
• Parameters of the ICH concept
• Selecting ICH
• Legal Considerations
• Museological Considerations (fossilization)
• Anthropological Considerations (folklorization)
• Summary of critiques
• Benefits of ICH/2003 Convention
Museums and ICH

At international level:

Since 2000, ICOFOM, ICME and ICOM have embraced the aims of the 2003 Convention.

- Shanghai Charter, 2002
- Declaration of Seoul, 2004

“The museum now functions as an oxygen mask for local cultures which are slowly suffocating to death” (Lee, 2004).
“Museums are generally poor institutions for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage — the only problem is that there is probably no better institution to do so” (Kurin, 2004)
Museums and ICH

At the local level (North East England):

Uneasiness/discomfort with the term, “intangible cultural heritage”

- living history (re-enactments, past traditions)
- stories, meanings, values associated with material culture
Overview:

- Introduction to the current framework for safeguarding ICH worldwide
- ICH Precursors and inherent uses
- Parameters of the ICH concept
- Selecting ICH
- Legal Considerations
- Museological Considerations (fossilization)
- Anthropological Considerations (folklorization)
- Benefits of ICH/2003 Convention
- Summary
Folklorization

De Jong, 2007:

- Vital aspect of the Kankurang Masquerade: **secrecy!!!**
- After UNESCO intervention, the ritual became more visible
- Tourist destination
- In an effort to safeguard the masquerade, it was fundamentally changed!
“...heritage is a mode of cultural production that gives the endangered or outmoded a second life as an exhibit of itself” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004)

Folklorization = a self-conscious awareness of the value of one’s tradition to others (non-source practitioners)...so that it’s spontaneity and life are transformed into artifice...the once ever-evolving expression becomes stuck in time and an empty shell...
Benefits of the 2003 Convention?

• ‘Dematerialization’ of heritage

• Recognition is given to those who embody ICH
  - Links to identity / social cohesion

(but still, will this recognition lead to empowerment, where local communities possess power?)

• Wide acceptance – an advantage?

• It’s not just ‘non-western’/’exotic’

• It’s vagueness can be used as an advantage (more room for examining alternatives)
**Summary**

- ICH is a categorical tool — represents diversity by proxy

- Added values: Local, nuanced, specific → national/international level

- Risk of fossilization

- Risk of folklorization / tourist destination

Risk of severing the ties between ICH and its source communities, groups and individuals and the meanings, significance, and values with which it is imbued — as well as the places in which it has evolved.