Lecture 1: Introduction to the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Field School by Alexandra Denes, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, Thailand

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1.0 Definition of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Since the adoption of the UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage in 1972¹, which defined world cultural heritage as monuments and sites of “universal value,” the field of heritage preservation has focused largely on the conservation of material culture—particularly the built landscape. For instance, in the region of Southeast Asia, we have the World Heritage sites of Luang Prabang in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, and the historic towns of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya in Thailand.

However, over the past two decades, the meaning of cultural heritage has begun to shift and gradually expand to include intangible culture. This has culminated in the adoption of the UN Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in 2003.² The convention calls upon governments, cultural organizations and local communities to collaborate and work together in the identification, protection and revitalization of the oral histories, languages, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festivals, and local knowledge and skills that constitute a vital source of the world’s cultural inheritance.

2.0 Role of Museums in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

“Perhaps the most appropriate type of organisation to take the lead role in the realization of the Convention is the museum, or a museum-like cultural organisation. Content-wise, they often cover the areas included in the Convention - they are cultural preservation institutions by their very definition.”³

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Richard Kurin, Director of Smithsonian Institution, USA

According to the latest definition of the museum given by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 2007, a museum is an institution that “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” And yet, as Kurin has pointed out, museums face a number of key challenges as the scope of museum work expands to include intangible cultural heritage.

### 2.1 Adapting museum work to ICH

The first challenge is that most museum professionals are trained to work with material heritage rather than intangible heritage. They are taught methods and techniques for collecting, curating and interpreting objects. Intangible cultural heritage refers to the living cultural practices and traditions which are part of the identity and lifeways of groups and communities. So for museum and heritage professionals to work with and learn about this intangible cultural heritage, they must first endeavor to broaden scope of their focus to include the living culture in their own localities.

The second challenge is that museums are generally accustomed to being the experts about how to curate, conserve and interpret their collections. However, if we look at the 2003 Convention, the Convention calls for a very different approach, that is a participatory approach to heritage management - one which recognizes the culture bearers, the owners of culture, producers of culture as a primary experts vis-à-vis their own practices, narratives, knowledge and traditions. To work with intangible cultural heritage, museums must first acquire the tools for learning from culture bearers and engaging with them as equal partners.

The third challenge is that traditional museums have generally been defined and contained by their buildings. But to revitalize intangible cultural heritage, museums must reach beyond the walls of the museum to build lasting relationships with local constituencies.

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2.2 Concepts and tools for incorporating the ICH into museum activities

While the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is a relatively new instrument, in fact the research and documentation of intangible cultural heritage is not new. Indeed, cultural anthropologists have been involved in the study of the world’s diverse cultural beliefs, practices, social structures and forms of local knowledge since the 19th century. The key method of cultural anthropology is called ethnography—an approach which seeks to learn about culture through observing and participating in the daily lives of social groups and communities. One of the aims of this Field School is to provide participants with an understanding of the anthropological approach to the study of culture, some conceptual tools and practical methods for learning about intangible heritage and incorporating it into museum activities. Anthropological approaches are valuable and useful for this endeavor of safeguarding intangible heritage. Why is it so?

Because Anthropology explores what it means to be human. Anthropology is the scientific study of humankind in all the cultures of the world, both past and present. The discipline is committed to the study of human cultural diversity and to accumulating knowledge and experience from researching culture. There is no question that Anthropology can offer important tools to the global effort to safeguard the ICH.

In practice, there are six core components of fieldwork:

2.2.1 Participation observation

Basically, participant observation refers to being involved and engaged in the living cultural practices of the communities where you work. It is about participating and watching, learning through observing and reflecting on those observations.

2.2.2 Self-reflexivity

What self-reflexivity means is being aware of your own biases, prejudices, perceptions that you bring as an individual. Given our background, our upbringing, and our ethnicity, we all bring a certain bias. We must be aware of this and reflect on how this shapes our perception of other cultures, other people.
2.2.3 Building Rapport

“Building rapport” means is building trust and mutually respectful relationships in the communities where we work. This takes time and it takes a commitment to develop those kinds of relationships with communities. There is a certain level of investment, certainly for people who are more familiar working within the museum or within a heritage context, with material heritage or built heritage. Instead of focusing on the museum space, museum practitioners have to go out and build relationship with communities.

2.2.4 Understanding “context”

This means to broaden the scope of our understanding to history, to social context, to kinship and all of the factors that frame and shape cultural practices and intangible culture.

2.2.5 Learning from “key informants”

Museum practitioners must learn how to identifying “key informants who can share information, and who are knowledgeable about intangible cultural heritage. You have to learn how to interview, how to ask questions, and to deal and probe into topics more deeply, so you can understand them in greater depth.

2.2.6 Listening for diverse local voices and points of view

Last but not least, a key dimension of fieldwork is to listen for diverse local voices and points of view. You are not looking for one single master definition of some elements of intangible heritage or cultural practice. But rather you want to listen for all the different ways that a cultural practice, intangible cultural heritage is defined. The intangible heritage consists of multiple meanings and dimensions.

3.0 Critiques of the ICH Convention

“[C]ultural heritage that is inventoried, declared an official treasure and sustained by self-concious instruction, and surveilled by government oversight committees has lost much of the spontaneous creativity that gave it meaning in the first place. So again this is the critique that once you start the heritage
process there is no longer sort of natural and spontaneous. These are critiques that we have to think about.\textsuperscript{5}

Michael Brown

One of these critiques is what we could call “decontextualization.” Many anthropologists have said that once you take cultural practices that are part everyday lives and you start to document them, you start to perform them, you turn them into heritage. In fact they are fundamentally changed in this process. Once you start the process of heritage revitalization, they no longer have the same meanings, values and significances as they once did.

Another concern among anthropologists about cultural appropriation. As we document and create heritage lists, we document the details and background of intangible cultural heritage. Paradoxically, we are also making it more vulnerable to appropriation by entrepreneurs. In many cases, these elements are taken and turned into commodities, for instance, indigenous music forms. Because these elements are in the public domain, they can be appropriated by musicians without permission or consent to incorporate them into their own music.

As heritage practitioners, we have to learn how we can safeguard intangible cultural heritage in ways in which the significance, value, and meanings of those cultural practices are fundamentally respected. We also have to learn how to give greater agency and greater voice to the bearers of culture, owners and procurers of culture, in determining what and how to safeguard. We are only part of the participatory process.

4.0 Structure of the Field School

There are lecture and discussion sessions to discuss the ICH Convention and the definition of ICH, including some of the critiques of the Convention. There are also lectures on museums and communities, and new museological approaches.

We also have lectures on the 6 core areas of museum activities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage via the museum as follows:

1) Identification and Selection of ICH covers exploration and identification of intangible cultural heritage on which museum and cultural bearers might collaborate to safeguard.

2) Research and Documentation refers to researching and to documenting the details of cultural elements, including historical aspects and traditional practices reflecting diverse views of the bearers of culture.

3) Preservation and Protection aims to provide steps and measures to safeguard local ICH.

4) Promotion and Enhancement focuses on public dissemination in localities and at the regional level through different media in order to encourage sustainability.

5) Transmission and Revitalization concerns activities that support safeguarding and revitalization of the ICH, with a focus on intergenerational transmission activities including youth.

6) Conclusion and Recommendations. At the conclusion of the Field School program, the participants offer recommendations to their host communities on how to implement and improve their ICH activities.

Another core component of the Field School is the on-site practicum with local museums in Lamphun Province. Indeed, we are extremely fortunate to have this opportunity to hold this Field School in Lamphun, which has not only a rich culture and fascinating history but also many museums dedicated to researching, collecting, conserving and educating the broader public about diverse aspects of Lamphun’s heritage. Under the guidance of our international and local resource persons, Field School participants will work in collaboration with four of the province’s museums to apply newly acquired tools and concepts.

The aim of this collaborative engagement will be to develop a plan for a museum activity highlighting one aspect of intangible heritage, and to report on lessons learned and recommendations for the enhancement of ICH activities in participating museums. It is our sincere hope that the museum plans and recommendations for safeguarding ICH developed by each of the working groups will offer valuable insights and useful recommendations for the local museum operators and their communities who are so generously hosting us.

Another objective of the Field School is to build a regional network of heritage practitioners. Such a network would allow participants as heritage practitioners involved in museums and intangible heritage issues to share experiences and insights from with colleagues. Safeguarding of intangible
cultural heritage is not just a specific local process, but it is also the learning process among the people who are involved in the ICH at local, regional, national and international levels.