Lecture 15: ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES AND TOOLS FOR THE STUDY OF ICH - INTRODUCING ANTHROPOLOGICAL METHODS & TOOLS by Dr. Alexandra Denes, Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre.

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In this lecture, Dr. Denes aims to offer an introduction to the anthropological concepts and frameworks that are useful for researching and understanding intangible culture. The key conceptual and methodological approaches consist of participant observation and self-reflexivity, building rapport, understanding context, identifying key informants and undertaking interviews, listening for diverse local voices and points of view, ethnography, and rapid research tools, which are socio-cultural mapping, community histories, economic and social calendars, and life stories.

1. Definition of Anthropology and its application to ICH

Dr. Denes introduced the concept of Anthropology as defined by two different institutions:

Anthropology is the study of human diversity around the world. Anthropologists look at cross-cultural differences in social institutions, cultural beliefs, and communication styles. They often seek to promote understanding between groups by “translating” each culture to the other, for instance by spelling out common, taken-for-granted assumptions.—University of North Texas

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.—Western Washington University

The anthropologist Peter Nas (2002: 143) said that the mandate to safeguard intangible heritage represents a significant milestone in the discipline of anthropology, inasmuch as it is “the first time that cultural expressions have been taken as a subject of worldwide intergovernmental policy in such detail.”

In fact, considering the definition of Anthropology as the study of human cultural diversity, we see that ICH has long been the focus of this discipline. This means that anthropology has both methods and concepts that are appropriate for the study and management of ICH. Intangible cultural heritage refers to “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.”

2. Key conceptual and methodological approaches

2.1 Participant observation

“Participation” refers to the researcher’s presence in and interaction with a group or community when a social activity or event is taking place. In classic anthropological terms, it refers to the researcher’s total immersion in another culture, generally for an extended period of time. While “Observation” refers to what is seen through the eyes of the researcher. “What a researcher
observes” of another culture, or even her own culture, is shaped by his or her own theoretical orientation, as well as personal values, experiences, assumptions and biases, which are often implicit and sometimes unknown to the researcher herself.

As the researcher gets to know a new culture, she should endeavor to be aware of how her own values and experiences shape her perceptions of that culture. She should also be questioning her own assumptions, which constitute an “etic” perspective.

2.2 Building Rapport

Building “rapport” is another important component of anthropological research. It refers to establishing relationships based on trust and mutual respect with the group or community where you are conducting research. Rapport is built by demonstrating thoughtfulness and respect for local beliefs, traditions, and practices. The researchers should ask thoughtful questions, and to be a good listener. They show willingness to learn from the group or community and develop ties through sustained engagement with the group or community.

2.3 Understanding “context”

Context refers to the conditions in which something exists or occurs. With elements of culture, whether rituals, performances, oral narratives, or artifacts, as researchers, we gain a more holistic understanding if we see these elements in relation to the broader historical, environmental, and cultural context.

2.4 Identifying “key informants” and undertaking interviews

“Key informant” refers to anyone who can provide detailed information and opinions based on his or her knowledge of a particular practice, event or issue. Key informants are also often regarded as “experts” on a given practice, event or issue by members of the local community, i.e. a highly respected local midwife would a key informant on childbirth practices.

When first learning about a topic or cultural practice, interview questions are usually “open-ended” or “unstructured.” Open-ended questions are those that begin with “how,” “why” or “tell me about.” (i.e. Would you tell me more about…? Can you help me understand…?). Open-ended questions encourage informants to “tell their own stories” and give their own interpretations of cultural phenomena and events. Additionally, related open-ended techniques include eliciting stories through photo documentation and auto-documentation. As a researcher gains more understanding of the topic, s/he can develop more structured and guided interviews for cross-checking and triangulation of data.

2.5 Listening for diverse local voices and points of view

Cultures are not “monolithic,” they are not static or uniform. People who share the same culture (i.e. language, ethnic background, nation or territory) will very often have different viewpoints about the meaning and value of cultural beliefs and practices. For instance, one individual ethnic Yong cannot speak for the whole ethnic Yong community.

These differences of viewpoint are often a reflection of age group, ethnicity, gender, educational background and social class. Thus, rather than trying to present a coherent or seamless picture of culture, anthropologists endeavor to reveal this diversity of local voices and perspectives.

2.6 Ethnography

All of these approaches are central to ethnography. Ethnography is two things: (1) the fundamental research method of cultural anthropology, and (2) the written text produced to report
ethnographic research results. However, the way to which anthropologists develop ethnography is based on fieldnotes. Emerson (1995) said that detailed fieldnotes are a record of the researcher’s evolving understanding of the local context.

In fact, there is no “objective information” that has a “fixed meaning independent of how that information was elicited or established and by whom (Emerson 2005: 6).” Therefore, fieldnotes should reveal rather than attempt to conceal the partiality of the researcher’s experience. In writing fieldnotes, one should endeavor to capture interactional detail as well as the information collected from interviews.

### 2.7. Rapid Research Tools

#### 2.7.1. Community Mapping/Cultural Mapping

The mapping should be developed from the collaboration between researcher and community members. Identifying places where reflect Social activities, social identities, gendered spaces, domestic, public, political, etc. on the map helps to develop understanding local contexts and a “sense of place.” The latter means social meaning of spaces, like ritual, sacred, taboo, modern, and the places of meaning and memory. In sum, “Geo-social mapping is not just a map; it is a way of understanding and organizing community information.”

#### 2.7.2 Community History Timelines

It means to identify key economic, political and social events and to identify the collective memories and shared experiences of the community.

#### 2.7.3. Economic and Cultural Calendars

Community calendars are a tool for charting a community’s economic and cultural activities during a year (daily, weekly, monthly or annual events can be put in the diagram). An economic calendar lists all economic activities such as ploughing, attending rice fields, harvesting, fishing, cotton picking, weaving, migrant labor, etc. A cultural calendar includes social and cultural activities: holidays, festivals, pilgrimage, home coming, religious events, etc.

Economic activities calendar concerns a list of all local occupations, i.e. farming, weaving, plantation, trading, seasonal labor migration, factory work, etc. Gather information about each occupation around the year and put them in chronological order. The researcher needs to observe and mark seasonal change.

Cultural activities calendar reveals traditional practices such as marriage, ordination, fasting, the coming of age, or burial ceremony. Those rituals often take place in specific time of the year. Time or seasonal changes can also demarcate what are allowed or prohibited. Cock-fighting, for instance, is not allowed during Buddhist Lent.

#### 2.7.4. Life Stories

Objectives of eliciting life stories are (1) to understand in depth community life as it is lived by local villagers, (2) understand existential values and to be able to appreciate common humanity amid cultural differences, and (3) to develop a humanistic sensibility within ourselves. Personal stories reflect social changes, values and cultural practices. Often the researchers study life story of elder persons, religious leaders, community leaders, healers, the Poor, ethnic minorities.
3. Conclusion

Heritage practitioners generally do not have as much time for field research as professional anthropologists. Nevertheless, anthropological approaches and tools can be useful for learning about and safeguarding ICH. If the study is done thoughtfully and respectfully, the process of researching intangible culture can be one important means of fostering awareness and pride among local cultural bearers. Moreover, research and documentation of intangible heritage using anthropological approaches can contribute to the creation of a valuable archive of local knowledge for the revitalization and transmission of ICH.

4. Reference