

Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC)

“Through anthropology, humans learn about humanity, and learn to understand themselves and their fellow humans, forming the basis for mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence.”

*Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn,
at the formal opening of the Centre*

9 March, 1999

The Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (SAC) is a public organization under the supervision of the Thai Ministry of Culture. Established in 1989, the Centre’s primary mission is to promote understanding among peoples through the study of human societies. SAC’s activities fall within three main program areas: documentation, research, and public education and outreach. Geographically, SAC’s program activities focus on Thailand and the Greater Mekong Sub-region, with the broad aim of fostering tolerance and cross-cultural awareness in the region through anthropological research and public education.

The Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre and Intangible Cultural Heritage

Since the adoption of the *UNESCO Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* in 1972, 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.

However, in recent years, the meaning of heritage has gradually expanded to include living cultural practices, culminating in the adoption of the [United Nations Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) (ICH) in 2003, which calls upon governments and local communities to collaborate in the protection of the oral histories, performing arts, social practices, and local knowledge and skills that constitute a vital source of the world’s inheritance. This expansion of heritage management to include intangible culture has created an unprecedented demand for analytical expertise and methodological approaches drawn from the discipline of cultural anthropology. This is particularly true in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, where heritage programs have not kept pace with the demand for expertise in intangible heritage management.

In response to this need, and as part of its commitment to the expansion of anthropological research and knowledge in Thailand and the region, in 2009, the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre (Public Organization) launched the Intangible Cultural Heritage Field School program—a two-week training program open to recent university graduates, mid-career professionals, educators, and others involved in the heritage field. Developed in partnership with UNESCO Bangkok and the Asian Academy of Heritage Management (AAHM) and offered once per annum, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Field School program aims to equip participants with both the conceptual and practical tools to actively engage with intangible heritage issues.

Building on its institutional expertise in the area of anthropological research, SAC's Intangible Cultural Heritage Field School program aims to offer anthropological frameworks as well as practical tools for engaging in the growing field of Intangible Cultural Heritage management in the Asian region, with the corollary objective of fostering transnational collaboration and understanding of the region's shared heritage.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums: Learning Resources

Museums have long been sites for the collection and display of tangible heritage, including art and artifacts. In recent years, however, museums around the world have expanded the scope of their exhibitions and curatorial practices to include living heritage, such as oral history and memory, craftsmanship, festivals, ritual and performance, and in this regard, museums are increasingly being recognized as important partners in the effort to safeguard intangible cultural heritage.

As noted by Richard Kurin, Director of the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage at the Smithsonian Institution, this expansion of museum work to include intangible heritage presents a number of methodological challenges. While most museum professionals are trained to manage collections of objects, working with intangible heritage entails the extensive involvement and active participation of communities who are the bearers of living culture. In learning about intangible heritage, museum professionals must engage with local communities to understand the history and meaning of their cultural expressions. In addition, in curating intangible heritage, they must know how to establish equal partnerships with culture bearers and develop mechanisms for sharing authority and decision-making about museum activities and representations.

These learning resources focus on the role of the museum in the safeguarding of intangible

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cultural heritage. Aimed at heritage practitioners and museum operators, these resources provide an introduction to the conceptual and methodological linkages between museology and intangible cultural heritage. Drawing on lectures and hands-on field experience from the Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museums Field School held in Thailand's Lamphun Province since 2009, the resources offer lectures, readings, and case studies on how to support the research, documentation, transmission and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage.

The SAC also aims to foster dialog and exchange among heritage institutions involved in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Towards this goal, the Learning Resources Website will serve as a forum for sharing news, knowledge and case studies on ICH safeguarding initiatives. Please take the time to visit the exhibitions and contribute to the ICH blog on our website!