

COMMUNITY IN THE CONTEXT OF UNESCO'S CONVENTION ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Diana Baird N'Diaye, Ph.D.
Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

Defining Community

The word “communities” is used 11 times in UNESCO's Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage and it is indicated that community participation is required in the fulfillment of the terms of the convention. But how do we go about defining such a nebulous term? How do we operationalize the definition so that it serves the purposes of identifying and safeguarding cultural heritage and remains true to the spirit of the convention?

Underlying the wording of the convention's references to “communities, groups and individuals” are several principles based on desired outcomes which can provide a blueprint for the framing of guidelines. Desired outcomes of the convention include:

- ❖ Cultural groups and individuals continue to value, practice, nurture, and transmit the vitality of forms of traditional knowledge, skills and expressive culture that embody their identities—as long as these practices do not impinge on essential human rights.
- ❖ The diversity of communities—based on geography, gender, occupation, age, faith, and other forms of affiliation—is recognized and documented.
- ❖ Communities' ICH is sustained, respected, and valued as a source of pride and self esteem both within and outside of the nation-states in which it is created.
- ❖ National governments pro-actively create sustainable programs and projects that nurture the continued vitality and re ICH within their borders.
- ❖ Respect and appreciation for and education about ICH becomes a part of education of youth as a source both within and outside of communities and groups

Principles which underlie the convention's references to community include :

- ❖ The **definition of “community” based on practice**.
- ❖ Community **agency** - recognition of the importance of participation in all aspects of the process of documenting and safeguarding ICH by members of communities,-especially cultural practitioners (including both conveyers, creators and audiences/users.)
- ❖ The importance of **flexibility** in the approaches to creating inventories.
- ❖ The importance of **active collaboration** between stakeholders including government policy makers, research professionals, cultural practitioners, and members of civic society in initiatives directed towards safeguarding ICH.
- ❖ Recognition that people belong to several communities and that people who claim membership in the same community may impart differing meanings to the same features/elements of ICH. This complexity of relationship must be assumed in the presentations of nation-states.

“Individuals” and Community Practitioners

To its references to “community” and “groups,” the convention almost always adds “or individuals.” The inclusion of “individual” intends to cover those instances where intangible cultural heritage is vested in the memory and practice of a single cultural practitioner. Using the term “cultural practitioners” in the guidelines instead of “individuals” makes explicit that the term “individuals” is weighted towards cultural practitioners from within communities and groups as opposed to specialists who merely study those groups or genres---although one individual may embody both. (For example, Dr. Wande Abimbola is both a foremost scholarly authority on Ifa Divination and a cultural practitioner with deep roots in the tradition--his father and grandfather with whom he apprenticed were priests in the tradition.)

As centuries of disagreement over issues of identity and ownership can attest, defining “community”, like defining “culture” an inevitably messy if not unfortunately bloody process. The way in which community membership is defined has serious social, political and economic impact on individuals and groups within a nation state. At the same time that the UNESCO convention on intangible heritage insists on the substantive

participation of the communities whose heritage is being inventoried, the convention itself leaves open the parsing of terms like “community” and “group.”

According to one definition communities are groups of people who have shared history, shared experience, shared practice, shared knowledge, shared values, and shared aesthetics.

The convention also refers to responsibility of “the international community to contribute, together with the States Parties to this Convention, to the safeguarding of such heritage in a spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance” implying the building of consensus (and a community) shaped in the creation of the convention itself. ¹

Engaging Communities in defining, identifying, and inventorying their ICH

The way in which the identification of ICH is made, and the process of creating inventories of ICH within a nation state are crucial to the ultimate goals of safeguarding ICH. Conventionally, the task of researching and drawing up inventories of intangible cultural heritage has been assigned to academically trained professional researchers and scholarly “experts” who typically complete documentation of ICH at the behest of governments on behalf of groups or at the behest of groups themselves. Cultural practitioners who are grounded in the experience and indigenous knowledge of a group, those that sing, speak, create, know, transmit to others and interact within a cultural group are primary stakeholders in defining, identifying, and inventorying the ICH. It follows that the guidelines should emphasize that cultural practitioners be engaged as active agents at in all stages in the identification/ safeguarding continuum rather than merely giving their assent. In using the inventory making process as a project of national self study and reciprocal learning, the aims of inventory-making comes to incorporate effective safeguarding and transmission activities as well.

Models exist for the meaningful participation of cultural practitioners and effective collaboration between cultural practitioners, educators, academically trained researchers and government administrators be

¹ In an essay devoted to the use of the term “group”, folklorist Dorothy Noyes notes that group is described as: created in everyday interaction, made by insider assertion or outside ascription, bounded by descent, defined by territory, defined by occupation, a category of political or touristic representation, or emerging from performance. She remarks that in recent formulations groups and communities are conceptualized as products of interaction rather than it's precondition and that performers and audience are both cultural practitioners when they are a part of the same reference group. Whereas the older paradigms saw people as bearers of ICH, newer views see people as makers of tradition, a conception which supports the agency of self ascribed communities.

achieved through partnerships at several key steps in the process of inventorying, creating, and implementing cultural policy aimed at safeguarding ICH.

Ensuring Community participation in Safeguarding Activities.

---What kind of policy---and institutional practice follows logically from these definitions of community? Although we cannot play out every scenario, we can look at what outcomes have derived from definitions of ICH and policies (Japan's, US, South Africa, Cambodia) that preceded the actual convention. Starting from outcomes and working backwards, where do we see ICH being safeguarded in a way that works and that holds the most positive outcomes for cultural practitioners, civil societies as a whole? What do we want to see as an outcome from the ICH on the level of local cultural practitioners and practice?

In preparation for the UNESCO/ACCU meeting in Tokyo, March, 2006, a gathering of staff members and Rockefeller cultural heritage fellows at the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage was convened to consider the issues to be discussed at the Tokyo meeting. Participants included individuals who are academically trained cultural specialists involved in day to day work with communities inside and outside their own, and colleagues involved with civil society critiques of cultural policy. In addition to the meeting, individual consultations with craftspersons involved in traditional practice within their communities, several cultural workers and readings inform the notes that follow. These notes examine the use of the term "community" in the convention, and principles that are implied therein; some examples of definitions attempted in folklore and anthropology; and how "community" has been operationalized in folklore practice in selected case study projects in the United States directed towards the identification, and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. On the basis of these, the paper concludes with observations and suggestions for, guidelines and approaches to "community" within the context of the Convention.

Following are examples from the experience of ICH projects {in which the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage has been engaged} in the United States, Bermuda, and in the Mekong Delta region of how this can be done through encouraging "technologies" of institutional practice and policy in the guidelines that set out a framework for substantive engagement by community stakeholders.

Examples of Technologies of Practice:

- 1) Establishment of Public Folklore infrastructures and positions at State, Regional, and National levels in the US
- 2) Mekong Project
- 3) National Heritage Awards
- 4) Folk Arts in Education eg. Louisiana

5) Bermuda Connections

In 1999 the island colony of Bermuda, a self governing part of the British Commonwealth undertook an inventory of local culture. Although the initial catalyst for the project was Bermuda's participation in the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival the project plans quickly expanded to include a sustainable and community based focus. The essential elements of the project included:

- A working town hall meeting at the beginning of the project that significantly brought together Bermudians from all walks of life--local storytellers, government officials from ministries of culture, education, finance, and tourism, formally trained historians and journalists, artists, primary and secondary school educators, athletes, and other interested citizens. Smithsonian staff facilitated the meeting as a brainstorming session to discuss the cultural landscape of the island.
- Fieldworkers, including both lay and professional researchers were recruited and trained to carry out the work of identifying and interviewing cultural practitioners, then reporting back to the group.
- A representative group of educators in local schools were also recruited and received training in the fundamentals of ICH and facilitating research on intangible cultural heritage. They guided their students through research projects and exhibitions of the students' explorations of their topics at the local agricultural fair. An instructional video documentary followed students through the process of ICH research on cultural practitioners.
- cultural practitioners performed or made presentations at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival (and at local public venues in Bermuda.
- Local Bermudian coordinators worked side by side with experienced coordinators
- Bermudians trained during the Smithsonian Festival created and managed their own public showcase of ICH.
- A cultural resource guide for classrooms-broadly keyed to the curriculum used transcripts, images and other materials documenting Bermudian culture and practitioners created during the research.

Olivia Cadaval, folklorist and curator at CFCH mentioned that one positive outcome might be space (both physically and metaphorically) for ICH to flourish; a discursive and fully collaborative process between local cultural practitioners--both those who create/perform and users/audience), cultural "specialists" formally trained in research, and government providing support and funds. Again---what models have worked under what conditions? Key phrases/ values which exemplify the spirit of the convention are: community agency, collaborative process, reciprocal learning, flexible approaches, multivocal, emphasis on people and practice, recognition of multiple genres of community.

Bernard Bakaye, Rockefeller fellow studying community participation in the preservation, promotion and development of cultural heritage for poverty eradication, eloquently describes a situation in his home country, Uganda, where on the one hand you might find communities that are relatively culturally homogenous---same language, faith, values, knowledge, land. You might also see communities where people speak distinct languages at home but whose children growing up in a diverse urban setting communicate in a common other language like English which may itself take on a uniquely "Ugandan" form. The strategies for recognizing "community" and "community ICH" may be very different in each case. Definitions of community and community practice are modified by settings and conditions, therefore, framers of the guidelines should be open to several definitions of "community" and the self ascription of community by groups sharing ICH practice.

What kind of guidelines would serve the identification and safeguarding ICH? A very flexible system incorporating establishment of semi-autonomous state folklorists, national heritage awards, apprenticeships, and ICH community research education (the inventorying process as community self-study and discourse facilitated by those trained in research) can and has worked.