

*Involvement of Communities in defining, inventorying and safeguarding their ICH :
A Comment from a Mauritian perspective*

Philippe de la Hausse de Lalouvière (Mauritius)

Well before the proclamation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), certain countries and several groups of researchers had embarked and achieved remarkable inventories of intangible cultural heritage practices. Similarly some countries had established ways and means of safeguarding certain cultural practices and some aspects of their ICH. These programmes have formed the basis for more recent initiatives and will certainly help in creating “best practice” operational guidelines for implementation of the Convention. These practices involved the practitioners of the ICH and are considered to be robust and sustainable methodologies on account of the community involvement.

Barriers to involving Communities

In many State parties and in many situations, there are barriers to community involvement. The first, considered by papers elsewhere, is the definition of the community. It might be that the group is not able or easy to be identified, and so is not included in the process of inventory and safeguarding, for that reason. The identification in Mauritius of community might be structured around a 2-pronged approach:

1. local “Community Centres / Village Councils / Municipalities” (State organizations)
2. NGOs and scholars and civil society (non-State organizations).

This is possibly a best-practice, creating a balance between State and non-State organizations.

Secondly, it is the choice of the community involved, should there be several communities involved. Article 12 of the Convention grants freedom to member States to make the inventory and Article 11 confers makes it essential that communities are included in the inventory. The danger is for the least politically acceptable communities or minority communities, to be excluded. In Mauritius, a remarkable ICH are the religious pilgrimages, which involve hundreds of thousands of people each year, indeed the majority of citizens participate in at least one pilgrimage each year. With such popular expression of spirituality, many organizations are involved and recent years have shown massive State involvement – from funding of routes to granting of land to various organizations. In the safeguarding of this extremely visible and popular ICH, it will be important for all the stakeholders to be clearly identified and included. It is not the case, as there are allegations that the State supports certain groups and not others.

Thirdly, the “visibility” of certain communities is less than others. In Mauritius, activities concentrate on the main island to the repeated refrain of neglecting Rodrigues and Agalega, far smaller islands. That neglect of physically distant and better hidden ICH is a danger in community involvement.

Finally, those ICH which have economic benefits and spin-offs, are likely to attract greater support from the State and than those without. In the application of resources to study, understand and to safeguard, ICH like dance and music might have a greater chance of mobilizing attention as they are useful to a booming tourist industry, while language and oral traditions less as they have fewer direct benefits. The challenge will be to have an objectivity in the application of resources and time, to all ICH and their stakeholder communities.