

Defining 'communities', 'groups' and 'individuals' and their involvement and safeguarding of their ICH

By Tan Huism

Under UNESCO 2003 Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Heritage, recognition is given to the importance of communities, groups and even certain individuals in the production, safeguarding and maintenance of intangible heritage. The Convention also highlights the need to ensure respect of the intangible heritage of these various groups of people. How might one define these terms? Where appropriate I would like to provide examples from my museum experience that could possibly apply to intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

Who makes up a community? Who defines the community? Generally, one could define a community as a group of people sharing some common link or interest with each other or a common sense of being similar. Some of these common links would be for example, being members of a particular geographical region, language, ethnicity, religion, cultural or interest group. One should also take note that an individual could be a member of various communities, and conversely despite sharing common links, an individual can feel that he/she is not part of the community.

Who is defined as part of the community and who isn't, is of course political. Take for example, our museum's involvement with the Peranakan community on developing a new Peranakan museum. The word Peranakan which means 'born of' is a generic term used by several non-indigenous ethnic groups who have adapted local traditions and been born in Island Southeast Asia. Generally in the Singapore context, it is usually taken to mean the Straits Chinese community – the Chinese who have adapted local Malay traditions to form a fusion culture. The traditional enclaves of Peranakan Chinese culture were in Singapore, Penang and Malacca (the last two in Peninsular Malaysia). The past few years, there have been debates amongst members of the Singapore Peranakan community, whether or not the 'community' in Phuket (an island on the west coast of Thailand) could be considered Peranakan, even though they share similar traditions. It did not matter that the Phuket community claimed that they were Peranakans. Some traditionalists would even question whether those who do not speak the language (patio Malay) or lived the Peranakan 'lifestyle', could be part of the community even if you were of Peranakan parentage. Our museum would be trying to capture this diversity of views within the community as well as the diversity of views of people outside the community have of the Peranakans in our future display. Similarly, any state register of ICH, should try to capture the diversity that can be found in any particular community, not to mention the multiple communities in any particular society.

With regards to the word 'group', I feel that the word might not be necessary if it could fall under the category of community, as such I have not tried to define it. Given the context of the convention, the 'individuals' mentioned I take it to mean specific persons who are directly involved in the production and the 'living-out' of the intangible heritage (as defined in the convention). Thus for example, the individual could be an artisan,

dancer, a bomoh (Malay medicine man), an elder, a poet and so on. The difficulty would be in deciding which individual to choose to present the ICH? Considering that resources would be limited and one is unable to document as many individuals as possible. Do we leave it to the community decide?

Defining the terms 'community', 'groups' and 'individuals' may not be too difficult in theory, however, in practice, who is to decide what ICH or who would represent the community or group and who might the individuals be, would pose a constant challenge.

Community Involvement in Defining, Inventorising and Safeguarding their ICH

I feel the issues raised in the writeup above naturally leads us into the area of getting community involvement in compiling and safeguarding their ICH.

Just as a museum is seen to safeguard the material culture of the various communities in society, a similar organisation would probably need to be set up within a state to spearhead the collecting, documentation and safeguarding of ICH. As mentioned earlier, cultural diversity should be reflected in the ICH collection, although, some cultures might have less expressions of ICH than another, given the particularities of the culture. Getting community involvement in the defining what aspects of their ICH to safeguard would be imperative. After convincing the community the merits of the project, the ICH agency would then have to decide who to approach in the community to help with this process. The same issue would then face the ICH agency, do you then as an external party moderate what has been defined by the community? Take for example, in a museum setting, it would be usual for the community to want to show all the best examples of their material culture to the public in an exhibition. This might however, give the impression that all members of that community are rich. It is also usual that the vocal members of the community might also be the traditional power-holders of the community, and would want to dictate their version of their culture. One would then imagine the involvement of external scholars in helping to define the community's ICH. There would also be the issue of getting community involvement in the process, especially if the state agency is not considered by them to be neutral.

It is in the very nature of ICH, that various expressions would change reflecting changes in the community's lifestyle. Any inventory list drawn up should thus include any additional contemporary expressions that might emerge. The community would certainly need to be engaged in safeguarding their ICH, for if the community no longer finds that particular expression of their ICH meaningful, it would just be a thing of the past. To help safeguard some important factors would be educating people in and outside of the community of the importance of the ICH and for example in the case of a performance, its appreciation to achieve sustainability, and also providing assistance and support to practitioners.