

III. ICH and Safeguarding Measures

1. Definition

UNESCO defines the “Intangible Cultural Heritage”²² as “means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development”.

Furthermore the Convention goes on to say²³ further that the “intangible cultural heritage”, manifests inter alia in the following domains:

- (a) Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) Performing arts;
- (c) Social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- (e) Traditional craftsmanship.

²² Article 2.(1) of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding on Intangible Cultural Heritage

²³ _____ 2.2 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding on Intangible Cultural Heritage

In the Kiribati context the form of manifestation of ICH referred to above is relevant and important. Much of our skill and knowledge about our mythology and cosmogony were preserved and transmitted by oral traditions and expressions. Our language even before the arrival of Dr. Bingham who developed the Kiribati alphabet was the vehicle of transmitting the oral and traditions expressions.

Performing arts in Kiribati is largely dancing and music. There is an absence of musical instruments except the conch shell which is used for calling purposes. The vocal music of I-Kiribati²⁴ in the form of solo and chorus is quiet exciting and outstanding. Chorus is very much suitable for festive dances notably the standing dance – Waan Tarawa – and sitting dance - Bino.

Social practices, rituals and festive events are also alive and strong in Kiribati. In the Kiribati context it is normal that people are living as families headed by an old man, extended families, headed by a number of old men who are closely related, villagers headed by a group of old men in the village and as islanders belonging to one island headed by a group of old men from different villages. They live in their ancestral lands the ownership of which, unless interrupted by some reasons, commenced many years ago. They have periodical festivities, different rituals in relation to marriage, pregnancy, birth, and treatment of first born child, mensuration and funeral.

Kiribati has its own experts in knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. Generally it is agreed that there is one God by the name of Nareau whom he tasked every other gods subservient to him to help in one way or the other in the creation of the universe. Nareau and other gods became hero in the settlement of our islands, in war and other deeds.

The craftsmanship in the Kiribati context is limited to skills in using tools made of limestone to build cultural important artefact. The classical example is the canoes that could travel around a large area of the Pacific Ocean. .

Craftsman of diversified traditional artefacts including fisherman's torch for fishing, frame net, hand net used by women for fishing on the reef, hand net used by men for fishing on the reef, netting needles, fishing of sand worm, catching moray eels with traps and the making of those traps and many more skills.

Overall ICH in all its manifestations is alive and strong in Kiribati and therefore there is good reason for this country to participate in this project.

²⁴ The material culture of Kiribati, Gerd Koch, English translation by Guy Slatter, Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1986, p. xviii

2. Safeguarding Measures

UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of the ICH²⁵, defines safeguarding as “measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the ICH, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.”

In the Kiribati context safeguarding ICH is very much important for the community as well as the government. However, the community is very much incapable of safeguarding due largely to lack of resources and technical know-how. It is unable to stimulate interest and active participation of the young generation in the diversified ICH of their ancestors.

Government likewise has problems of inadequate resources and lack of expertise and inadequate number of staff to do the job. Enhancing the capacity of both the community and the government in safeguarding the ICH is therefore very important.

The catastrophe of safeguarding ICH began from an assault on the traditional maneaba a centerpiece of I-Kiribati ICH. The maneaba have disappeared from most of our islands.

Unimane (elders) were seated in their boti (sitting place) in the maneaba according to the status of their ancestors who were the founders of Te boti from hundreds of years ago.

One of the Unimane was seated in the maneaba with the right to deliver te moa n taeka ao te kabanea n taeka (the first and final words in the meeting) as well as te moa ni bee (the right to stand in the foremost front of the dancing group in the maneaba to be easily watched by spectators), another Unimane, as already referred to above was seated as te tia kaota (food exhibitor) while others are playing their own respective important roles.

Te Boti in the maneaba as already mentioned exhibited as well land the boti holder owns from many years ago.

The new generation of I-Kiribati favors progressive practices that are not bound by cultural norms that benefit a few in the maneaba system. The distribution of foods by Te Tia kaota to all those who were seated in the maneaba, in particular, when Te Tia kaota chose to distribute the food unfairly, the few i.e. te tia kaota

²⁵ _____ 2.3 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding on Intangible Cultural Heritage

and his own clan are the recipients of the larger proportion of the food. The majority received a little portion of the food. This explains how the maneaba system favored the few.

Overcoming this particular problem and many more is difficult as by custom no one was allowed to complain against decisions made in the maneaba including food distribution as it was entirely a matter for the responsible clan te tia kaota to decide. This practice began some centuries ago. Ill-feelings like this, therefore, covert and thus extremely difficult to overcome.

While the situation remained unresolved the church maneaba dramatically gained the favor by the majority as an alternative to the traditional maneaba.

The church maneaba is free from cultural restrictions and rules thus everyone in the church maneaba was treated the same.

The information about the maneaba available from the cultural mapping of 2005 and traditions published by Grimble, Maude, Jean-Paul Latouche and Kambati Uriam may be used as guide in the revival of the maneaba system.

Moreover, the traditional knowledge and skills possessed by hereditary owners as a family or clan which as a rule, are not divulged, are in danger of disappearing. This is in the area of fishing, cutting toddy and magic. Magic is used in many forms for different purposes.

Fishing skill enables an I-Kiribati fisherman to catch very easily fish in shallow and deep waters. In fishing competition a skillful fisherman helped by magic could disable other competitors of catching fish.

A skillful toddy cutter could produce relatively quality and high quantity of toddy rich in vitamin C which is good for drink.

Magic frightens enemies and win the heart of the loved one. It cures illness caused by the bad spirit.

The causes of disappearance of such skills was that the practitioners of the skill passed away untimely before passing it on to his next of kin, declining numbers of practitioners and growing disinterest of young people.

Counteracting the growing disinterest by the young generation in ICH may be, among others, in the form of increasing public awareness of the importance of ICH by government and creating jobs equivalent in nature with Living Human

Treasures and the establishing of statutory bodies at island and national level with the task of ensuring ICH remains intact.

Appropriate measures must be developed to provoke practitioners and local experts to share authentic skills with the C&MD of MIA. These two institutions could disseminate to the wider community such knowledge and skill

The impact of climate change affects areas where there are baangota. This is a sacred site where the spirits are worshipped. It may include gravesites of kings and other famous people and other well-known sites of cultural significance. They are in danger of disappearing. These sites are not only situated in coastal areas where they are affected by waves and other turbulence of the sea.

They are also situated in areas inland far away from the sea. However, heavy rainfall amid climate change nowadays could force the rainwater to penetrate into the sacred site and may destroy for example the physical remains of the dead stored in some of these sacred places.

On the island of Tabuaeran formerly Fanning Island there is a gravesite of the well-known family on the island - former owners of the islands – the Greig family. Furthermore on Tabuaeran there are old buildings built in the late 1880s or early in the 1900s. They are treated in the same manner as any other places and buildings on the island. There are fears they may disappear.

Teraina formerly Washington Island may have places and old buildings of cultural significance. There is fear they may have vanished as if they are of no cultural significance.

Kiritimati Island formerly Christmas Island has a presence of old buildings and churches built by the British and United States military forces when they were on the island during the 1950s for purpose of nuclear testing. There are fears they may vanish if their cultural importance are not recognized.

There are also sites of old Polynesian human settlements occurring many years prior to the presence of UK and US military on the island.

Every island in the Gilbert Group has baangota and well-known sites of cultural importance, most of which are not well looked after and thus vulnerable to destruction.

Furthermore, the gravesite of Kings and other important people are left unattended and would disappear if they are not looked after.

Throughout the Gilbert Group the Catholic and Protestant Churches in the middle of the last century built churches. Even residents of priest and Protestant were also built using imported materials. Some of these buildings were of western architecture for which reason they are important to be retained.

The foregoing demonstrates that the present safeguarding of ICH in Kiribati is poor hence protective measures of ICH must be accorded the highest priority.

However, important activities in the form of a national workshop have taken place in Kiribati to improve the safeguarding efforts of ICH. The absence of efforts on the part of Government in taking actions as recommended by the workshop to improve the safeguarding measures is the reason of not achieving any improvement of safeguarding ICH in Kiribati.

That workshop was organized by the C&MD of MIA from 9 – 11 February 2011. It took place in Tarawa with the participation of Unimane - traditional leaders - representing all islands in Kiribati. Resource persons provided by UNESCO facilitated the discussions. The Minister responsible for ICH officially opened the workshop.

A Draft Five Year work plan for ICH safeguarding was presented by staff of the C&MD and discussed by the workshop participants. The work plan included among others: i) Establishing ICH Inventory with the community participation at the country level; ii) Ratifying the 2013 Convention; and iii) The Nomination of ICH elements for inscriptions on RL and USL.

The 30 participating representatives from all islands including the cultural experts who participated in the workshop endorsed the work plan. 23 of the participants signed for the recommendation to the Government of Kiribati (GOK) of ratification of the 2013 Convention.

Actions to implement the Draft Five Year Work Plan for ICH safeguarding that began its life from 2011 is not only relevant and important at this point in time it remains desirable that it is translated into reality.

The implementation of the work plan is the right response to the concerns expressed above.