

VII. Pending Issues

Q1. Is any of the intangible cultural heritage in your country in danger of disappearance or transformation?

(Please include the name of the particular heritage, location, problems encountered, etc.)

The intangible cultural heritage in greatest danger of disappearance is the oral histories. While Yap has remained one of the most traditional islands of the Pacific it still seems that much of its oral history and myths have been lost. Many people and Yap have told me that they once had a rich oral history that took seven days to recount that told of the travels of Pululap and his sons and all the islands they held within their empire. Today there are few if any who can recount the stories in full. In Pohnpei, the oral history is closely guarded as it is in other islands. Because of its secrecy it is difficult to assess how well it is retained. The small atoll of Sapwuahfik offers the best method of retaining such oral histories. It maintains a council of traditional elders who are the keepers of their islands oral history. In this way those who retain the knowledge have been identified and may share the stories between themselves in the manner they see fit.

Q2. What are the reasons the heritage is in danger and what type of safeguarding measures have been taken? Please be specific.

Oral history accounts are in danger most likely because of the influx of modern culture from television. It is difficult to get the younger generation interested in oral history which is passed down in a slow, tedious manner when it must compete with flashy, highly-edited television programming. The incorporation of oral histories into the school curriculum would be a good safeguarding measure, especially if such histories could be written in interesting ways.

Q3. What are the pending issues for safeguarding ICH in your country that you have found through interviews and the field survey?

The most pending issue for safeguarding ICH is for the elements of ICH protected within the state constitutions and state codes to be more clearly defined, specifically the power of the traditional leaders and exemptions to natural resource protection for customary use.

Q4. What kind of problems and difficulties were encountered during the safeguarding projects?

The safeguarding of ICH is not something that can be simply accomplished by funding projects and passing laws. It must be performed and organized with instructors who show great care. In the 1990s several programs were funded to construct traditional canoes. The idea was that elders who retained the knowledge would teach the younger generation. However, I was told that elders constructed the canoe too fast for the younger students to keep up. The master carvers were performing the project for money and wanted to complete the project quickly so they could get paid. It is important to identify people who truly want to pass on the knowledge and not just to pay someone to do the job. Ichiro John, a Mwokilese elder, is one such person who wants to pass on the tradition of sailing canoe.

Another difficulty that is commonly seen is that the oral history and other such ICH are seen as the property of certain individuals and is appropriate to be passed down only by certain people. For example, westerners who compile oral histories, even if based strongly on the accounts of local historians, will be heavily criticized because they are not the appropriate persons to share such knowledge. This challenge is difficult to mediate unless these traditional protocols are softened.

Q5. What future plans are there for the safeguarding of ICH (programme information)?

Currently policies are being developed for Cultural Research and the passing of the Nagoya Protocol. These measures will ensure that research on ICH will be shared with the local people on the island and that profits from that research will be shared as well. This will hopefully encourage local people to share their knowledge more openly knowing that researchers will not take advantage of them, specifically in regards to traditional medicine.

Q6. What type of contributions and cooperation from the international society is needed for the safeguarding of ICH in your country?

The best way in which the international society may fund the protection of ICH is to support the festivals and presentations in which ICH is performed. Participation in the Festival of the Pacific Arts will be a huge opportunity for the FSM to show its pride in its ICH. However, because of the many different islands involved it is often difficult for FSM to support everyone equally. Supporting this and other cultural events should be a starting point for the international community to contribute.

Q7. What role do you expect ICHCAP to play in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in the region in terms of programmes, projects, etc.?

There are several projects currently being proposed that lack organization and funding. Rather than trying to create new projects I feel it is best for ICHCAP to identify on-going projects that show promise, such as revitalization projects focused on sailing canoe and oral history compilations.

Q8. Please include any requests and/or suggestions you have on this matter.

Currently, Dr. Paul Ehrlich is in the process of re-editing a book of Pohnpei's oral history that he wrote with the late Pohnpeian historian Masao Hadley, entitled Spaces in the Reef of Heaven which covers the legends of Nan Madol. Dr. Ehrlich is planning to publish the book as an ebook available on Kindle. However, the book is worthy of being published in print and should be shared with the College of Micronesia campuses and high schools throughout FSM. Such a publication could launch a project to publish oral histories for use in schools throughout FSM including the documentation of the Pululap legends of Yap. Father Fran Hezel has also proposed to produce a documentary of oral histories of FSM, concentrating on the links between the islands. The production of video accounts of oral histories would create multimedia for use in schools that could compete with the onslaught of western television. Dr. Ehrlich is also working to complete a documentary on Masao Hadley with footage shot before his death. I would therefore propose that ICHCAP consider a project to publish written and audio/visual materials on the oral histories of the islands.

Q9. What should be considered to encourage or to ensure active involvement from the community in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage?

For the community to become involved the project needs to be something that absolutely everyone can be involved in. Projects that are successful in Micronesia are those in which the whole village is incorporated. Projects that focus on just a few people often never get off the ground for fear of alienating anyone. It is also important that each and everyone person is made aware of the project before it occurs and all permissions are received. The preparation for any project is long and tedious, but if everything has been set in order than everyone will work to make it happen. For example, even the publication of the oral histories should include consultation with the traditional chiefs to ask permission for such a publication to take place.