



## **Shared, but with Differences:**

### Multinational Intangible Cultural Heritages as Shared Heritages of the Humanity and Their Implications for Cultural Diversity within and Across Borders<sup>1</sup>

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UNESCO's programs on safeguarding heritages are considered to be highly successful, and have made visible and concrete effects. In addition to the fact that world heritages have been better safeguarded at least partly due to the success of the those programs, there have been a number of additional, more indirect effects that have helped the humanity better appreciate the values of heritages as their common assets, and understand each other across cultures. On a more practical note, heritage tourism, for instance, has significantly benefitted from UNESCO's official recognition when heritage sites were nominated as UNESCO World Heritage or other similar titles. UNESCO's heritage-related programs have evolved and diversified over the years, often leading the general public to expand their horizon on human creativity and to be aware of their responsibilities toward their community, environment and future generations.

## **UNESCO and CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Compared to the UNESCO Safeguarding Programs for natural and tangible heritages, its safeguarding programs on ICH's have a relatively shorter history. UNESCO's 1972 adoption of the "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" did not include intangible heritage as one of the primary objects to be

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protected. Only in 1989 UNESCO issued the “Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore,” which opened up a more active discussion on safeguarding intangible heritages. This “Recommendations” was later followed by the establishment of a more systematic and highly publicized program called, “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” The selection of “Masterpieces” was carried out three times: in 2001 (19 elements), in 2003 (28 elements), and in 2005 (43 elements). The “Masterpieces Program” helped enhance the public awareness of the ICH safeguarding and in fact drastically raised the visibility of the ICH’s. On the other hand, listing ICH’s as “Masterpieces” caused concerns over possibly creating hierarchy among cultures.

The “International Convention to Safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage” was passed at UNESCO’s General Assembly in 2003, and took effect in April 2006, three months after the number of state parties that ratified the Convention reached thirty. With the Convention in effect, the previous “List of Masterpieces” was incorporated into the “Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The other List under the Convention is entitled the “List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.” The Convention represents the philosophical foundation of ICH safeguarding and highlights the common denominators among member states of global society with a diverse array of approaches to ICH safeguarding.

## **TANGIBLE and INTANGIBLE HERITAGES**

Compared to tangible heritages, intangible heritages tend to be more fragile and vulnerable to changes that occur from outside influences such as Westernization and globalization. This is because the intangible heritages stop to be alive as soon as they cease to be regularly practiced by the relevant communities for one reason or another. Many ICH’s are orally transmitted and they are also constantly recreated as they are practiced by different individuals or groups of people. Even when the basic forms of an ICH are shared by groups of people, due to the flexibility and recreation processes, there can be many different versions that coexist at any given time. All these variety of versions are considered to be variations rather than one standard version with non-standard variations. When an inventory of ICH’s is officially made, either by the state government or experts, the ever-evolving ICH’s may be fossilized as the version that was recorded at the time of inventory making. If one version is recorded in the inventory, it tends to become the standard of that cultural element, while all the other versions are relegated to marginal status. Sometimes inventorying ICH’s may even result in their de-contextualization, because inventory itself might essentialize the ICH only, while obliterating the socio-cultural contexts out of the way.

## MULTINATIONAL ICH's

Multinational heritages are much more prevalent in the case of ICH's and natural heritages. The national borders do not necessarily overlap with cultural borders. But more importantly, cultures are not homogeneous, nor clearly bounded units. Various practices and views coexist in a society and they are represented in the whole cultural landscape of an area or community, reflecting the political, social, and historical order and characteristics the society has. ICH's can also be shared through diffusion or migration of people. In this case people may differentiate the original form of ICH from the other variations. With so many possibilities of ICH becoming multinational, it is even argued that being multinational is a norm for the ICH's rather than an exception. UNESCO's ICH safeguarding program, which is still based on having the nation/states be the primary agencies in carrying out the nomination process and safeguarding measures, does not accurately reflect this important aspect of ICH's.

As stated above, UNESCO's ICH Program still heavily depends on the nation/states in identifying, nominating, and safeguarding the ICH. To process UNESCO's multinational ICH nomination, the role of nation/states is still critical. Cultural diplomacy by national governments seems to be the most likely means to seek collaboration from the potential partners in pursuing nomination at least in its initial stage. This means that the problems associated with the nation/states being the primary agencies in the case of single nation/state ICH's, may still remain. They include: the domestic politics of heritage and identity, the (lack of) representation of marginal (peripheral) cultures in national identity, self exoticization (patronization) of minority cultures, among others.

## MULTINATIONAL ICH's in UNESCO's 2003 CONVENTION

The following are from the Operational Directives of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on ICH. Only about half a page is devoted to the multinational files for nomination out of 30 pages of the whole text of the Operational Directives. Considering that multinational presence is a norm rather than an exception in the case of ICH, more detailed guidelines are necessary in this regard. The detailed guidelines should accommodate the diverse scenarios of multinational ICH nominations.

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### **1.5 Multi-national files**

**13.** *States Parties are encouraged to jointly submit multi-national nominations to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity when an element is found on the territory of more than one State Party.*

**14.** *One or more States Parties may, with the agreement of each State Party concerned, propose inscription on an extended basis of an element already inscribed. The States Parties concerned submit together a nomination showing that the element, as extended, satisfies all of the criteria set out in paragraph 1 for the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and paragraph 2 for the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Such a request shall be submitted according to the established procedures and deadlines for nominations. In the event that the Committee decides to inscribe the element on the basis of the new nomination file, the new inscription shall replace the original inscription. In the event that the Committee, on the basis of the new nomination file, decides not to inscribe the element, the original inscription shall remain intact.*

**15.** *The Committee encourages the submission of subregional or regional programmes, projects and activities as well as those undertaken jointly by States Parties in geographically discontinuous areas. States Parties may submit these proposals individually or jointly.*

**16.** *States Parties may submit to the Committee requests for international assistance jointly submitted by two or more States Parties.*

*(End of citation)*

*Operational Directives, 2003 UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*

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## COMMON HERITAGES

Perhaps the biggest challenge in dealing with multinational ICH's is how to define and identify "common" heritages. Is "similarity of the form" the only sufficient condition to categorize ICH's that are practiced among communities in disparate localities? Or, should the cultural meanings and significance associated with those ICH's be also very similar? This is a very complicated issue that touches upon the central concept in anthropology, "culture." If we take the similarity of forms as the primary marker of common heritage, it is highly likely that we take cultural elements completely out of context. As Geertz (1973) said in his article on the importance of cultural context and "thick description," a physical blinking of someone's right eye may mean a number of totally different things: a suggestion to conspire against a third person present, expression of sexual interest, or an act to let the other person know that there is a special kind of mutual understanding, among others. If we categorize all different "blinking acts" into one category, we are treating blinking out of the context. We may still learn something about the facial

movements associated with blinking, but this alone is far from being sufficient when we try to understand anything about culture.

Common heritages may have been resulted from cultural diffusion, or more recently, globalization process that includes more frequent and massive flow of people, resources, and information. In this case, people may know who “originally” created, or practiced the cultural element. As it is often the case, when the “origin” is not clear, individuals, communities, and nation/states might claim the cultural ownership of the element, or dispute such claims made by others. Since the cultural ownership of particular heritage can be an important component of the identity and pride of nation/states, the politics of cultural heritage surrounding multinational ICH’s can be as highly volatile as that in national competition among members of society. A case in point is the controversy over Korea’s Dano Festival in Gengneung, which was put on UNESCO’s List of Masterpieces in 2005. Claiming that the Dano Day originated in China, some Chinese people argued that Gangneung Dano Festival should not be listed as Korean ICH, no matter how much localized and locally rooted the contents of the Festival are. Issues surrounding this incident became sensitive and led to heated debates in the East Asian region, with its colonial history and longtime rivalry among the region’s nation/states. This is one of the many possible challenges that any party pursuing multinational ICH nomination should anticipate. However, collaborating on multinational ICH nomination projects can initiate regional dialogues on the region’s common heritage, and a successful nomination may bring further positive consequences as well.

## **CHALLENGES in WORKING with MULTINATIONAL ICH’s**

Promoting multinational ICH’s in the UNESCO context may not necessarily relieve the tension over cultural hegemony among nation/states. It may simply replicate the current tendency of rivalry among nation/states, or the unequal representation by the mainstream and minority cultures within nation/states. Regional politics based on the politico-economic power of nation/states may simply be translated into the politics of cultural heritage.

On a more practical note, any projects involving multinational ICH’s required a close collaboration across political (and perhaps, cultural) borders. Realistically, the collaboration will be made through (or at least initiated by) the diplomatic work of the nation/state governments. When the common ICH is part of the mainstream cultural heritage in one nation/state, while that same ICH belongs to minority groups in another country, carrying out a multinational ICH nomination project can be highly difficult and politically charged. It may even make it impossible to carry out such projects. A hypothetical case can illustrate such tension very clearly. An ICH in nation/state A may be an integral part of the A national identity, while in nation/state B, where recent migrants from A are ethnically and economically marginal, the same ICH can be used as an

expression of subversive political expression in B . In this rather extreme scenario, any projects on multinational ICH would be next to impossible.

As mentioned earlier, ICH's have been present across borders throughout human history due to human migration, diffusion, or independent creation. Cultures, including ICH's, have always been negotiated and contested within and between groups of people. Crossing borders has become even easier with recent surge of globalization. People flow, cultures flow, and resources and information are shared across borders. In this process, cultures (including ICH's) are shared, mixed, and hybridized. Through this, cultural diversity increases within a society, while safeguarding ICH is necessary in order to maintain cultural diversity in the global community. Even with all the potential problems mentioned earlier, recognizing and safeguarding multinational ICH' s can be an effective way to avoid nationalistic competition among nation/states over ICH's. Also it can be a way to mitigate the hegemonic and unilateral cultural policies by the mainstream of the nation/states. Understanding the exact nature of the ICH's, and the current circumstances of the multinational ICH's, and initiating an in-depth dialogue among nation/states on this matter will be the some of the important first steps in moving towards this inevitable path in securing harmonious and sustainable future for the humanity.

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