



Chapter 3

Establishment of Intangible Cultural Heritage
Information Systems and Information Sharing



Mobilizing communities to document their intangible cultural heritage

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The title of this presentation automatically brings to mind an immediate question. Why mobilize communities to document their intangible cultural heritage? What does documentation have to do with safeguarding intangible cultural heritage? Indeed, any discussion



of the use of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage cannot avoid this fundamental question. After all why did René Magritte in his famous painting of a pipe, write that 'this is not a pipe'? Quite simply because it is a picture of a pipe, one cannot light it, one cannot smoke it, one can only, through representation, imagine it. It is very important to understand that the same can be implied for Documentation of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Documentation is not in and of itself a means of safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage does, indeed, include 'documentation' among a long list of almost a dozen measures that might constitute safeguarding. The Convention

makes it clear, however, that such measures can only be considered to be safeguarding measures when they are 'aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage.' In that sense, then, documentation that cannot reasonably be expected to contribute to this goal of ensuring viability is not, for the purposes of the Convention, a safeguarding measure – any more than is research for its own sake, preservation that intends to freeze heritage in some unchanged form, or protection measures that do not reflect the nature of intangible cultural heritage as constantly recreated.

We might consider that 'Documentation' is an act of making the intangible tangible: somehow capturing the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills that communities recognize as part of their intangible cultural heritage and reducing them to a physical artefact – or, in the digital age, into a stream of ones and zeroes stored somewhere in a physical form. In that sense the documentary impulse is as old as writing, and older, and is itself an integral part of many elements of intangible cultural heritage. Consider for example the weavers of Ban Pone in Thailand's Kalasin Province, who weave the beautiful Phrae Wa silk textiles, known as the 'queen of Thai silk'. The villagers of Ban Pone migrated to Thailand from North-Western Viet Nam some two centuries ago, bringing with them their Pu Thai language, their traditional costume differing from their neighbours in Thailand's North-East and their knowledge and skill at the highly ornate Phrae Wa weaving. But they also brought something more: something they have transmitted since from generation to generation as the documentary record of their intangible heritage. Nothing is more precious to a weaver from Ban Pone than the 'pha saew' or pattern cloth that she inherited from her mother, grandmother, or even from her grandmother's grandmother. The 'pha saew' embodies, in physical form, the intangible knowledge that allows children in Ban Pone to learn not only the techniques of Phrae Wa weaving, and not only its patterns and the techniques needed to reproduce them, but the meanings of those patterns: the stories, legends and myths that explain the symbols. These 'pha saew' are literally heirlooms: the most precious legacy that a mother can bequeath to her daughters or granddaughters, the documentary record of what Phrae Wa weaving looks like and how to continue making it.

In the Pacific nation of Vanuatu, geometrical Sand-drawings inscribed in the ground are a means of representing origin stories, value systems, codes of kinship structures or can refer to the wide variety of garden produce that are an important part of the horticultural lifestyle, they may represent voyages undertaken by mythical ancestors and so on. They are a means

of documentation of a repository of traditional knowledge and intangible cultural heritage, and yet they are relatively ephemeral, lasting just as long as the wind blows the sand over the design, or someone comes along and scrubs it out. Nevertheless that process of 'documentation' is an integral part of the transmission of knowledge, even if the document lasts only a few minutes as opposed to a few decades or centuries (Huffman 1996). (Vanuatu Sand drawings were proclaimed a masterpiece of oral and intangible heritage by UNESCO in 2003, and inscribed on the representative list of the Convention in 2008:<http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?RL=00085>).

In the Appalachian and Ozark Mountains of the United States of America, 'ballet books' ('ballad books') created by singers over the last century. Singers in remote mountain villages did not need to wait for a visiting 'song-catcher' or folklorist to know that their ballads were valuable intangible heritage. In old school notebooks or using recycled wrapping paper, they documented their own repertoires by writing down the words and even the musical notes for the traditional ballads they had learned from their ancestors. One such ballad singer, Almeda Riddle of Heber Springs, Arkansas, watched her first ballet book burn to ashes along with her home in 1926, and set about to reconstitute it from memory. Thirty-five years later, when folklorist Roger Abrahams came to visit, she showed him her second ballet book, and together they wrote one of the first comprehensive studies of 'a singer and her songs', in a book of the same title. But Granny Riddle didn't just use her ballet book to record her memories: she used it to teach her neighbours and the younger generations of Heber Springs so that the ballads would remain alive in performance, not only as words on paper, and she carried it with her when she performed all over America in the 1960s and 1970s.

There are many other examples we could consider, if time permitted, where communities have created documents – in tangible form, whether using writing, graphic images or other mnemonic devices – to record traces of their intangible cultural heritage. Few have done so out of an impulse to record only for the sake of recording. Rather, such traditional methods of documentation are always tied up inextricably with transmission and with the continued performance of the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills they embody. They are, that is, always aimed at 'ensuring the viability' of the intangible cultural heritage, and thus safeguarding in the strict sense of the Convention's definition.

Alongside such community-based, community-driven self-documentation efforts, of course, there arose a parallel process of documentation by people

outside the communities: by anthropologists, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, other cultural researchers, local administrators, mandarins and others who looked around and noticed that intangible cultural heritage was everywhere, but everywhere it was also changing, and in many cases diminishing or disappearing. These cultural researchers were quick to adopt whatever was the latest technology of the day. From the time that photography and then sound recording were invented in the nineteenth century, these technologies were taken up by researchers eager to record, in tangible form, the intangible expressions they sought out in remote areas of their own countries or abroad. American anthropologist Jesse Walter Fewkes recorded American Indian songs and stories from the Passamaquoddy and the Zuni on Edison's wax cylinders in 1890, and British anthropologist Alfred Cort Haddon used a wax cylinder recorder in 1898 in the Torres Straits, between Australia and New Guinea. French, German and Russian ethnologists soon followed suit, in their respective hinterlands or colonial possessions. Fewkes was animated by a sense of urgency that seems very familiar even today: 'When one considers the changes which yearly come to the Indians', he wrote, 'and the probability that in a few years many of their customs will be greatly modified or disappear forever, the necessity for immediate preservation of their songs and rituals is imperative.... Now is the time to collect material before all is lost' (Fewkes 1890: 1095, 1098).

Fewkes, Haddon and those that followed were motivated by the impulse to preserve: to record intangible cultural heritage not so it would remain viable, but so it could be studied scientifically even as it disappeared or was being destroyed. This, it should be emphasized, is not safeguarding in the terms laid out by the Convention. That they considered their work as preservation and as salvage does not make us less grateful today to have such records. It would, however, be some decades before a second generation of cultural researchers joined the work of documentation to that of dissemination, using sound recordings as one link in a chain – together with books, radio and even film – not only to preserve the traces of heritage but to encourage its continued transmission and performance. And it would be 90 years after Fewkes before the Library of Congress in the United States took his wax cylinders, converted them to the high-technology of the day (audio cassettes) and repatriated them to the Passamaquoddy and Zuni so they could stimulate continued creativity within their communities of origin. By that time, the Passamaquoddy language was critically endangered and the Zuni language seriously at risk, and the songs and ritual had disappeared or gone underground. By returning

the recordings from a century earlier to their present-day communities, the Library of Congress could stimulate revitalization efforts within those communities and help to ensure the ongoing viability of their intangible heritage.

Recent decades have seen a number of innovative approaches in which documentation is not conceived – as Fewkes did – simply as a means of preserving heritage that would soon disappear, but rather, as the Convention advocates, as a measure to ensure the viability of heritage. In the late 1960s, visual anthropologists Sol Worth and John Adair had the idea to put movie cameras into the hands of Navajo Indians in New Mexico and Arizona, in the South-Western United States. Their motivation was primarily one of research, to try to understand how Navajo themselves would see their lives and portray it to others through film, but they quickly saw that their project was more than simply a scientific experiment. Noting that most ethnographic film-making is done by ‘us’ about ‘them’, Worth and Adair realized that “*We do [so] because it never occurred to us that ‘they’ ought to be doing it, that ‘they’ can do it, and most importantly that when ‘we’ do it we are showing a picture of our world and salvaging a culture not of others but of ourselves*” (Worth and Adair 1972: 254). This new method, contrasting sharply with what preceded, allowed ‘them’ to represent themselves. Worth and Adair continue, “*This medium, taught by the bio-documentary method and used by an artist of another society, drawing on very different myth and musical styles, dramatic structures, and different concepts of event, time, and space, might well serve not only to present one culture to another but also to enrich that store of knowledge about man which our culture traditionally calls art, and which clearly is part of the scientific study of the culture of man*” (ibid, p. 262). By permitting Navajo themselves to document their intangible cultural heritage – their weaving, silversmithing, healing rituals, mythology – Worth and Adair broke the monopoly by which information and communication technologies were tools only for outside researchers, and made them tools for community self-representation.

At virtually the same time as Worth and Adair were putting movie cameras into Navajo hands, a high school English teacher in Rabun Gap, a remote hamlet in the Appalachian mountains in the north-east corner of the U.S. state of Georgia was looking for ways to motivate his students to finish school rather than dropping out. The students decided in 1966 to publish a magazine that they themselves would produce, documenting every aspect of the intangible cultural heritage of their community through sound recordings and photographs. They called the magazine ‘Foxfire’. Armed with cameras and

tape recorders, the high school students went to interview their grandparents and the community elders and to document their handicrafts, foodways, traditional medicine, music and song, storytelling – in short, their intangible heritage. Instead of being ashamed of their local culture as something backward and inferior, the students gained a new respect for their own heritage and, by presenting it to others, it gained a new viability for themselves and their younger siblings. The magazine grew into a book, then a series of books, then a museum and cultural centre – and schools all over the United States adopted the ‘Foxfire’ approach to community self-documentation and intergenerational transmission, ‘using the local community as a resource for learning and providing an audience beyond the classroom for the students’ work’ (<http://www.foxfire.org/teaching.html>).

The approaches of anthropologists such as Worth and Adair, and of community activists such as the high-school teacher in Rabun Gap, have been combined in the last fifteen years into an approach to community-based, participatory self-documentation and self-representation that is known as the ‘photovoice’ approach.¹ The first Photovoice project, by that name, was created in rural Yunnan Province in South-Western China in 1992, by public health expert Caroline Wang and Ford Foundation officer Mary Ann Burris, who were collaborating on a programme addressing the health needs of ethnic minority women in Yunnan (Wang and Burris 1997). Wang and Burris had the idea to put cameras into the hands of the ethnic minority villagers and to ask them to identify, and to depict, their own priorities and challenges. The photographs taken by the village women were complemented by explanatory quotes in their words, and incorporated into a published booklet and exhibition. Although this first project did not concern intangible cultural heritage, cultural workers who learned of the approach quickly saw its potential as a tool for communities to document their own culture and – more importantly – to combine that documentation with dissemination, awareness-raising and other measures to ensure the viability of the heritage.

One cultural institution that has pioneered such community self-documentation is the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology in Hanoi. Under the visionary leadership of its founding director, Nguyen Van Huy, and

1. See also the similar approach of ‘Literacy through Photography’ (<http://cfs.aas.duke.edu/ltp/index.html>), which, like the Foxfire projects, focuses in particular on children; as it explains, ‘Literacy Through Photography encourages children to explore their world as they photograph scenes from their own lives, and then to use their images as catalysts for verbal and written expression’.

continuing today under his successor, the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology committed itself to being a space where communities could tell their stories to a larger public, and through that process, reinforce and sustain their own cultural traditions and intangible heritage. The VME's first 'photovoice' project began in 2002, when anthropology student Duong Bich Hanh, with funding support from the Toyota Foundation, gave small point-and-shoot cameras to the young Hmong girls she had been working with in the tourist centre of Sa Pa, in Viet Nam's north-western mountains. Hanh had previously worked extensively in handicraft revitalization, and she was interested in how contact between Vietnamese and international tourists and young Hmong women would be perceived by those women and how it would influence the Hmong textile traditions. As Hanh explains, 'The girls used the cameras to document the people, activities and interactions in their everyday life. Interviews have been conducted on each photo, where the girls expressed their perceptions and views about the worlds surrounding them.' From July to December 2002, around 120 rolls of film were shot, from which Hanh and the Museum selected some 200 photos for exhibition in 2003 and publication in a book, accompanied by short narratives told by the Hmong girls.

The Museum has continued to use this approach on a number of other projects, and now other museums in Viet Nam are also finding it to be an effective means of mobilizing communities themselves to safeguard their intangible cultural heritage. In one project, for instance, bronze-workers in a craft village outside of Hanoi and Lao weavers in a mountain village in north-west Viet Nam were both asked to document their craft traditions as part of a national planning process to develop a sectoral strategy for handicrafts. After being trained by a Vietnamese photojournalist, the bronze-workers and weavers set about the task of documenting their craft processes and preparing exhibitions. For the bronze-workers, young villagers had a chance to learn about some of the older techniques that were rarely used today, and gained a new respect for the knowledge of their elders (see Nguyen Kim Dung 2007). 'Through the photo-voice approach, craftsmen had the opportunity to learn from each other,' Dung reports, 'Thanks to these discussions young people could learn from the elder generations and improve their knowledge of the traditional crafts and thanks to that it was preserved.'

For the weavers, an exhibition of their photos in their own village turned the entire village into a living museum, where young people could see the familiar and undervalued handicrafts of their daily life turned into subjects of national and international attention. The latter exhibition was so

successful, in fact, that the province later ordered a second set of the photo panels so that the exhibition could be mounted in the province seat, where tourists could have easier access than visiting the village itself. The Vietnam Museum of Ethnology also used the 'photovoice' approach for a fascinating study of Hanoi's old quarter, asking residents of a single street to inventory, in photographs and through interviews, the intangible cultural heritage values of their community (see http://www.vme.org.vn/exhibitions_special_view_panos.asp?ID=57#Panos).

If I may move again from Vietnam to Vanuatu, there is another Museum in the region that has engaged with the process of community documentation with a specific safeguarding strategy in mind. The Vanuatu cultural centre has been training community 'fieldworkers' in the documentation of their intangible cultural heritage for nearly twenty years now. These local fieldworkers regularly collaborate with foreign researchers however more often with the aim of utilizing the research undertaken to revitalize, or maintain, interest in various domains of their communities intangible cultural heritage, so that the documentation process itself, rather than the output of the documentation, becomes part of the safeguarding effort (see Bolton 1999).

Beyond this fieldworkers also use video cameras and tape recorders to record stories, oral narratives, ceremonies and other expressions of intangible heritage. What is interesting in Vanuatu is that much of this documented intangible heritage is, according to customary procedures, only made accessible to those who have the customary rights to access specific kinds of information. The Vanuatu Cultural Centre has made this possible through the establishment of the 'Taboo Room' where various forms of media documentation of Intangible Heritage are kept, with specific indications of which level of access they might have. Certain descendants of certain clans may access them or people having acquired the right ritual 'grades' for accessing that specific type of knowledge or so on. Here this kind of community documentation is done not for the sake of sharing information, but rather with the specific purpose of making the information available to future generations should it be lost, with the hope that they may continue a specific tradition or element of Intangible Heritage.

These several examples have focused on how communities can be mobilized to create documentation, using current information and communications technologies, that record their intangible cultural heritage in tangible form. Through such documentation projects, community members come to see familiar aspects of their own intangible cultural heritage through

a new lens, enhancing the value of those expressions by rendering them both tangible and contemporary. As we have seen, many of these community self-documentation projects concentrate especially on mobilizing young people to utilize ICTs as a means of re-establishing communications with their parents and grandparents. Young people are always fascinated by the latest technology, and these projects succeed by putting digital cameras, audio recorders, video recorders, into their hands. Through the lens of a camera or video recorder, or listening carefully to an interview on headphones, community members experience their own intangible cultural heritage in a new way, and learn to appreciate it anew. Through this active, participatory approach, intangible cultural heritage is sustained and transmitted, given new inspiration and enhanced viability.

Now, does this mean that the documentation that has been collected for decades by outside researchers cannot also be used for safeguarding? By no means. Recall the example of the Passamaquoddy and Zuni sound recordings, repatriated to their originating communities some 90 years after they were recorded. Many archives around the world have similarly made efforts to return documentation to the descendants of the people who first created it, so that it could once again stimulate creativity and expression and contribute to the viability of that heritage, even if it had not been created for that purpose. In closing, one final example of how communities can be mobilized to safeguard heritage through documentation. The Internet offers unparalleled opportunities not only to make digitalized heritage available once again to its communities of origin, but also to allow those communities to respond to the documentary images and sounds, enhancing the documentary record. When the Library of Congress repatriated American Indian recordings to tribes across North America, they asked the receiving communities to provide annotations and additional information to supplement the old documents. In the same way, several innovative wiki-like projects are now underway in which museum collections and archival documents, once digitized and put online, are continually enriched and enhanced through the information voluntarily offered by community members. This newly interactive dialogue with old documents offers one more way in which communities can be mobilized to ensure the viability of their intangible cultural heritage through the use of information and communications technologies.

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