Supporting Identification and Documentation for Information Building

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Abstract

This paper considers some of the challenges around inventory making for intangible cultural heritage from a European perspective. It will outline the work that is currently being undertaken in Scotland to develop an online inventory using a wiki-based approach. Scotland as a devolved nation within the UK has its own cultural policies that embrace the concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH); however, at a UK level, there appears to be resistance to the ratification of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on ICH. Scotland has taken an inclusive and participatory approach to the creation of an inventory that reflects the broad and open definition of ICH that has been adopted. This approach has brought some challenges as we begin to operationalize the identification and future safeguarding of ICH in Scotland. In managing the process, we are beginning to encounter some ethical questions. The digital inventory format of the wiki promotes grassroots community ownership, which means that data is user generated. Our challenges are around how this data should be moderated whilst adhering to the principles of

a community approach, but also ensuring that we do not actively promote ICH that contravenes the basic human rights that the Convention is designed to uphold.

I. Introduction

The United Kingdom is constituted as four home nations—England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland—and since 1999, Scotland has had a devolved parliament. Devolved areas of governance cover all aspects of home affairs, including culture and intangible cultural heritage (ICH). UNESCO is not a devolved area and matters relating to UNESCO Conventions are dealt with at a UK-government level. The UK has not signed up to the 2003 UNESCO Convention, and although Scotland is working in the spirit of the Convention, this is a reserved matter; therefore, Scotland cannot ratify it.

In their recent article, 'The Envy of the World', Smith and Waterton (2009) suggest that the UK has not ratified the 2003 Convention because the 'accepted heritage discourse' in England has rejected the intangible because 'it simply cannot be managed'. They theorise that the accepted heritage discourse has started to stagnate around a view of identifying national importance, establishing objective and immutable value of aesthetics and authenticity. Heritage from a UK government perspective is seen as in the past and an end product in itself a view that is in tension with ICH, which is focuses the more on the living culture that develops through participation.

Scotland has embraced the framework of the 2003 Convention as it has relevance to the way communities relate to their culture here in Scotland. We are now beginning to operationalise the processes of implementing the inventory element of the Convention using an online wiki that relies on user-generated content and the willingness of communities to participate in identifying their ICH. In implementing the inventory making, we are identifying challenges in how far to moderate the content and how to present the information in a way that identifies the breadth of ICH but does not celebrate practices that may contravene basic human rights.

II. Institutional Context

Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS) is the representative body for over 350 museums and galleries in Scotland. Almost every community in Scotland either hosts a museum or has access to one, from the most remote island communities to Glasgow, the largest metropolitan museum service in the UK. Scotland has the highest number of museums per capita anywhere in the UK. Many of the museums in MGS's membership are small independent trusts embedded in the local community. Over 50 percent of the sector's workforce is made up of volunteers: in short, people are passionate about their heritage. All of this aggregates up to a sector that generates £800 million per annum in economic return and attracts over £25million visitors a year.

This grassroots infrastructure means that museums play an important role within local communities operating as cultural hubs and providing additional physical capital such as cafés and meeting places. For example, the Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Arts Centre in Lochmaddy on the Isle of North Uist, is also the post office, and the heritage centre on the Isle of Lismore also houses the library and community centre.

III. Scotland's Approach to ICH and Inventory Making—the Research Project

MGS is the development organisation for all the museums and galleries in Scotland, and from around 2006, it started to receive requests from the sector for support on how to develop and build their links with their local ICH. As a response to this interest, MGS commissioned a study to scope and map ICH in Scotland and explore measures to safeguard this ICH. The brief for the work used the 2003 Convention as the framework drawing on the domain definitions set out in Article 2.2. The work was funded through a partnership of MGS, the then Scottish Arts Council, and the Scotland Committee of the UK National Commission for UNESCO, with advice from the Scottish government Gaelic Unit.

Edinburgh Napier University was successful in winning the contract and was commissioned in January 2008 with their findings published in 'Intangible Cultural Heritage in Scotland—The Way Forward' (2008). This piece of research explored a definition of ICH that would be applicable to all people living in Scotland regardless of their place of origin and regardless of the length of time they had lived in Scotland. It would be an inventory of ICH *in* Scotland not the inventory of *Scottish* ICH, and as such it was aimed at promoting diversity and enhancing cultural knowledge and understanding. It would be about the living practices of ICH in Scotland.

The research proposed that an inventory would be a first step in scoping ICH in Scotland and that this could be done using an online database using a wiki format. The full report suggested that the wiki should be password protected and that authorised and trained users would enter the data. It was anticipated that this process would start with people working in local authorities throughout Scotland and that there would be a snowball effect and more people would become involved over time.

Following this report, Edinburgh Napier University in partnership with MGS was successful in securing UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funding for a three-year research project to create an online inventory using a wiki approach.

The wiki specification used off-the-shelf software called MediaWiki, and this basic software was customised as the project progressed. It was envisaged that the local Scottish authorities would input the data into the inventory as registered users. However, the onset of the economic downturn meant that the local authorities did not have the capacity to do this, and an alternative approach was quickly developed, instead relying on the general public providing user-generated content. To assist in this process, a video tutorial on how to input data was uploaded onto the wiki. The wiki homepage was also adapted to be accessed in three languages: English, Scots, and Gaelic.

A major challenge for the project is to raise the profile of the wiki and engage people to create wiki records of their ICH. This stage is proving challenging as those participating in living practices are not necessarily those who are online. The three-year research project placed particular emphasis on raising the profile of ICH, and the wiki was the chief focus in this promotion. Promotion was done using social media, such as blogs, a presence on Facebook and Twitter, and with the publication of a quarterly newsletter. The Edinburgh Napier University team also carried

out community outreach, engaging with community groups to create inventory records. A series of short films showcasing ICH examples were produced, and they are now available on YouTube.

IV. ICH and Museums in Scotland

As a large percentage of museums in Scotland are rooted in their respective communities, they are a natural portal for much ICH activity. They are often a reflection of local culture, language, and tradition. They can provide opportunities for ICH practitioners to reach new audiences and for people to experience and interact with ICH practices. A recent example of this is around the Gaelic language, which is now mainly spoken in the Western Isles and parts of the Highlands. When the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (IMAG) reopened in 2007 after refurbishment, they made a number of changes to ensure that Gaelic was present and usable throughout the museum. They wanted a venue 'that gives an introduction to Gaelic, encourages the use of the language, and celebrates the richness of Scottish Cultural identity.' All interpretation and signage are bilingual throughout the museum with Gaelic holding equal status throughout and enabling non-Gaelic speakers to make a comparison between the two languages.

Another example of where a museum has been the catalyst for the reinvigoration of an ICH practice on a national scale is the Scottish Fisheries Museum. The museum worked with students and its own historic boatyard to produce a kit for building a rowing skiff based on a historic design—a project funded through MGS. In 2010, the museum established a coastal rowing club that uses one of the boats built in the boatyard to race. The idea behind the Scottish coastal rowing project is that communities come together to form a rowing club and build a boat using the kit developed by the museum. Once the boat is completed, it is ready to take to the water. In the first year alone, ten boats were launched, and twenty-two boats are now on the water, with at least a further sixteen in production across the country. Communities are now racing these boats and the project has reinvigorated the tradition of inter-community regattas in Scottish coastal communities.

Another MGS-funded project embedding the intangible was carried out by the Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Arts Centre on the Isle of North Uist in the Outer Hebrides. Here, a contemporary artist Deidre Nelson spent a four-month artist's residency, responding to the collections of artefacts, photographs, and oral recordings. Deidre researched the symbols used in fishermen's jerseys, particularly the Eriskay jumpers, where each fishing village has its own pattern. She then wove into her work, Gaelic proverbs such as 'he's nothing but a half hemmed blanket' and 'there's no salmon without peer equal'. This new art work inspired by living traditions has helped to reinvigorate community enthusiasm for knitting, and there are now regular groups meeting to knit together.

The Scottish Traditional Boat Festival, which is held in Portsoy on the boundary between Moray and Aberdeenshire, has been taking place annually for sixteen years. The festival opened a new museum base in 2008 at the Portsoy Salmon Bothy, where visitors can learn about the maritime and cultural heritage of the North East. This includes sailing, fishing, crafts, language, music, dancing, food, and drink. Having a museum venue has enabled the organisation to make links with other ICH practitioners from related ICH practices outside the existing annual event calendar.

V. Future Development and Challenges for the Inventory

The wiki-based inventory making in Scotland champions taking a bottom-up community-based approach. Inspiring people to create inventory records and to describe their ICH practice in their own words and explain why it is important. Before handing over the wiki to MGS, Edinburgh Napier University was overseeing the site to ensure appropriate material was being uploaded. They were not, however, verifying each entry. In taking over the administration of the online wiki, MGS has to consider how it will take the project forward, developing the site to be more user friendly and raising the profile of ICH so that more inventory records are created. In promoting the site, MGS will have to consider what level of intervention will be appropriate on the user-generated content. At present, intervention is low, and the material on the site is treated very much like the information that is collated on

Wikipedia. However unlike Wikipedia, which is a platform for information, the inventory is in effect a platform for promoting ICH in Scotland.

MGS is now challenged in ensuring that what is promoted on the wiki does not contravene basic human rights, which underpin all of UNESCO's conventions, or break the law of the land in Scotland. MGS will have to provide some level of moderation to ensure, for example lyrics from sectarian football songs, are not posted up as examples of Scotland's ICH to be promoted. This type of ICH would arguably contravene Scotland's laws on racial equality. In its current form, the wiki faces the dilemma of effectively censoring information on less desirable ICH. Where then do we collate this as information without effectively promoting these as ICH practices to be safeguarded?

MGS is developing a partnership with Wikimedia UK which is part of the Wikipedia family. They have flagged that they hold much information that has been collated at community level on ICH practices in Scotland; they also have entries in many of the languages to be found in Scotland. The partnership we are developing will recruit a co-ordinator who will work on transferring some of this ICH material into the wiki. The partnership may help us to take a closer look at some of the ethical issues of making information available responsibly, something that Wikipedia is also considering. What is becoming clear is that although linked, a distinction between the inventory and information gathering stage and the safeguarding of ICH practices will need to be made. The ICH inventory has now been handed over to MGS, and the thinking on how we can develop it to be more user-friendly has begun. MGS is developing a major programme to engage people with the inventory and to raise the profile of ICH nationally. In 2012, MGS, working in partnership with Historic Scotland and Creative Scotland (they built heritage and arts agencies for Scotland), is to deliver a project of artists in residence using ICH as its central theme. As 2012 is a themed year of Creativity and Culture, MGS is planning a programme of events that will focus on using museums as venues for living practices such as traditional music, storytelling, crafts, and festivals. Also planned to launch is an online search to ask people to vote for the ICH practices in Scotland that they would nominate to the UNESCO ICH lists. In doing so, it will raise awareness of the 2003 Convention and its relevance in the UK.

VI. Conclusion

The UK has not signed up to the 2003 UNESCO Convention. This is perhaps symptomatic of a particularly European view of heritage as something fixed and in the past, which is in contrast with the ICH Convention, which promotes the notion of heritage as being living and dynamic.

In the UK, we have many organisations devoted to preserving a particular aspect of heritage, often fixing it to a particular point in time. However, these organisations all employ a great range of knowledge and skills in preserving the heritage. This knowledge and skill is often drawn from a context of ICH, for example thatching or dry-stone diking or the knowledge of building techniques passed down through generations. So perhaps these two views of heritage are not so polarised as they would first appear.

Re-theorisation of heritage as a cultural practice rather than simply as site, place, or intangible performance or event is being developed through the broader heritage literature. This perspective of heritage that embraces the intangible is certainly alive and well in Scotland. It is embedded at the community level and is being supported through Scotland's network of over 350 museums. Heritage cannot be defined by its materiality or non-materiality but rather by what is done with it. It is people who ascribe value to heritage and participation in living practices is a way of valuing that heritage.

By developing an inclusive and broad definition of ICH in Scotland and through the online wiki we provide snap shots of living practice in Scotland. Heritage can be seen as in the past and an end product, whereas ICH is about the living and the actual process. It could be argued that all heritage is intangible as it is only form until people ascribe value to it. By taking this project forward we hope to be able to demonstrate that the UK has as much ICH as anywhere in the world and to work towards a shift in the perception of heritage that will enable a UK ratification of the 2003 Convention.