

Towards Safeguarding Creole Intangible Cultural Heritage: The 2003 UNESCO Convention

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Abstract

In 2003 at the UNESCO general conference voted in favour of the Convention on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. With the onslaught of globalization, ubiquitous and often commercialized branded identities can supplant the local. The UNESCO convention highlights the fragility of indigenous living cultural traditions and their importance for preserving diversity under such pressures. Intangible cultural heritage is a repository of a community's creativity. It is a source of inspiration for new cultural expressions.

This talk explores the intellectual work which the Convention brings to us as cultural historians, curators and researchers. It argues that we must address our unconscious bias in the selection of what we preserve, and must record all contextualising variables to assess their relevance. It reviews current research and its relevance to the AHRC networking project of safeguarding Creole ICH, and proposes a programme of research and publications, in addition to the continuation of the performance of the tradition that underpins ICH inscriptions as an agenda of any research network.

Finally it highlights examples of digital classification, public participation, and creative re-presentation which document the ICH tradition and also seek to understand the factors that have sustained it and will influence its future as a living tradition.

Key words Creole Kreole, folk, Dominica, oral storytelling, dance, cultural policy-making

Introduction

Fifteen years ago on the 17th October 2003 at the UNESCO general conference 120 member states voted in favour of the Convention on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, many other states have subsequently joined, the number now reaching 177. No one voted against.

Such support is a positive endorsement of the need to help the survival of significant cultural activities and artifacts. Not only in the big institutional arts and cultural organisations where valuable cultural artifacts are preserved, but also the local cultural traditions which bind and have bound communities and societies forging their identities. With the onslaught of globalization, ubiquitous and often commercialized branded identities can supplant the local. The UNESCO convention highlights the fragility of

indigenous living cultural traditions and their importance for preserving diversity under such pressures.

There is no doubt that these things are important and an imposing Latinate phrase such as 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' has a transcultural applicability and status which the more nebulous terms - folklore, traditional culture, community arts - don't have. The issue is in understanding and interpreting its remit. A more convenient definition appears difficult (Kurin 2004). Defining the term the Convention states it:

includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts. (UNESCO)

These may be storytelling practices, puppetry, pilgrimage, culinary traditions or a community's cosmology.

Fundamentally however it is the culture of daily life, often of family or community life. It is expressive, often playful, sometimes irreverent, it marks transitions in stages of life and reaffirms a community's ontological view.

I have been looking recently at the very tangible heritage of Bedfordshire as a prelude to some work on the writers, journalists, storytellers who lived, passed through and wrote about the county. Thomas Batchelor recorded Bedfordshire dialect within lists of words and their meanings, but lacking standardised phonetic notation, the result is difficult to decipher in its entirety (Batchelor 1804). Thomas was personally motivated by his sense that an old rural way of life was being lost and individually took the initiative. Later 19th century groups of collectors of folk dance and music who tramped across the country describing regional dances recorded what they thought worthwhile, different and compatible with their sense of country or folk dance, and judging by the lacuna that is Bedfordshire, these nineteenth century cultural preservers found little different or relevant for them here.

But I am not the only one to point to the values and biases in the methods of the 19th century researchers who recorded or chose not to record folk practices. It is something we all have to address in our research of the intangible practice or, for me when capturing the ephemeral experience of historical storytelling, reading or reciting aloud. Not only must we address our unconscious bias in the selection of what we preserve, but we must record all contextualising variables to assess their relevance: *ostensible purpose or function, location, time of day and season, whether alone or in company*, whether that company is *participative or receptive* - and the not insignificant intellectual challenge to find suitable categories of *type of performance or activity, person's status/role, category of community and engagement*. Professor Trisha Winter's work *Performing Englishness* based on her ethnographic fieldwork, interviews and analysis of dance and music examines the recent growth in popularity and profile of the English folk arts in the first decade of this millennium (Winter and Keegan-Phipps 2013). Interestingly for us she adds to this list and problematizes the concepts of *preservation* and *revival*, and the *indigenous* and the *local* in an age of social movement and migration.

A glance at the UKRI funding database shows how hard it can be to gain funding and recognition for research into folk arts. But the Convention spotlights the need for such research and raises the urgency to safeguard such traditions. In this context Dr Violet Cuffy's networking grant is all the more important. Building a community of research in Creole culture, sharing the knowledge gained from case studies by others in the field and uniting a body of experience across national boundaries is why we are here to day.

Professor Charlotte Waelde is researching how the protective legal frameworks for heritage cover or more often pose problems for the extension into intangible culture (Whatley et al. 2015). This is a minefield for the legal profession. From my own practical knowledge of copyright in publishing, I can see how the western conceptualisation of texts and creative expressions as property could cause a problem if extended to intangible cultural traditions. Ownership and creative input is unclear. The definition of 'public domain' however also seems inadequate. So protecting intangible heritage from exploitation by commercial forces from within or outside their country is an very real threat and has been the subject of concern for national and international law. But I will leave deeper insights to Charlotte.

The first essay into this area of cultural protection by UNESCO came in 1972 with the *Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage* which lead to the establishment of the World Heritage List. This promoted the preservation and conservation of important monuments and landscapes. In the UK we are familiar with the designations of the Dorset coast preserving the fossil-rich limestone strata of the Jurassic where it comes to the earth's surface, Kew Gardens with its plant-collecting heritage and unique botanical collection, and the Neolithic monument of Stonehenge, though it might be hard to name all 31. In Dominica the Morne Trois Pitons National Park was designated in 1997 to protect its geomorphic natural features, endemic and uniquely-rich biodiversity among the Antilles.

After Koichiro Matsuura became Director-General in 2001, UNESCO started the *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage* programme. It is no coincidence that Japan had in 1950 passed its *Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties* which distinguished between *tangible*, *intangible* and *folk* cultural properties: examples of tangible are the monuments and landscapes, and intangible properties include performing arts and craft skills, and thirdly folk cultural properties are those that relate to the rituals of everyday life. Half a century later the UNESCO *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage* programme listed its first masterpieces. These included Chinese Kun Qu opera; the language, dance and music of the Garifuna across central America; the oral heritage of Gelede in West Africa; the Bolivian carnival of Oruro, the Gbofe horn music accompanied by song and dance of Tagbana community in the Ivory Coast, amongst others. Many are in the southern hemisphere where cultures with strong intangible traditions are more common. It was hoped that such designations would instigate action and mobilize resources to protect these living traditions and offset the deeply western construct of the World Heritage list which emphasized material cultures. Yet like the World Heritage list, the Masterpieces programme offered international recognition by naming and conceptually describing the tradition or location and its cultural significance. This, you will be aware, is not a simple task.

While I remain resolutely optimistic about the benefits of the Convention which followed. I cannot deny that the challenges in adopting the Convention are great. Perhaps the first is in working through what is intangible cultural heritage: the words I

have used hitherto – folk, traditional, community occasions or events – offer wide scope for interpretation even within one’s own homeland let alone transferring it to national and cultural contexts that are unfamiliar. The definition in the articles of the Convention is:

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. (UNESCO 2003)

Further precision is given by the continuity and longevity of these practices and their responsiveness to external factors and their purpose:

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 (UNESCO 2003)

This promotion of a sense of social identity – which is often the product of distinction from an ‘other’ through systemic hegemony, colonialism, tribal or nationalistic forces – is qualified by mutual respect:

... thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO 2003)

And there are exclusions:

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. (UNESCO 2003)

Many communities formed their identity in contradistinction to an oppressor through struggle against colonial rule or through victory over another and these stories are embedded in their songs of glory, resistance and martyrdom. As last week on 5th November we in Britain enjoyed fireworks nominally celebrating the failure of plot to overthrow the British parliament and the execution or martyrdom of the British Catholic conspirators.

Britain has been slow to ratify the Convention, in answer to a Parliamentary question in April 2017, Lord Ashton replied that it was ‘necessary to carefully prioritise resources towards those Conventions that will have the most impact on the safeguarding of our heritage’ indicating they have not got round to it yet and had just ratified the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property. But also stated ‘the Government fully recognises the contribution that the UK’s oral traditions, social practices and festive events make to the country’s cultural fabric, and continues to encourage communities to celebrate these practices and to continue them for future generations’ (Ashton of Hyde 2017). In Scotland there has been more action, in 2007 Museum Galleries Scotland commissioned Napier University to scope Intangible Cultural

Heritage in the country and one outcome is a site 'From first footing to Faeries: An inventory of Scotland's living Culture' (Scotland 2011). The Convention puts the task of compiling comprehensive inventories on the country's government. It may be for this reason that Australia and Canada have not ratified it: it does run counter to the holistic nature of culture as it pigeonholes each ICH. Many countries have now issued an open such as in Ireland, Malta and Estonia. Nevertheless I am interested to see how Scotland has approached this in a simple first step, through a participatory wiki to which the community can sign up to and add photos and events. The public can explore it through a direct search and a map. A similar approach has been taken in Finland and Singapore (Singapore 2016). In Sint Maarten it is an online form (Sint Maarten and UNESCO 2016). The Scottish project has categories in tiles which deserve some consideration as they differ from 5 domains listed by UNESCO (the oral tradition; performing arts; social practices, celebrations and rituals; knowledge and practices regarding nature and the universe; crafts). The Finnish site has different categories (Finland 2016). The French collated pre-existing ethnographic inventories and added the required national inventory. They have a different model for participation based on the principles 'urn to the public, internet diffusion, action research' which they say means:

research that aims to return to their "owners" the collected data after they have been studied and organized by the researcher. (Bortolotto 2012)

Their seven categories are: traditional physical practices (e.g. falconry, French horse riding), festive practices, music and dances, games, expressions and oral traditions, ritual practices, craft knowledge. The *Mission Ethnographie*, French Ministry of Culture department for ethnographic research, was responsible for its development (Bortolotto 2012). This brings me to another point: the range of organisations appointed or adopting this role is wide. In Austria the National Commission for UNESCO host the inventory, in Finland a separate government advisory committee has been set up, in Estonia the Folk Culture centre administers the site, in Sri Lanka it is the national library (Austria 2018; Estonia 2018; SriLanka 2017). However by using digital participatory technologies, the dubious method of inventory (and its embedded colonial values and atomistic approach) is transformed into something much more acceptable.

On the UNESCO site the elements inscribed are displayed as a list and on a map. Being able to explore in this way is one of the advances of digital humanities since the advent of the World Heritage List. The list shows the number each year from an accumulation of 80 in 2008 to a more regular 42 in 2016 and 2017. Those who were turned down were often done so for lack of evidence of consultation with the community enacting the tradition (Bortolotto 2012). The map, in tints of green, shows the predominance of ICH elements in the southern hemisphere. Roll over the country and the number of elements is shown but the map leaves blank the countries which have not yet ratified the Convention.

The architects of the Convention undoubtedly saw ICH nominations arising from a community definition of a meaningful tradition. Yet in an age of regional diaspora and when our neighbourhoods have been reconfigured in what Benedict Anderson calls imagined communities, intangible cultures have proliferated. Many have been developed and sustained though social media such as gaming and cosplay, story retelling through fansites and instagram, online rap or pop jams, and karaoke. Look hard at some of these and you find they have grown from earlier forms of play, the marking of life events, and rituals of family and community bondmaking. These are ruled out of the Convention. Similarly ruled out of the Convention but not the definition of ICH is 'going

to the match' a very British pastime of football and underpinning culture of Saturday matches for all age groups, or state rituals such as the British Trouping of the Colour or the Coronation. You may argue that British football is not endangered. But this raises another problem: the ICH convention is about safeguarding rather than preserving. If a tradition is endangered then there may be reasons why it is not sustainable – perhaps it is no longer meaningful, or its cultural context is lost - and preserving it may simply hasten its demise as a living tradition and ossify it. But sustainability is unpredictable and so an assessment has to be made by researchers.

I cite these examples to demonstrate the intellectual work which the Convention brings to us as cultural historians, curators and researchers. Through their work Museum Galleries Scotland became 'the first UK organisation to become accredited as an expert NGO advisor to UNESCO' on the Convention (Scotland 2018). Such expertise is needed to assess the validity of claims for safeguarding Turkish whistling language and not open the list to *all* languages. Such work requires deeper understanding and further precision in the interpretation and application of the Convention.

Safeguarding craft skills is a useful adjunct. For example in 2014 Gwoka was added. Gwoka is singing in Guadeloupean Creole to rhythms played on the Ka drums and dancing. The nomination included safeguarding the skills of dancing and drum-making which is learned through families and through formal workshops in traditional dance and music. 'It strengthens identity and provides a feeling of communal development and individual pride, conveying values of conviviality, resistance and dignity,' says the webpage (UNESCO 2017a). Similarly last year Uilleann piping from Ireland was inscribed on the list. Uilleann 'is a musical practice which uses a particular type of bagpipe ... it offers an important way of socializing and plays an integral role in life events such as marriages and funerals, where it provides a sense of rootedness and a connection to the past...' even in a diasporic community. Master-to-student instruction and 'modern methods such as video and DVD tutorials and the internet' keep the tradition living. 'Through a programme of research, publications, tuition and training, the Na Píobairí Uilleann group of pipers [NPU] has contributed to a huge increase in the use and appreciation of the instrument and its music, resulting in a flowering of the art in modern times, with more players than in any previous period' (UNESCO 2017b).

Such programme of research and publications, in addition to the continuation of the performance of the tradition underpins this inscription and I suggest should be on the agenda of any research network.

Yesterday we discussed the tension between museum preservation of the tangible objects associated with intangible performance and living heritage. Dr Carr's research in evaluating dance archives and, perhaps more significantly for this project, in somatics and examining the interface between tangible and intangible cultural heritage will be of vital importance. Curators and museum directors offer place of portage for cultural artefacts and practices in the stormy seas of globalisation and displacement but despite their critical friendship and goodwill these traditions must be living and breathing – and relevant as Dr Carr's work shows.

Yesterday's panels made me think of memory too. Memory as we know, does not record the past, it re-forms what is meaningful in it to help us in the present and to prepare us for the future. It is not a means to preserve, it empowers us to adapt. The cultural

memories within the ICH have a similar role in our societies. Research shows that some of them derive from a moment where adaptation or social agility has been necessary for a community. The Creole speaking Palenque de San Basilio community in Columbia vividly describes itself to tourists as the only free town in America, 'free from Slavery, free from Spanish rule'. The Bolivian carnival of Oruro celebrates indigenous Andean dances and traditions and up until independence in 1825, resistance to Spanish rule. For them the current threats are emigration, a growing generation gap - and uncontrolled financial exploitation of the carnival. Of course ICH also emphasises continuity with the past, and it is hoped a UNESCO inscription gives rise to pride in an indigenous heritage which may have been devalued. But it is also true that the less pleasant side of this can be contested ownership, external and internal exploitation of creative rights.

If our memories help us to be adaptable, so too without our memories we are untethered and mentally bewildered. In cultural terms the link with the past must be liberating and relevant to the next generation. As Mikhail Bahktin tells us, in carnival the status quo and the familiar is defamiliarised and for that period of time what is normally accepted can be examined, questioned, and challenged. This becomes a time when political and social change can take place.

Today we live in a remix culture and take from our heritage what is meaningful to reuse. Looking at it this way, intangible cultural heritage is a repository of a community's creativity. It is a source of inspiration for new cultural expressions. Dr Ukaegbu's paper yesterday on reclaiming of the oral history black British voices preserved on audio tape in the archive for his stage performance, was an enjoyable an example of this.

So to conclude these key notes for Dr Cuffy: it is an exciting task to gather this AHRC network and focus its work. Its relevance and urgency is undeniable. Your work in Dominica and the work by others here Dr Daniella Police-Michel in Mauritius on the Segga, Gregory Rabess on the Kalinago heritage and Dr. Penda Choppy in the Seyshelles is most important, and rarely do French and English Creole researchers come together.

I have picked out some examples of digital classification, public participation, and creative re-presentation which I found illuminating and which are I think within the reach of a new network. Your agenda should, I suggest, include a programme of research and publications which not only document the tradition, but seek to understand the factors that have sustained it and will influence its future as a living tradition.

A great deal of thought has gone into the UNESCO Convention and the concepts and language are a scaffold on which you can build the impact of your research in a global community of scholarship and policy making. The three obligations that the Convention puts on a nation are: a national inventory of ICHs; the recognition that the community members who practice the traditions should have major responsibility for their safeguarding; and thirdly that one national body has the role of developing action plans to safeguard its intangible heritage – to integrate them within plans for growth, education and development, national and international legal protection, and the research agenda. In 2015 Finland for example published such a plan.(Finland 2017)

Researchers provide the vital evidence upon which policy makers can take decisions. I look forward to learning more about the different interests and projects which will come together through this network.

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Please contact the author if you wish to quote from this talk.

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