

# The Ethnology Department of the French Ministry of Culture and the inventories of Intangible Cultural Heritage in France

The French State ratified the UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) on June 2006. Since then, the Ethnology Department of the French Ministry of Culture (or « Mission ethnologie » in French) has been in charge of its implementation. The methods of the inventory of tangible heritage (called in France “Inventaire Général” or General Inventory) have been studied in 2005 by a French anthropologist, Nathalie Heinich, with a very critical point of view. In fact, this research can be a quite good guideline for our project of inventorying de french intangible cultural heritage. The present text aims at examining the common points and differences between the work of the Ethnology Department and the ICH Convention; the actions and reflections led by the implementation of the Convention; and finally, the issues of this inventory.

The issue of inventories, as it has often been underlined during this seminar, is an important element in the implementation of the ICH Convention, though not an essential one. This Convention is above all action-oriented, and inventories are just a first step for the safeguarding of practices. This being said, inventories have a very interesting cultural aspect, as they are most of the time revealing of the habits of studying and describing heritage proper to each country. The examples tackled during this seminar bear testimony of this situation. In fact, one can almost say: ‘tell me who you are, and I’ll tell you what is your relation to heritage matters’. These remarks are aiming at putting into perspective the following remarks on the implementation of the Convention in France.

## *I. The « Mission ethnologie » and the ICH Convention*

### **A. The institution, its history and the ethnological heritage**

The « Mission ethnologie » is a sub-department of a wider department of the Ministry of Culture, dedicated to architectural and heritage issues, called the « Direction de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine » (DAPA). The mission of the DAPA is to inventory, study, protect, preserve and spread the knowledge on the architectural, urban, ethnological heritage of France. The « Mission ethnologie » has the role of studying and promoting the study of material and immaterial aspects of heritage, on an ethnological point of view.

The story of the French State departments is quite complex, and the texts, reports, that gave birth to them are often dated very rapidly, almost at the very moment they are issued. It could have been the same for the report that gave birth to the « Mission ethnologie »<sup>1</sup>. This report was produced in 1979. It is now more than 25 years old, but nevertheless, it is really interesting to start from its content, first because it settled domains of research that are still relevant, and second, because it gives an explanation to the reason why the “Mission ethnologie” appeared as the department that was the most suited for the implementation of the ICH Convention. The « Mission ethnologie » was created in 1980 and was, from its very beginning, a department dedicated to the study of ethnological heritage. It was created in a special context. The 1980s were marked in France by the feeling that its society was confronted with the final disappearing of many traditional practices. The role of the State was, therefore, to find the means of creating a policy that would articulate the notion of ethnology and the notion of heritage. The Minister of Culture of the time,

Jean-Philippe Lecat, commissioned researchers to think about this state of things, and to draw their conclusions, which they did in this report.

The first chapter of the report is called “Ethnology as a Need”<sup>ii</sup> and details precise examples of practices, traditions, that had completely disappeared at the time. Among the examples, one can read the weaving trades and skills in the region of Lyon, or the semi-nomadic society of fishermen of the Languedoc-Roussillon region. In this report, ethnological heritage is seen as “the emanation of the will of human societies to be the actors of their future”<sup>iii</sup>. Ethnology is considered here as the pivot of the relations between the recognition of the social identity of communities, and their heritage, whatever form it may take. Heritage is therefore linked not only to aesthetic issues, as could have been the case in other sectors of the DAPA that were much older than the “Mission ethnologie”, but is seen as part of a whole process of socialization and self-recognition of the value of communities.

The beginning of the second chapter of the report is dedicated to the definition of ethnological heritage:

“The ethnological heritage of a country includes the specific modes of material existence and social organization of the groups that compose it, their knowledges, their representation of the world, and, generally speaking, of the elements that form the basis of each social group and makes it different from the other ones.

Therefore, will be included:

- Agents: individuals, social groups, institutions;
- Material and immaterial goods;
- Organized knowledges: technical, symbolical (magic, religious, based on games), social (etiquette, group traditions), aesthetic...
- Means of communication: languages, idioms, systems of signs”<sup>iv</sup>

Someone quite familiar with the UNESCO ICH Convention will immediately see that this definition is quite near to the one given to ICH by the UNESCO.

So, to a large extent, when time came to identify a department that would work on the implementation of the Convention, it appeared quite obvious that it would be the “Mission ethnologie”, since it was used to be working on the very same topics as the ones detailed in the Convention. Indeed, it had also established methods of working that made it quite ready to work on ICH. Though the role of the “Mission” was re-defined quite regularly, it nevertheless kept some tasks, that remained constant for 25 years. These tasks were, and still are, guided by two principles: on the one hand, the idea that the ethnological knowledge should be identified and known as widely as possible, and on the other hand, the idea that the ethnological landscape and phenomena had to be studied by specialists.

## **B. Previous examples of inventories in the “Mission ethnologie”**

The idea that the ethnological knowledge should be identified and widely known, led to the creation of a repertory of ethnology, that was published in 1985<sup>v</sup>. This repertory was never really renewed, but in 2000, a new inventory was launched by the “Mission”. Its aim is to give to the public a selection of sources and institutions that tackle ethnological issues in France. This repertory, called “PortEthno” (for “Portail de l’Ethnologie”), is available on the web<sup>vi</sup>. So, even though the idea of inventorying was slowly becoming a field that was less and less investigated by researchers in ethnology, the “Mission” still kept on working on an inventory, on a national level. The creation of

“PortEthno” engendered among the members of the “Mission” reflections, thoughts, that made it quite different from the inventories that had been produced in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, it appeared quite rapidly that the heterogeneity of the French nation, and of ethnological phenomena, could not be submitted to a single grid, and that the fields had to be as free as possible. Also, the idea emerged that the chosen associations and institutions should be the main authors of their texts, the “Mission ethnologie” playing only a back-up role<sup>vii</sup>.

The area delimited by the report also enabled the « Mission ethnologie » to launch researches on oral traditions and expressions, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship. The detail of all the programmes of researches, launched from the beginning of the “Mission”, can be found on the website of the “Mission ethnologie”<sup>viii</sup>. These programmes played an important part in the emergence of a French anthropological research field. They nevertheless had an orientation that was different from the one given to the inventory work. The idea behind all the research programmes was (and still is) that the communities themselves can’t give an appropriate analysis of what they are and think, and that the need of specialists is absolutely necessary. This idea, common to the anthropological field, since it emerged as a human science, is also clearly stated in the founding report of the “Mission”: “The mess of disordered collects and the pseudo-scientific illusion of a spontaneous ethnology that individuals and groups could practice on themselves, are two major obstacles that must be avoided”<sup>ix</sup>

It appears quite obvious that the “Mission ethnologie” and the UNESCO ICH Convention bear some elements of convergence, in its fields of research and/or investigation, as well as some methods of investigation, but it must be underlined that the “Mission” had from its beginning a dual aspect, one dedicated to researches led by specialists, coming for most of them from the academic fields, and another, that was raised out of the inventorying work, and that tended more or less to give some means of expression to the actors themselves.

## ***2. The Ethnology Department and the implementation of the ICH Convention: actions and reflections***

The first thing the UNESCO Convention requires the States Parties to do, is an inventory of their ICH practices. The Convention leaves the States Parties quite free to draw the inventories they want. The “Mission ethnologie” decided to create two inventories, one dedicated to an inventory of inventories, and the other to an inventory based on the work with the communities.

First, it must be underlined that all the decisions the “Mission ethnologie” may take, are validated by a committee, presided by the Director of the DAPA. This committee was established in June 2006, and held its first meeting at about the same time as the Convention was ratified by the French government. It is composed of members from various departments of the French Ministry of Culture, working on various areas, such as music, dance, archives, museums, or libraries. Its aim is to decide of the great orientations to be given by the Ministry: the methods of implementation, and, when they come, to decide of the files that can be presented to the UNESCO committee. It is this committee that validated the idea of an inventory of inventories.

### **A. Inventories**

## **1. An inventory of inventories**

The choice of an inventory of inventories was decided within the committee, first, to submit to the requirements of the Convention, and second, because it answered the necessity of knowing the field and the ICH manifestations the “Mission ethnologie” had to deal with. A grid was established by this committee. This grid gives the details of the works that have already been made in a given field (for example, musics in the South-West of France), whether they are published or not, the relevant repertoires that give an account of the manifestations, or the details of the recordings that may have been made. It gives the number of volumes or recordings, of archives, as well as the details of the associations or structures that may be concerned. It also gives indications about the establishment of a safeguarding policy or not.

But if this inventory is a means of knowing the state of researches, and will avoid a redundancy in researches, it has also one main drawback. It records things of the past, things that may already be dead, and is therefore in contradiction with one main aspect of the Convention, that requires the manifestations to be constantly re-invented by the communities concerned (“This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups”, art. 1.1 of the ICH Convention). Also, when talking with communities, one realises that the notion of archives, or of recordings of the past, doesn’t appear in their speech as a vital element in their everyday practice, even if some of them drew their inspiration from them. So, in order to conform to the state of mind of some communities, and also, to be able to register manifestations that may not have been recorded in repertoires and inventories, the “Mission ethnologie” has decided to draw another inventory, based on fieldwork, and implying the communities.

## **2. An inventory turned towards the communities**

The grid of this inventory is largely inspired from the one invented by the Anthropology Department of the Laval University, the IREPI (“Inventaire des ressources ethnologiques du patrimoine immatériel” or “Inventory of the ethnological resources of intangible heritage”)<sup>x</sup>. The fields will be more or less the same, and will give an account of the manifestations, of their history, and of the way it is transmitted. Nevertheless, it is probable that its spirit will be different, since it is not sure that the “Mission ethnologie” will work on the same categories as the ones chosen by the IREPI. It is more particularly the fact with the bearers of tradition, who are given a great deal of attention in the IREPI. It is more likely that the “Mission ethnologie” will concentrate on the manifestations *per se*, as we consider that the bearers are the temporary recipients of a given tradition, that they transmit an art that existed before them and will continue to exist afterwards, even though they surely contribute to modify and transform it.

For the time being, an experiment is being made with the Corsican region, on the Corsican polyphonies. The “Mission ethnologie” has asked the vice-director of the Center for Traditional Corsican Musics, Michèle Guelfucci, to draw an inventory of “Cantu in paghjella”, a specific form of traditional music, sung by groups of three people, mostly men. We submitted to her the first grid we have established. The idea of this experiment is first, to let the communities determine for themselves what they consider as their living heritage, and second, to see if the grid that we have made can be adapted to local contexts. This work began in April 2007, and for the time being, the idea of Michèle Guelfucci is to give a repertoire of the various local variations (or “versu”) of “Cantu a paghjella”, according to the local specificities of the song.

It is possible to work directly with associations representing their communities, but we can also imagine to work with researchers who make enquiries with associations in order to identify ICH manifestations : we will also soon experiment this method in Languedoc-Roussillon, with Gaetano Ciarcia, an anthropologist. This method is strongly inspired by the method of the IREPI for the inventory of ICH in Quebec. On a scientific point of view, it seems to be quite efficient.

Indeed, this method appears to be grounded on a right balance between the role left to the communities, and the scientific expertise. The field-work is left to researchers working under the direction of a scientific institution. They visit the territories that are to be studied, meet with the local authorities in order to identify ICH practices, or the practitioners themselves. Then, the researchers collect their information directly through field-work, which is then put into files. Third, these files are approved or not by the institution, which decides if it should be published or not.

For the year to come, the Ministry of Culture aims at launching some researches, according to its priorities, or to the contacts that have been drawn with the community delegates. For example, a research on the ICH in the Ile-de-France region will enable us, among other things, to take into account the recent evolution of practices of communities that have recently migrated into France. Apart from this project, linked to a specific area, other projects will be initiated, that will be linked to specific themes, such as the ICH in the maritime world, in French Jewish communities, or in traditional crafts.

The enquiries may be done on a precise territory, or on a special subject, with a direct link with a community, or with a researcher working with. But, first of all, there must be a thorough explanation of the method chosen for each enquiry and a real contextualization of the enquiry itself. Also, these “metadata” must be seen on the website of the inventory. It seems that each country, according to its history, its culture, its resources, must draw a policy that will take all these elements into account. More particularly, it appears that the questions of scale, of population as well as of territory, are crucial. If it is possible to work according to the principles of a direct cultural democracy, where every citizen is taken into account, when being asked what he or she considers as being ICH; it is more difficult to apply this method to a largely populated State or country. Therefore, the role of institutions acting as a go-between is a thing to be taken into consideration, whether they be associations, groups, study groups, or local communities. We are more particularly working on this aspect in France, as is shown in our research projects for the coming years.

The results of all this inventorying work, whether of the inventory of inventories, or of the second inventory, will be made available through the new website of the French Ministry of Culture ([www.culture.gouv.fr](http://www.culture.gouv.fr)), which is being re-worked, but will soon be available to the public. What we want above all things, is that our inventories should not be too static. We wish them to follow the evolution of manifestations and forms, and to take into account all the variations of a given phenomenon or manifestation. The internet tool gives us this possibility, and must be exploited to its full, as it will certainly help us follow the evolutions of manifestations.

## **B. Reflections**

Nevertheless, even though an inventory is a pre-requisite to any further work, it must be undertaken with a certain amount of reflection, or distance, about what we are choosing and doing. These reflections must help us determine the line of what we want and do not want about the manifestations that will be inscribed, and eventually

selected for one of the two lists. For example, it is true to say that the “communities” that are chosen do indeed correspond to certain criteria. The “Mission ethnologie” will certainly choose to work with institutions, associations, that are validated by various official and State institutions. Such is the case for the Corsican Center for Traditional Corsican Musics: this center is working in close collaboration with the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles de Corse, and therefore, can have the support of State authorities, whether they emanate from the Central State or the local powers. They also created an association, composed of the greatest singers of polyphonies, that supports the idea of the inscription of “cantu in paghjella” on the safeguarding list of ICH.

But State action moves in a certain field, that may not always give a wide latitude of thought. This is why the “Mission” launched a workshop dedicated to intangible heritage, that is held in the LAHIC laboratory. The LAHIC (« Laboratoire d’Anthropologie et d’Histoire de l’Institution de la Culture » or « Laboratory of the Anthropology and History of the Institution of Culture ») is co-financed by the “Mission ethnologie” and the CNRS. Daniel Fabre, its director, is conscious of the deep impact of the ICH Convention on the ethnological area, and gave his agreement to the creation of this workshop. It is directed by a post-doctoral researcher, Chiara Bortolotto, and Sylvie Grenet. The first session took place this year. The main idea was to work on the normative aspects of the Convention, and to see how they could be declined by the “Mission ethnologie”, without insisting too much on theoretical aspects of the notion of ICH. This workshop invites researchers, but also actors of ICH, and tries to offer them a space of reflections and thoughts, independent from the official frame. For example, this year, Michèle Guelfucci was invited, as well as members of the Institute of Gastronomy in Tours, who wish to present the candidacy of French gastronomy to the UNESCO. We tried, each time, to invite two people, who could talk with each other, and could confront their various experiences, on two levels, one national, and the other international. Next year, it is probable that we’ll try to invite the bearers of ICH and associations, and let them dialogue with the official and State actors of ICH. All the details of the seminar, as well as the summaries of the various interventions, can be found on the website of the LAHIC<sup>xi</sup>.

### ***3. Conclusions : The issues of this inventory for France.***

#### **A. The political issues : the Central state versus communities?**

It is well known that France has a strong centralizing tradition. Throughout its history, it has aimed at uniting various parts of its territory. It is not untrue to say that, to a certain extent, this centralizing tendency was at the root of the disappearance of many regional traditions. Now, the movement seems to be the reverse: decentralization has become effective and regions will be more and more in charge of heritage matters (indeed, the Inventaire Général, is now totally under the responsibility of regional communities). The problem lies in the role of the various components of the State concerning ICH, and the role of the various groups, communities and associations, that may or maybe not chosen. So far, there has been no major problem, but who knows what may come out of the choice of one manifestation for an inscription on one of the two lists? France is a country composed of various communities, various landscapes, various economic and political forces, and some of them have a strong speech about their political autonomy. Will the choice of some manifestations be for some communities, the starting point for asking more autonomy? To sum up our fears, will the selection we’ll make after having drawn our inventories, open the Pandora box?

#### **B. Safeguarding, or promoting living and changing forms?**

The president of the French commission on ICH, Shérif Khaznadar, wishes the implementation to be turned much more towards the safeguarding of manifestations, rather than pointing out manifestations that are constantly changing. Of course, the two may not be contradictory, but they may have a consequence that can be feared: to fossilize practices, that may block any creation, and therefore, any evolution of the communities, that will no longer be able to re-invent the ICH forms and manifestations. In one of the LAHIC workshop sessions, we invited Ouidad Tebaa, who was an active actor in the classification of the Jama-el-Fna cultural space in Marrakech as one of the masterpieces of ICH, and she told us about her fears on this distinction, more particularly concerning the story-tellers of the square. They are constantly re-inventing their art, taking inspiration from a very old tradition, but also from contemporary authors. Will they go on practicing their art the same way now? Won't they become "obliged" to refer only to "old" traditions, simply because it is only this way of telling tales that is noticed by tourists?

### **C. The scientific issues: ICH, an "intellectual nonsense?"**

This last point turned out in fact to be the most surprising for us. We knew we would encounter political, even economic issues, but we had never thought that the strongest criticisms would come from the community of researchers we have been accustomed to work with. This community shows doubts toward ICH, and more than that, a real resistance to the idea of inventories. Quoting some of the remarks we've already heard is significant of the scepticism of the community of anthropologists in France. The remarks that will be quoted are of course anonymous, but they come from ethnographers with whom we are closely working with. The idea of ICH was qualified as "intellectual nonsense". The work on inventories bears, for some, the risk of "essentialism", and for some others, the action of inventorying is quite near the action of the Vichy Regime, which had the temptation of launching a kind of inventory of "traditional France", as a means of highlighting the beauty of rurality, against what the Vichy regime saw as the perversion of urban societies. The answer given by Christian Hottin to one of his colleague, may well serve as a conclusion, not only to this precise issue, but also to the whole paper:

'In our country, where the ICH is an imported notion, and is in the process of entering our common language, ICH is neither a social reality, nor an object of research for anthropologists

Contrary to other research programmes, for which the texts, the results awaited, are chosen by the researchers, and for which the final evaluation is only more or less ours, we have to deal here with a governmental official text, a decree, which declines the implementation of an international convention by France. Whatever the forms and names we may give to the term « inventory », we will always be expected to give some kind of list, with « identified » items.

Within this programme, which is imposed on us, we nevertheless have a wide array of choices. To speak briefly, an inventory must be made, but it is up to us to decide of the form it will take, how the communities must be implied, and the role the researchers will play.

An inventory of the ICH must not become a research work on the ICH, because we move within the legal framework of the implementation of an official text.

The question of ICH is crucial to our discipline, and it is our role to build a theoretical framework that can be applied in all the regions where we are present. I regret that, while I was evoking the University of Laval inventory, a colleague answered me that it was irrelevant, and that the most important thing was to consider it as an object of research and that, 'maybe', one could eventually work on the UNESCO criteria.

To my opinion, it is doubtless that anthropologists will soon tackle the issue, and that a book will be published on the subject, as have already been published books on historical monuments, heritage issues, etc. But it

also is doubtless that this critical approach of one aspect of the anthropology science within the Ministry of Culture will be, more than any other, a self-criticism of our action.’

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<sup>i</sup> *Rapport sur l’ethnologie de la France. Besoins et projets.* Rapport présenté au Ministère de la culture par Redjem Benzaïd en 1979. Paris, Documentation Française, 86 p.

<sup>ii</sup> « L’ethnologie comme besoin », *op.cit.*, p. 9

<sup>iii</sup> « (...) l’affectivité profonde de groupes humains se reconnaît en ce patrimoine. Ce sentiment fonde l’identité de bien des micro-régions et collectivités ; il sous-tend la volonté qu’elles ont d’assumer leur devenir » *op.cit.*, p. 21

<sup>iv</sup> « Le patrimoine ethnologique comprend les modes spécifiques d’existence matérielle et d’organisation sociale des groupes qui le composent, leurs savoirs, leur représentation du monde et, de façon générale, les éléments qui fondent l’identité de chaque groupe social et le différencient des autres.

On y inclura donc

- des agents : individus, groupes sociaux, institutions ;
- des biens matériels ou immatériels, œuvres virtuelles ou réalisées ;
- des savoirs organisés : techniques, symboliques (magiques, religieux, ludiques), sociaux (étiquette, traditions de groupe), esthétiques...

des moyens de communication : langues, parlers, systèmes de signes » *op.cit.*, p. 27

<sup>v</sup> *Répertoire de l’ethnologie de la France 1986-1987.* Etabli par Christine Langlois, Ministère de la culture et de la communication, 367 p.

<sup>vi</sup> [www.culture.gouv.fr/mpe](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/mpe), « PortEthno » section

<sup>vii</sup> Sylvie Grenet, « PortEthno: un exemple d’anthropologie partagée au Ministère de la Culture? », to be published on [ethnographiques.org](http://www.ethnographiques.org) (<http://www.ethnographiques.org>)

<sup>viii</sup> The details of the research programmes can be found on the website of the « Mission ethnologie » ([www.culture.gouv.fr/mpe](http://www.culture.gouv.fr/mpe) »

<sup>ix</sup> « Le gâchis des collectes anarchiques et l’illusion pseudo-scientifique d’une ethnologie spontanée qu’individus et groupes pourraient pratiquer sur eux-mêmes, constituent deux écueils majeurs à éviter » *op.cit.*, p. 24



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<sup>x</sup> It can be seen on <http://www.ethnologie.chaire.ulaval.ca/>

<sup>xi</sup> Details as well as summaries of the papers can be seen on [www.lahic.cnrs.fr](http://www.lahic.cnrs.fr)