**Chengdu International Conference on Intangible Cultural Heritage   
in Celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of UNESCO’s Convention   
for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage**

**Chengdu, China, 14 to 16 June 2013**

**Round-table 1: Achievements of the Convention:   
changing the discourse of intangible cultural heritage and implanting new concepts**

Today, the 2003 [Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php) counts 153 States Parties, large and small, from every region of the world. Its rate of ratification has been more rapid than that of any of the other UNESCO cultural conventions.[[1]](#footnote-1) That swift pace of ratification is testament to the timeliness of the Convention and to the principle – enunciated in its Article 19 – that ‘the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is of general interest to humanity’. People around the world have rallied to that principle and to its consequence, that international cooperation is essential to achieving the Convention’s broader objectives.

In taking stock of the Convention’s first decade, what can we identify as its greatest achievements? Foremost among them must be the degree to which it has transformed global understandings of intangible cultural heritage and its safeguarding. Even if intangible cultural heritage itself is as old as humanity, and its safeguarding has been the subject of deliberate attention from practitioners and, for several centuries already, from scholars and cultural workers, the Convention introduced new terminology and definitions that have since gained global prominence, supplanting older concepts. How do these new terminology and definitions demand a fundamental reconceptualization of the relations between intangible cultural heritage and its bearers? Looking back over the Convention’s first decade, what has been the global impact of those new concepts and orientations?

During the preparation of the Convention, experts discussed the meaning and understanding of key terms in order to create an internationally viable vocabulary for the Convention. As a parallel to this exercise, a profoundly new understanding of the nature of intangible cultural heritage emerged, requiring, for many people, a fundamentally different way of thinking and acting than had previously prevailed. This was often particularly true for experts and researchers who had devoted their lives to studying intangible cultural heritage, only to discover that in the Convention’s conceptions, they no longer retained an undisputed hegemony over what that heritage was or what should be done with it.

Consider for example the discussions over decades that led ultimately to the term ‘intangible cultural heritage’ and to its definition in Article 2.1 of the Convention. (Similarly, we might excavate the history of the adoption of ‘safeguarding’ as the guiding rubric of the Convention in preference to the term ‘protection’ with which the discussions began.)

When the Bolivian authorities in 1973 [proposed to the Director-General](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0000/000058/005845eb.pdf) that the Intergovernmental Copyright Committee consider the question of establishing an ‘international instrument for the protection of folklore’, their request referred (in the Spanish text, followed by the English translations of the day) to concepts such as ‘culturas tradicionales’ (‘traditional cultures’), ‘acervo folklórico’ (‘heritage of folk arts’), ‘cultura artística tradicional de los pueblos’ (‘traditional artistic culture of the peoples’), ‘expresiones folklóricas’ (‘folk art forms’), ‘artes populares’ (‘national cultural heritages’), ‘expresiones culturales de creación colectiva o cuyos autores no se identifican’ (‘cultural expressions of collective or anonymous origin’), ‘folklore’ (‘folklore’), ‘bienes culturales folklóricos’ (‘folkloristic cultural property’) and ‘creación colectiva o creación anónima’ (‘works of collective or anonymous authorship’). In its cover note, the UNESCO Secretariat introduced as well the notion of ‘artes folklóricas’ (‘folk arts’) and equated folklore with ‘patrimonio cultural nacional’ (‘national cultural heritage’)[[2]](#footnote-2).

‘Folklore’ and related terms continued to dominate the discussions within UNESCO over the ensuing decades. From the beginning, however, the search was on for a term of greater international applicability. The term ‘folklore’ presented numerous problems, first being certain undesirable connotations it had acquired in particular languages or regions and second being its resistance to easy definition. As regards the latter, for instance, an expert meeting convened by UNESCO in 1982 ‘with a view to defining measures to safeguard the existence, development and authenticity of folklore and traditional popular culture and to protect them against the risk of distortion’ ([21 C/Resolution 5/03](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001140/114029e.pdf)) was charged first with the problem of defining the concept. As its report points out, ‘All the experts emphasized that it was difficult, not to say impossible, to reach a consensus on the concept of folklore: some of them, in fact, suggested that the term be left undefined’ ([Report, Committee of Governmental Experts on the Safeguarding of Folklore, CPY/TPC/I/4; CPY.82/CONF.202/COL.7,](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0004/000493/049393eb.pdf) p. 3). The term did not become easier to define over the coming decades.

The search for definitions and for appropriate programmatic initiatives continued. In the Approved Programme and Budget of the Organization adopted by the 22nd session of the General Conference in 1983, a new sub-programme was established within UNESCO to focus on what was called the ‘“non-physical” heritage, that is the cultural heritage made up of music, literature, oral traditions, folklore, customs, myths and beliefs, etc.’ ([22 C/5](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0005/000579/057999eo.pdf) p. 454). The document went on to note that ‘The first two years [1984-85] will be devoted to clarifying concepts, determining fields of application and working out a typology of the non-physical heritage and a methodology for research, study and preservation’ (ibid.). Since this field had not yet been clearly defined, the document continues, an expert meeting will ‘draw up a typology of the non-physical heritage and define a methodology and an order of priority for action to promote the inventorying, collection, study and preservation of this heritage’ (ibid., p. 458).

The working paper prepared for that 1984 meeting proposed its own definition in which the new term was essentially assimilated to folklore: ‘“Non-physical heritage,” “popular traditions,” and “folklore” all share four common precepts: 1) the collective and spontaneous participation in the traditions by the community; 2) the impersonal or anonymous origin of the traditions: 3) the non-commercial and largely unwritten means of transmission; and 4) the tradition’s core structure and techniques which have passed across generations’ ([The world’s non-physical heritage, CLT.84/CONF.603; CLT.84/CONF.603/COL.1](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000609/060950eb.pdf), p. 8). The experts, however, found that ‘non-physical heritage’ did not adequately capture the subject of interest. Other alternatives – ‘non-material culture’ and ‘living tradition’ – were proposed and rejected, and the group finally decided to revert to the term ‘cultural traditions’ as the ‘simplest, most exact, and most inclusive’ term ([Final report, Meeting of experts to draw up a future programme concerning the non-physical heritage, CLT-84/CONF.603](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0006/000649/064992eb.pdf), p. 5).

Despite this rejection by experts, the term ‘non-physical heritage’ remained the name of UNESCO’s unit responsible for on-going activities in folklore, endangered languages, oral traditions and traditional music until 1993, when the term ‘intangible cultural heritage’ replaced it in the Approved Programme and Budget ([27 C/5](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0009/000956/095663eo.pdf)), subsequent to an expert meeting in June of that same year, ‘[International Consultation on New Perspectives for UNESCO’s Programme: The Intangible Cultural Heritage](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?meeting_id=00077).’

A final repudiation of the term ‘folklore’ came with the turn of the century and the decisions to move forward with what became the 2003 Convention. UNESCO and the Smithsonian Institution cooperated in organizing the 1999 Washington Conference, ‘[A Global Assessment of the 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore: Local Empowerment and International Cooperation](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?meeting_id=00058).’ Participants insisted on the primacy of practitioners in any safeguarding effort, and noted the unacceptability, in the international context, of the term folklore. The Washington Conference’s call for UNESCO’s Member States to move forward with a normative instrument was answered when the General Conference decided to ‘carry out a preliminary study on the advisability of regulating internationally, through a new standard-setting instrument, the protection of *traditional culture and folklore*’ ([30 C/Resolution 25](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001185/118514e.pdf); emphasis added). When that preliminary study was presented to the 2001 expert meeting organized in Turin, ‘Intangible cultural heritage – Working definitions’, the experts recommended that the normative instrument be addressed instead to the new term, ‘intangible cultural heritage’ (see its [Action Plan, 161 EX/15 Annex](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001225/122585e.pdf)). The question of a normative instrument came before the next session of the Executive Board still wearing the name, ‘traditional culture and folklore’, but left adorned, irreversibly, with the new name of ‘intangible cultural heritage’ ([161 EX/Decision 3.4.4](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001229/122959e.pdf)).

Choosing a term was one thing; defining it quite another. Space here does not permit a comprehensive recounting of the lengthy search for a definition worthy of the new denomination. The Turin meeting had ended with a definition of intangible cultural heritage as follows: ‘peoples' learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity’. That definition was utilized in the documents examined by the Executive Board ([161 EX/15](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001225/122585e.pdf)) and General Conference ([31 C/43](http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001234/123437e.pdf)) and endorsed in turn by the expert meeting on ‘[Intangible Cultural Heritage: Priority Domains for an International Convention](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?meeting_id=00056)’ in Rio de Janeiro in January 2002 and several other meetings.

When the ‘[First meeting of the select drafting group of a preliminary international convention on intangible cultural heritage](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?meeting_id=00054)’ met in Paris in March 2002, it proposed that ‘detailed discussion of [a definition of intangible cultural heritage] be held at the end of the discussion of the text since it will be informed by other issues raised.’ It noted, however, that ‘There was broad support for keeping the Turin definition at this stage since it has been endorsed by various fora and is sufficiently encompassing’ ([Final report](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00070-EN.pdf)).

Nevertheless, recurrent calls for greater terminological precision gave rise to an [‘International Meeting of Experts on Intangible Cultural Heritage: Establishment of a Glossary](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?meeting_id=00082)’ held in Paris in June 2002. It was at that meeting that the revolutionary definition we find today in the Convention’s Article 2.1 first took familiar shape: ‘intangible cultural heritage means the practices and representations – together with their necessary knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artefacts and places – that are recognized as such by communities and individuals’ ([Glossary of Intangible Cultural Heritage](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00265.pdf)).[[3]](#footnote-3) In the dozens of definitions of folklore and intangible heritage collated by the Secretariat and made available to the expert meeting for the glossary, and in the numerous papers and presentations for the Turin, Rio and Paris meetings, as in the three decades’ worth of UNESCO documents that preceded, intangible cultural heritage had always before been something identified and defined by persons other than its practitioners and bearers.

Only two exceptions have left their traces in the documentary record prior to the Paris glossary meeting: one is the definition of intangible cultural heritage prepared at the initiative of the Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO and made available to the Paris meeting, which provides that ‘Communities and individuals in the contemporary world decide how to recognize such elements of their intangible cultural heritage and continue to recreate them in constant response to their environment and to historical conditions’ (see [Glossary](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00265.pdf), p. 15). The other is the background paper prepared by Smithsonian expert Peter Seitel for the Rio meeting, in which he notes that ‘Operationally, it is living people whose words identify, and specify the boundaries of, the practices and bodies of knowledge that are the defining features of ICH. The active agency of tradition bearers is central to defining particular instances of ICH,’ (‘[Defining the Scope of the Term “Intangible Cultural Heritage](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/04591-EN.doc)”’).

The die was cast, the Rubicon crossed. Intangible cultural heritage, the Convention insists, is not something external or objective that can be defined by experts or government officials or through a process of scientific examination. Instead, it is the communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals who practise one or another cultural expression – and they alone – who can recognize it as constituting part of their intangible cultural heritage. Such recognition alone is not a sufficient condition for something to be considered intangible cultural heritage for the purposes of the Convention; in addition, it must also satisfy other conditions set out in Article 2.1. But recognition by the community is a necessary condition, and it is from that ground-breaking insight – formulated eleven years to the date before this Chengdu meeting – that the transforming power of the Convention derives.

1. Already in its sixth year, the 2003 Convention exceeded the number of ratifications of the 1970 [Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/culture/themes/illicit-traffic-of-cultural-property/1970-convention/) during more than 40 years, and in less than a decade it received as many ratifications as during 25 years for the 1972 [Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage](http://whc.unesco.org/). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Spanish, English and French texts of the Secretariat’s note differ appreciably. English – marked as the original language – has ‘national cultural heritage of “folklore”’; Spanish – which is also marked as the original language – has ‘patrimonio cultural nacional o “folklore”’ (i.e., ‘national cultural heritage *or* “folklore”; emphasis added); French (translated from English) has ‘patrimoine culturel national représenté par le folklore’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The drafting history of the Convention during a series of meetings in 2002 and 2003, including the evolution of the definition from this initial suggestion to its final formulation in Article 2.1, can be found at: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00015&keyword=00045&submit=true>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)