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Making Inventories: A Constraint or an Asset?

Regional seminar
"Principles and Experiences of Drawing up ICH Inventories in Europe"
May 14-15 2007, Tallinn, Estonia

The process of inventory making is complicated and presumably resonates on local, national, and international level. This seminar has been convened in Tallinn, Estonia, to analyse, exchange experience and debate on the drawing up of inventories with experts representing different regions of Europe, largely combining the expertise and practices of Eastern and Western Europe. The gathered represent relatively similar, yet also distinctly diverse historical experience that would hopefully provide a good basis for fruitful discussion.

The organizers have proposed to attain two goals. First, we've sought to assemble representatives of States Parties that form the electoral group Europe 2 in the Convention's General Assembly. On the other hand, we've expanded the scope of deliberations by inviting particular experts also from other regions of Europe.

This seminar should specify and analyse the advantages, disadvantages and contingencies of drawing up such inventories in various parts of Europe. Our regional context, which is defined by complex, multicultural modern societies with different political systems and historical practices, comprises a versatile range of experience that includes contingencies of modernisation and urbanisation, manipulations of cultural heritage for political gain, but at the same time also presents manifold moments of preservation and maintenance, particularly due to constraints of time and circumstance. Hopefully our discussion will address theoretical concerns but combine them also with practical issues to exchange information on different practices in inventory making.

Keeping that in mind, I would like to stress that our task is not simply to report on wonderful achievements during this meeting, but to attempt a reflexive analysis. My introduction to your following presentations and even more so to the discussions is geared towards both these ends, though presumably the analytic perspective may prevail.

The questions posed in the call for the seminar foreground the meaning and application of inventories from local to national, to regional, and also to global perspectives:

- Who is the suitable and capable body for drawing ICH inventories?
- Should the process be arranged top-down or bottom-up?
- What is the relation between national and local inventories?
- How to secure community involvement?
- What is the role of individuals and the human factor in general?
- How to resolve the contradiction of particularities and universalities on local, national and international level?

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has been designed with a purpose of ensuring respect for it, and of raising awareness about its significance in human experience. The basic rationale behind the Convention draws on the expectation that it should consequently bind States Parties to take measures at the national level in order to ensure the viability of their intangible cultural heritage, while encouraging them to cooperate at regional and international levels for the same purpose. The criteria elaborated by UNESCO define intangible cultural heritage to be traditional and living at the same time, constantly recreated and mainly transmitted orally. Many elements of such heritage are considered endangered, due to effects of globalization, homogenizing policies, and lack of means or appreciation.

This Convention is intended to be an enabling document, but it presumes certain constraints and limitations. One of the measures foreseen as instrumental in putting this document into function is the implementation of inventories, a prerequisite in the process of identifying and defining “the various elements of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory”, to quote Article 11.

Essentially an exercise of identification and categorisation of dynamic and vibrant forms of human expression and mental capacities, the making of inventories proves to be a task that instigates heated debates between cultural administrators, policy makers and scholarly experts in the field, but also on a larger scale between different social and political systems as well as representatives of different historical experience and administrative practices. The principles of management that favour clearly defined categories and tacit hierarchies confront here the

scholarly perception of culture that resists fixation and favours the living practices negotiated by their carriers on daily basis between tradition and innovation.

From a scholarly point of view, drawing inventories is an ambivalent problem – it is a controversial identification and mapping of cultural phenomena, on defining communities and their heritage. This is an intervention that generates hierarchies and complicates the position of marginalities. On the one hand, all research relies on some kind – if only mental – stock-taking. Historically, archives and museums function on the basis making catalogues and lists of cultural elements, even though they may often represent extinct past practices. Yet such historical overview of culture emanates from long-time observations, from going deep into the field and also from participating in performing and experiencing culture. In case of inventories of living cultural practices, however, the dissecting of different elements into distinct compartments presumes a process of detachment and fragmentation of cultural phenomena into manageable units. Yet cultural planning and management relies inherently on clearly defined and categorized elements. Thus cultural research and cultural politics deviate in essence, although they are actually interdependent. Still, in the present world of integrated global existence and the continuous collapse of time and space (thanks to the technologies that affect the size and scope of interaction), also cultural research and cultural politics are inherently interdependent.

When scholars of ethnographic research analyze today the active processual nature of culture, history, tradition, and heritage, they tend to pair them concurrently with verbs “to construct”, “to produce”, “to invent”, or “to market” (cf. Bruner 2005: 127). In the realm of cultural politics, however, one would instead notice the frequent use of the verbs “to preserve”, “to protect”, or “to safeguard”. For cultural policy makers these words often exist in an uncritical celebrative context, reflecting either ardent admiration, or then straightforward objectives of political gain.

Heritage is a project of ideology involving an ambivalent implementation of the category of time. Even as a term, it’s value-laden nature alludes to preservation and celebration of past elements of reified culture that is intended to manifest ethnicity, locality, and history; and yet the cultural politics involved with heritage proposes to address the concerns of the present, with a foreseeable perspective to the future. On the other hand, the employment of the notion of ‘heritage’ comprises a capacity to overshadow the complexities of history and politics, in

its program to empower local and indigenous groups or equip particular expressive forms with political resonance (cf. Bendix 2000). These developments derive from and are nurtured by the interaction of ethnographic research with heritage production and cultural policy making. Ethnographic research has entered the sphere of public domain, with discursive impact on local communities and their cultural expression, on ethnic and cultural identities, and eventually on heritage production on local, national, and international level.

The awareness of cultural heritage and its significance in identity construction has concurred with the modern process of documenting and promoting past repertoires and practices. Objects and elements of previous cultural experience are transformed into heritage as fragments that are decontextualized, in order to recontextualize them in a novel situation of representation that transforms them into national or ethnic symbols (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). The production and management of ethnic identities are negotiated in the discursive context of interrelations or oppositions, and they reflect power play developments in the region.

When considering UNESCO programmes in the context of ICH, and their relation to cultural policies in Estonia, it appears to be both an asset and an intervention. It enhances public presentation of heritage and also the construction of hierarchies of experience.¹ To generalize, we may conclude that the UNESCO launched process of evaluating expressive cultural practices (I have in mind here the Masterpieces programme) has met an active response in Europe mostly in its Eastern parts; explained, perhaps, by their relative political marginalization in comparison to the West, but also by their significant historical experience of identity manifestation through pre-industrial practices of expressive culture.

In Estonia, it has denoted direct and indirect impact particularly in two regions – the Kihnu and Seto areas with their cultural expression that have functioned for about a century as the celebrated folklore reservoirs by scholars – by redefining local initiative and modern socio-cultural processes.

In 2003, the Estonian national candidature of the *Kihnu Cultural Space* was proclaimed a Masterpiece. This case represents an integrated context of insular natural environment,

¹ I have discussed this topic in a greater detail in Kuutma 2006.

socioeconomic conditions and historical communal lifestyle. The community is defined by being: (a) a complex body of island residents; (b) a local, small-scale community; (c) a permanent settlement dependent on insular subsistence that defines their ICH. First, the initiative for recognizing this cultural space was launched by outside activists. The community involved, their cultural practice was initially defined by cultural researchers and experts who identified threats to its existence. Today, the local community activists have turned the tables while foregrounding local perceptions and current needs.

Inspired by this success in gaining such national and international recognition, the *Seto community* in Southeastern Estonia decided to take action to define and promote their intangible cultural heritage in correspondence to the UNESCO guidelines. This community is defined by distinct historical, religious, socioeconomic, and geographic features; they have distinct vernacular language and cultural practices; their's is a combination of resident and diaspora communities, shaped by the border region circumstance. Finally, the Seto case represents a targeted inside initiative to define and recognize particular expression of their intangible cultural heritage on the local and communal level.

The Seto community activists have convened a representative body to debate and reach an agreement on defining, inventorying and safeguarding their cultural expression. They have launched activities for identifying viable elements of cultural practice for the survival of their heritage. In this process they implement previous scholarly research, apply inside and outside resources for their purpose, and find ways to implement recent sociopolitical advantages. They have submitted applications to governmental subsidy programs, expanded community involvement through NGOs and local municipalities, and raised public awareness of their heritage through media promotion (TV programs and local periodicals).

Thus an outside celebratory recognition plays a significant role in raising awareness in communal ICH. One could also say that the presentation of Kihnu and Seto cultures has been standard-setting, it testifies to the significance of cultural research and cultural politics on local level (see Kuutma 2006). Among the other communities inspired are also the Russian Orthodox Old-believers, settled on the western coast of Lake Peipsi in Eastern Estonia.

The Estonian experience in inventory making

The following presents an overview of a progress of events for about a year. Following the Convention requirements, the Ministry of Culture and the Folk Culture Development and Training Centre gathered the first session of round table, to discuss the Convention and its implementation in March 2006. There were about 30 representatives of different cultural offices, NGOs, cultural (museums, archives) and educational institutions. The vague guidelines on inventorying found in the Convention were summed up with the decision that whatever process it starts, it should work in favour of the local perspective. This wide contingent was reduced next time to about ten or less, including also community activists. There have been several meetings both in North and South Estonia, to provide opportunities for wider participation, while the working group has been hosted also by the Kihnu and Seto communities.

Having experienced the Soviet regime of planned, monitored and carefully managed cultural system, post-totalitarian countries know how efficient it is to govern culture through such a system. (See Kuutma 2007) But this actually creates a phantom or facade culture that does not really reflect what goes on underneath. For administrators it is meaningful and makes their task easier if manageable systems of regulations are created. However, consequently the cultural workers and government bureaucracy will abide to such a system, but it need not reflect the concerns of the community.

After manifold debates, the working group adopted the decision to start with an inventory on a local level. A consensus was reached that the drawing up of inventories definitely needs to serve local cultural purposes – one mode of inventory should not be imposed as a unitary model. Such a long period with a lot of talking and little action definitely did not please ministerial officials who would have preferred quick and efficient, tangible (i.e. well-manageable) results.

The working group proposed the method of a “test ground”, which was chosen to be the island Hiiumaa whose cultural activists had already demonstrated their keen interest in the process of promoting their ICH.² After several discussions of the general purpose and rationale, it was left up to the Hiiumaa community to identify their ICH, compile

² For detailed information on Hiiumaa, see their homepage at <http://www.hiiumaa.ee>

questionnaires and conduct interviews on their island (size of 1000 sq km; population of 10,000). This task was taken by three local activists who approach the island according to the historical division into 4 districts, where they single out cultural practices and practitioners with the help of local people. All three are cultural workers with particular training, one woman in expressive culture (dance), one man from the island Municipal Government, and the third is the director of the Hiiumaa Museum. But it has been a hard lesson in learning how to think ‘outside the box’ and manage the mapping of cultural practices that define the island community today, with obvious roots in yesterday, which at the same time single out as unique and typical to Hiiumaa experience. It is interplay of insider and outsider perspectives, while the community activists have stressed the necessity of insider involvement, that is – the community involvement, in the whole process. At first, Hiiumaa asked for quite definite guidelines to be given on national level, but they had to resort to the talks and debates of the roundtable sessions. Consequently, they have come up with their own questionnaires and preliminary lists, serving the particular interests and cultural identity of that island community, with smaller, more local district/village communities (182 villages).

As already pointed out, it is a work in progress, and one cannot report enthusiastically on happy end results, but it seems to have been a learning process for everyone involved. And eventually the goal is to analyse the Hiiumaa island experience when they consider it presentable enough, which will then provide a helpful grid in introducing the process of inventorying to other regions. However, the state-level working group of ICH continues its activities also in the meantime, particularly in communicating with interested communities. For example, the Seto community activists arranged a roundtable session just last weekend (May 6, 2007), where they actually brought together representatives of different communities of distinguishable ICH, but most importantly: invited were guests from the Kihnu island, which provided a great opportunity for sharing experience both in managing their ICH and interacting with governmental programmes and offices.

Cultural researchers have always been engaged in mapping cultural elements, and historically it has often been a “rescue” operation to record those elements of culture that have already become extinct or are on the verge of disappearing. Today this process has incorporated the carriers and practitioners of culture – the identifying and mapping is no longer an “elite” project (whatever the definition of elite might be in this context). On the other hand, it should

not be a “rescue” campaign, but rather an identification of living practices that define the local community in the modern interpretation of past practices.

It is presumed that this recognition, a highlighting of cultural expression and items that the inventory-making process entails, strengthens them, and gives new impetus. The rationale for inventory-making in Estonia proposes the following goals: the affirmation of community identities and self-respect; enhancement of cultural networks inside and between communities, and cultural practitioners. Safeguarding should entail a combination of regional acknowledgement and state-level acknowledgement with the general goal of boosting the local communities.

For the communities involved, the most important issues at stake in this identifying and mapping of their ICH are: (a) national, or rather, governmental (i.e state-level) recognition, to voice the concerns for lack of support on local level; (b) or it could also be pride in their local identity, in order to find recognition to particular cultural practices, to local lifestyles; (c) or opportunities to voice different ethnic background and ethnic concerns.

In this process, it is vital to distinguish various interested parties. The distinctiveness and special qualities of cultural elements should be identified with the participation of local communities. This means the inclusion and leadership of community activists with particular interests, with positions and status from insider and outsider perspectives, and possibly with special training. However, it is also important to remind ourselves that communities are not homogeneous entities, they comprise people with different aspirations and perceptions; they include both traditionalists and non-traditionalists (see Kuutma 2006). Obviously, reaching the community consensus is not an easy task, but everyone instrumentally active in the process should be aware of those contingencies.

The current meeting in Tallinn is an event in the framework of cultural politics. We are working with topics and issues that are intended to be put into practice through making cultural policies. Those considerations should make us conscious of the concurring serious responsibility: the decisions made in the context of safeguarding ICH will affect people’s lives; it will affect particular cultural practices, and people’s perception of their everyday lives.

Our goal at this meeting is not to come up with solutions that would be the most efficient, or provide the quickest results. This task of making inventories should be a process – it will fashion the representation of culture; it will shape and redefine the policies of how a state, a nation, a community perceives their culture and manages it.

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