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Recognizing Intangible Cultural Heritage

The ministry of culture in Iceland is still in the early stages of considering how to implement the convention. Considering that the convention's executive committee still has to reach a consensus on what much of it actually means, this is perhaps not surprising. We are very curious to hear your thoughts and will be looking for viable models among other European states parties to the convention.

To date, the work done in Iceland on intangible heritage is distributed among three institutions. One is the National Museum, which over the past half-century has built up an important archive of written records of intangible culture. Another is the Arnamagnean Institute that houses a large archive of sound recordings of intangible heritage. Both of these archives constitute national inventories of a sort – based on an archival paradigm of preservation that emphasizes securing textual or aural traces of traditional culture for future research and publication. The third institutional home of intangible heritage is the Department of Folkloristics and Ethnology at the University of Iceland, where I work.

In fact, I wear two hats today. One is that of a university professor, the other is that of a special adviser to the Ministry of Culture and its representative to the meetings of the UNESCO committee. Considering that there is not yet much to say about Iceland's national implementation of the convention, I will speak today more in my capacity as a scholar than as a national expert. And in my scholarly capacity, let me begin, first, with a little history, followed by a song, and then, if you'll indulge me, I'll tell you a story.

The Intangible Heritage Convention was a long time coming. It is customary within UNESCO to refer in this context to over three decades of negotiation. Actually, UNESCO's

involvement with issues of intangible culture is much older – it's older, even, than UNESCO itself. Eighty years is more like it. In 1922, the League of Nations established a special commission in Paris – the Commission Internationale de Coopération Intellectuelle, abbreviated as CICI, that was responsible for international cooperation in the field of art, museums, and culture. CICI was a direct predecessor to UNESCO, which was founded on its basis when in the aftermath of the Second World War, the United Nations filled the void left behind by the League of Nations. In 1928, after much pressure from a group of folklorists, CICI organized an international congress on popular art in Prague. The Prague congress, in turn, created a permanent commission of its own, dedicated to what we now refer to as “intangible cultural heritage”: la Commission Internationale des Arts Populaires, or CIAP, which worked with UNESCO in the first two decades after the second world war. In 1964, the CIAP membership severed its ties with the UN and got rid of policy work from its portfolio. It gave itself a new charter and a new name: SIEF, the Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore, and it is an active scientific organization in the fields of intangible heritage, primarily in Europe (Rogan 2004). In other words, the states parties in groups 1 and 2 (that is to say, we who are here) already have our own scientific organization with wideranging competencies in the fields of intangible heritage and with a long and venerable history that ties it directly back to UNESCO and its predecessor – and this, I think, is something we should keep in mind and perhaps consider rebuilding bridges that have burned; after all, we need critical work in this field, we need not only inventories and safeguarding interventions, we also need a critical dialogue involving among others the scientific community.

In spite of the Prague congress and the eighty year old CIAP, it is nevertheless customary within UNESCO to speak of three decades of work, three and a half now, since UNESCO began to get involved with popular traditions (Hafstein 2004). And this customary reference points back to one particular letter, dated 24 April 1973. The letter is conventionally taken to

mark the beginning of these concerns in the UN. The letter is from the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Religion of the Republic of Bolivia and it is addressed to the Director-General of UNESCO. “My ministry has made a careful survey of existing documentation on the international protection of the cultural heritage of mankind,” the letter begins, and it has found that all existing instruments “are aimed at the protection of tangible objects, and not forms of expression such as music and dance, which are at present undergoing the most intensive clandestine commercialization and export, in a process of commercially oriented transculturation destructive of the traditional cultures. . .” (Republic of Bolivia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion 1973).

In his letter, the Bolivian minister makes three suggestions: first, that a new protocol be added to international copyright conventions “declaring all rights in cultural expressions of collective or anonymous origin which have been elaborated or [have] acquired traditional character in the territory of particular Member States to be the property of such States” – this is still under negotiation in a committee of WIPO, the World Intellectual Property Organization; second, the Bolivian minister suggests that an intergovernmental committee adjudicate any disputes concerning the “assignation of paternity between two or more States in respect of common forms of expression” – another issue on WIPO’s plate today; and, third, he suggests that a convention should be signed “to regulate the aspects of folklore preservation, promotion and diffusion” and, alongside this convention, an “International Register of Folkloristic Cultural Property” should be established (Republic of Bolivia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion 1973). This, of course, is the Intangible Heritage Convention and the Representative List, along with the national inventories. In 2007, it’s amazing to dig out this letter from the UNESCO archives at Place Fontenoy and to see just how little the challenges have changed and just how closely the work conducted within the

UN still follows the charter outlined by the Bolivian minister in 1973. It's like we've been following his lead all along.

I promised you a story, I haven't forgotten. The story is a story about this letter. Some of you may have heard it, or heard parts of it, before. It is an account that UNESCO sometimes gives about how it came to concern itself with folklore (Albro 2005, 4; Honko 2001; Sherkin 2001, 54, note 13). The stories we tell about ourselves often reveal more than we would like; this holds just as true for organizational storytelling as for personal narratives. The story begins with a song.

In 1970, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel released their album *Bridge over Troubled Water*. On one of the tracks, Simon and Garfunkel perform "El Condor Pasa." They are accompanied by the Peruvian group Los Incas, whom they had first heard perform this song in Paris – appropriately enough for a UNESCO story. "El Condor Pasa" is an indigenous folksong from the Andes, arranged and incorporated into a larger composition in 1913 by the Peruvian composer and folksong collector Daniel Alomía Robles. In Robles' version, the song commemorates an indigenous revolt against white oppressors who abuse and degrade the native population, while the condor flies above, ruler of the skies and spirit of the Incas. In Simon and Garfunkel's rendition, "El Condor Pasa" reached number eighteen on Billboard's pop singles chart. *Bridge over Troubled Water* won the Grammy award for the record of the year and it instantly reached the number one spot on Billboard's pop album chart, where it sat for a whole six weeks. To this day, it is still one of the highest-selling albums of all times.

Perhaps the American artists were displaying sympathy with the native cause and solidarity with poor, oppressed peoples by performing "El Condor Pasa" – it's not unlikely, all things considered: the year is 1970, and we're talking about two folk revivalists from New York City, not quite hippies or radicals, perhaps, but close enough. Whether or not that was their intention, however, one thing is for sure: there was no jubilation in the Andes over its

commercial success. On the contrary, as seen from the Andes this must have looked less like a celebration of indigenous traditional music and more like exploitation. Rich Americans had ransacked the musical tradition of poor people in the Andes and made millions of dollars, while not a dime was returned to the rightful “owners”—a pattern not unfamiliar from colonial expropriation, though this time around even the condor itself was siphoned off, a symbol of native pride. The whole affair left a bad taste in many mouths and, according to this etiology, the Bolivian letter to UNESCO’s Director General in 1973 is a political expression of this bad taste (López 2004; Moreno; Sherkin 2001, 54).

As I say, this is one account of how UNESCO came to care about the stuff we now call ICH, or that big slice of it that was formerly known as folklore. This account that has appeared in several UNESCO publications, although it usually appears only in passing, as an aside, a small reference, or a footnote. And it makes an interesting story, I hope you’ll agree. But, at closer look, what does this story really tell us? And what can we, for our purposes here today, learn from this account of the origins of our convention?

In fact, if we stop to consider its political backdrop, the story is rather more intricate than it seems at first glance. The letter from 1973 to UNESCO’s Director-General was signed by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Religion of the Republic of Bolivia. The government that he represented was a military dictatorship, led by General Hugo Banzer who came to power by coup in 1971. Before it got around to writing this letter, this government had banned opposition parties, suspended trade unions, and shut down the universities. As you can imagine, Banzer’s regime also had strained relations with the country’s indigenous groups, to put it mildly. The Aymara and the Quechua lived in abject poverty in the highlands and towns of Bolivia, their lands confiscated and their identities actively suppressed in a “transculturation” rather different in kind from the one that Banzer’s minister complained about.

Meanwhile, however, their expressive culture was celebrated by the military regime and indeed appropriated as the national-popular culture of Bolivia. Banzer was in power during the golden age of the folkloric spectacle, which celebrates traditional costume and music and dance in colorful performances of national pride and harmony; indeed, the folkloric spectacle was a favorite form of entertainment under dictators, from Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal to Pinochet's Chile and Banzer's Bolivia (cf. DaCosta Holton 2005; Ortiz 1999). In Latin America, indigenous cultures lend themselves very nicely to this type of display, which helps to disassociate cultural practices and expressions from the communities that they come from – to give them instead a national association.

It is important to understand, then, that the Bolivian government's efforts to protect an indigenous Andean folksong, *El Condor Pasa*, hide the real oppression of indigenous peoples within Bolivia in this period. In fact, the government's safeguarding measures were a part of its oppressive regime, a tool for cultural disenfranchisement. There's a lesson in there somewhere for us who are gathered here – after all, as a tool of display, the list is not all that different from the spectacle (Hafstein 2007).

In the case of our song, *El Condor Pasa*, this was especially insidious because *El Condor Pasa* is a song of resistance. As a matter of fact, the South American dictators of the 1970s also appropriated the condor, bird of the Incas and symbol of resistance, and converted it into a symbol of unity enforced at gunpoint: along with Pinochet and others, Banzer was one of the ringleaders in "Operation Condor", a transnational murder ring coordinated by government intelligence agencies to squash dissent (McSherry 2005). The lesson of *El Condor Pasa* thus extends beyond the transnational flows of culture. This story that recounts how folklore came to be inscribed on the international agenda also sheds light on the uses of folklore in hegemonic strategies within states and the ways in which it enters into subject formation under conditions of internal colonialism.

I think this story also provides a preliminary answer to one of the questions posed to this meeting by its organizers: “Should the process be arranged top-down or bottom-up?” This account of how Unesco got involved with intangible heritage stands as a serious warning against top-down approaches. Of course, it doesn’t speak of bottom-up approaches, nor give us any clue what such approaches might look like. Nonetheless, I think we can infer that a bottom-up approach to El Condor Pasa would at bare minimum have required that the Bolivian regime actually speak to its Aymara and Quechua subjects and tried to figure out what they thought of all of this. And if we cast our net a little wider, beyond El Condor Pasa, a bottom-up approach to any intangible heritage will necessarily involve extensive and unrepressive relations between national bodies, on the one hand, and various communities and groups within national borders, on the other hand, from indigenous to immigrant groups, from traditional communities to revivalist associations, and from occupational to religious collectivities. A bottom-up approach requires at the very least widespread consultation and a participatory process.

I would urge that we go further, however. I think – I hope – we are all in agreement that there is an important place for scholarly expertise in the implementation of this convention. Our agreement begs the question, however, what exactly that place is – what exactly scholars should contribute. A top-down approach relies on scholarly expertise for answers, it relies on experts to define heritage and to evaluate its merits, to decide what is worth safeguarding. A bottom-up approach, on the contrary, should rely on scholars not for answers but for questions. The answers should come from the grassroots, from the population, from social actors outside formal institutions; they should come from communities, groups, and individuals. In other words, I’m urging you – urging us – to take seriously the convention’s definition of intangible cultural heritage. It is an excellent definition. Remember:

The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills . . . that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.

(Article 2, paragraph 1)

So what is ICH? It is the practices that communities, groups, and individuals recognize as their heritage. It is ... what they say it is. In other words, we simply don't know what it is until we go out and ask them. I'm sure all of us here already have some particular practices and expressions in mind – this traditional dance, that traditional song, whatever – but we are prejudging the question. The question is not what experts recognize as intangible cultural heritage, it is not what ministries classify as intangible heritage, and it is not what museums or universities define as intangible heritage. The question posed to us by the convention is what practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills communities, groups, and individuals recognize as their heritage. The only way to give any kind of adequate answer is to do the research. And that is surely the beginning of any bottom-up approach to ICH.

It is also, incidentally, the key to getting communities involved in this process, for another task that the organizers have charged this meeting with is to consider how to go about securing such involvement. A third task they've set us is to figure out the role of individuals and the human factor in general. Again, I would suggest that any capable body charged with drawing up ICH inventories should begin by launching a research project – a social dialogue – in order to figure out its own mission. This research, this dialogue, will above all else involve talking to people. All the subsequent work of this body, when it draws up inventories and puts in place mechanisms for safeguarding, should be based on what people say, it should be based, that is, on the results of its research.

The research itself will no doubt take different forms in different countries, for methodology, after all, is context-sensitive. But in our countries, of group 1 and group 2, there is a long and venerable tradition of ethnological and anthropological and folkloristic field research, based on interviews, participant observation, questionnaires, and focus groups, and this can yield exactly the sort of answers we are looking for: that is to say, it can tell us what it is that communities, groups, and individuals recognize as their cultural heritage. In other words, what is it in their own practices and expressions that people feel ties their present lives to their past? How do they value these practices and expressions? And what role do they see for interventions designed to safeguard these?

Such research will yield inventories that reflect real priorities – not just of governments or of experts, but of the communities, groups, and individuals in our societies; inventories that conform to the spirit and to the letter of the convention; inventories that are created through a democratic, participatory process, which at the same time guarantees an influx of scholarly expertise. It is also the basis for successful safeguarding operations: there is no use in urging people to dance dances that they're not interested in dancing; no point in creating incentives for people to sing songs that don't speak to them; or enabling people to perform rituals that they don't care about because they no longer serve a purpose. Before we consecrate time and money and expertise and other resources to safeguarding intangible heritage, let's call to mind the convention's definition of intangible heritage and ask ourselves: what practices and expressions do people – other than I and General Hugo Banzer, other than governments and experts – recognize as part of their cultural heritage? To whom are they meaningful? Who values them as a way of binding together the past and the present?

So there you go: a little history, a song from the Andes, and story from UNESCO. Thank you for your attention and I look forward to continuing our discussions.

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