CASE STUDY 27

Measures for safeguarding a dance tradition in Mongolia

Different ethnic groups in the Khovd and Uvs Provinces of Mongolia have traditionally performed the Biyelgee, a Mongolian folk dance. Biyelgee dances are typically confined to the small space inside the *ger* (nomadic dwelling) and are performed while half-sitting or cross-legged, using hand, shoulder and leg movements. Biyelgee dancers wear clothing and accessories featuring colour combinations, artistic patterns, embroidery, knitting, quilting and leather techniques and gold and silver jewellery that are specific to their ethnic group.

The dances play a significant role in events such as celebrations, weddings and labour-related practices. Traditionally, the Biyelgee has been transmitted through apprenticeships or home-tutoring within the family, clan or neighbourhood. In most of the second half of the twentieth century, ICH elements that underpinned Mongolian identity were not encouraged, to say the least. Today, the majority of people who know how to perform the Biyelgee are elderly and their numbers have decreased dramatically (they currently stand at about twenty). Few young people are interested in the dance today and many have left the rural areas. The diversity of the Mongol Biyelgee is also under threat as there remain very few representatives of the distinct forms of Biyelgee from different ethnic groups.

#### Safeguarding measures

Mongol Biyelgee: Mongolian traditional folk dance was inscribed in 2009 on the Urgent Safeguarding List. The nomination file (which may be consulted on the website of the Convention) provides information about past and existing safeguarding measures; section 3(b) presents further safeguarding measures that are to be carried out to contribute further to the viability of the element.

A general framework for ICH safeguarding was already in place: the Mongolian Parliament (State Great Khural) passed a Law on Cultural Heritage Protection, and the State ratified the Intangible Heritage Convention in 2005. The State has implemented a national programme for promoting traditional culture. ‘Draft Regulations on Identifying, Registering, Safeguarding, Transmitting, Developing and Promoting State Support for the Intangible Cultural Heritage’ and ‘Draft Rule of National Council for Identifying Intangible Cultural Heritage and its Bearers’ have been submitted to the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science of Mongolia for further approval by the Government of Mongolia (2008).

Biyelgee tradition bearers, community representatives, scholars, researchers and NGOs worked together to develop a National Programme for Protection and Development of Mongol Biyelgee: Mongolian Traditional Folk Dance. This Programme was approved by the Government of Mongolia and implemented over the period 2008–12.

#### Specific measures

The programme includes the following main safeguarding measures (additional measures are included in the nomination file):

1. *Conduct research and documentation*: Researchers will carry out regional surveys on the dance in remote areas of Mongolia and identify tradition bearers. They will also send a research team to Inner Mongolia (China). They will create a database of information about Biyelgee dancers. They will publish textbooks and manuals, and academic conferences, seminars and workshops will be held on the topic. The subject of Biyelgee traditions will be included in the curriculum of professional arts college and universities.
2. *Support practitioners*: The Biyelgee tradition bearers will be provided with financial support to organize training for prospective learners. National conferences of multi-ethnic Biyelgee heritage bearers will be organized. Biyelgee contests and competitions will be held to motivate the tradition bearers and their pupils in continuing to practise the dance form. Biyelgee bearers, dancers and dance instructors will be offered training to improve their qualifications and skills for training others. Training facilities will be provided in local communities, and training manuals will be produced. The guidelines and memoirs of senior Biyelgee dancers and bearers will be published.
3. *Raise public awareness*: Media coverage of Biyelgee traditions will be promoted, featuring some of the tradition bearers. CDs and DVDs featuring the variety of Biyelgee performances will be produced. Meetings, festivals and events related to Biyelgee will be organized to promote awareness among the general public. Ethnic arts traditions will be included in the relevant subject syllabus of General Education Schools and the teaching thereof encouraged in local cultural centres.
4. *Monitor and evaluate the safeguarding activities*: Members of the implementing team will monitor and evaluate the success of the safeguarding activities.

People from the communities practising the folk dance will be invited to participate in meetings to discuss the further safeguarding of the Biyelgee folk dance heritage and will form part of the implementation team. Biyelgee tradition bearers and learners will be one of the main implementing partners for the safeguarding plan. The main executive body for the safeguarding plan will be the Mongolian Cultural Studies Association (MCSA), assisted by the Mongolian ‘Bii Biyeleg’ Association (MBBA) and other NGOs.