unit 43

describing an element

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lesson plan

Duration:

1 hour 30 mins

Objective(s):

Develop the ability to write a summary of an element of intangible cultural heritage that identifies and describes it for outsiders in a brief way, while at the same time capturing its complexity. Understand the importance of brief descriptions of elements for effective communication about intangible cultural heritage as defined in Article 2 of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Description:

The unit provides all the conceptual knowledge and practical guidance required to write a summary of an element of intangible cultural heritage that identifies and describes it for outsiders, in compliance with the criteria provided in Chapter I of the Operational Directives. As part of the methodology this unit uses the instructions provided for completing nomination forms and refers to existing summaries available online for all inscribed elements on the Lists of the Convention. This unit is generic and can easily be used as an exercise in other workshops.

*Proposed sequence:*

* The facilitator discusses the need for summaries, the importance of learning to focus on essential aspects of an ICH element, the characteristics of a summary and some examples of summaries using Unit 43 Hand-out 1.
* Participants read through Sections A–F and 1 and 2 of the Unit 43 Hand-out 3 sword dance USL sample nomination.
* In groups, participants draft a summary of up to 250 words (short description) of the sword dance USL sample nomination, ensuring they cover the questions identified in Unit 43 Hand-out 2.
* Participants report back to the plenary from their groups to present their summaries.
* Other participants are then given a chance to ask questions and provide comments.

Supporting documents:

* Unit 43 Hand-out 1: Examples of summaries
* Unit 43 Hand-out 2: Developing a summary
* Unit 43 Hand-out 3: Sword Dance sample nomination
* Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage[[2]](#footnote-2)

Notes and suggestions

The units on Describing an element (Unit 43), Involving the communities concerned (Unit 7) and Safeguarding (Unit 9) are intended to help participants explore some of the underlying issues in developing a nomination file:

* identifying and presenting an element of intangible heritage;
* identifying the communities and groups concerned;
* understanding an element’s value to the community concerned;
* encouraging community participation in the preparation of the file, and seeking and recording their consent for nomination, and
* developing safeguarding measures.

Participants will begin with writing a summary of a sample element called the sword dance (Unit 43 Hand-out 3 is a partially completed nomination form for this element). Summaries are short descriptions of elements that have to be provided in nomination files for the Representative List (see form ICH-02). A summary should be no longer than 250 words for English and slightly more for French (280 words). Brief summaries are included systematically on the ICH website after the inscription of an element on one of the Lists of the Convention.

The forms dedicated to nominations for possible inscription on the Urgent Safeguarding List (ICH-01) and requests for international assistance (ICH-04), more specifically, requests aimed at supporting a safeguarding plan, also include a description, but allow for a slightly longer version not exceeding 1000 words for English.

A summary identifies the important characteristics of an element and presents them in a clear way for outsiders not undermining the complexity of the intangible cultural heritage described. Writing a summary is a good exercise in briefly presenting the essentials of any element. Summaries may be required both at the national level (visibility, awareness-raising and in inventories) and on the international level (in nomination files for the RL and on the ICH website).

As an alternative to the activity presented in this unit, the facilitator could choose to lead an oral activity instead of using the sword dance nomination. For the activity, one participant could orally describe an ICH element that he or she is familiar with. After, the other participants can ask questions to clarify details about the element using the questions from Hand-out 2 as a guide. The participants are then divided into groups in which they must elaborate a 250-word summary of the element described. The descriptions are then presented in plenary and other groups can ask questions or comment.

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facilitator’s narrative

#### Defining an element: examples to discuss

Unit 43 Hand-out 1 presents a number of examples of summaries of elements already inscribed on the Lists of the Convention. Participants may use these to obtain a sense of the variety of ways in which an element can be defined and briefly described.

Before a summary can be written, the contours and boundaries of the element need to be defined in conjunction with, and with reference to, the communities, groups or individuals concerned. There are many ways of defining an element of ICH. ICH elements can be identified and defined for inventorying or safeguarding purposes at the national or local level; however, there are some considerations that should be borne in mind when nominating elements to the Lists of the Convention such as, the importance of nominating and inscribing elements that are neither overly general and all-inclusive nor overly similar to elements already inscribed.

For more information see the papers from the Open ended intergovernmental working group on the ‘right’ scale and scope of an element: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00497.

For a summary of perspectives on this matter, see the Aide-mémoires for completing nomination forms for inscription on the Lists of the Convention: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/forms/

#### The Sword Dance sample nomination

The sword dance sample nomination can be used as a basis for participants to develop a 250-word summary of the element.

This is not a complete sample nomination form. Participants can imagine that the form is in a rather preliminary state. It was drafted by the Zukhri Sword Dancers Association in Countries H and J, and sent to the Departments of Culture in those countries for advice along with a request to study whether the Ministers of Culture of both countries eventually might envisage a joint nomination to the USL. In their letter to the Departments of Culture, the Association might have asked for advice and assistance on:

* how to involve the broader Taraqa community in the development of the nomination file and safeguarding measures;
* whether the two states concerned would be willing to actively support safeguarding of the element; and
* what safeguarding measures the Association and the community concerned might consider for the element in the future.

Participants can imagine that they have been asked by the Departments of Culture in both countries to assist the Zukhri Sword Dancers Association in finding answers to these questions.

#### Developing a summary

The facilitator may divide the participants into groups (ideally, six to ten people) and ask each group to elect a chair and a rapporteur who will present their discussion points. In their groups participants can read through Sections A–F and 1 and 2 of the sword dance sample nomination file (see Unit 43 Hand-out 3) and work through the questions in Unit 43 Hand-out 2 to develop a 250-word summary of the element, if possible on a computer. Remind them that they have only 250 words, so they should aim to be succinct.

After the participants have developed their summaries in their groups, they then return to the plenary and a representative of each group reads out the summary produced by the group. Ideally, the summaries should be displayed on screen for the entire group to see. The other participants are then given a chance to ask questions. The plenary can comment on whether each group’s summary has answered all the most relevant questions from Hand-out 2. To save time, one group can present their summary and the other groups can simply add or make suggestions for amendment from their own summaries as needed.

When discussing the summaries, the facilitator should check whether the participants answered the questions outlined below. Additional information is given below so that the facilitator can easily check whether the information provided by the participants in their short descriptions is relevant and correct. Because of the length restrictions, not all of the information below should be included in the summary.

1. What practices, skills or other features characterize the element concerned? Are any instruments, other objects or specific spaces required for the enactment of the element?

* Sword dancing is practised by Taraqa men wearing black robes and a special cloth wound around their heads. They carry swords and sometimes also small brass shields. Between one and three men dance at a time in between two rows of other men who chant and clap, sometimes to the accompaniment of traditional musical instruments such as the riqq fiddle. The men in the middle twirl or throw their swords and sometimes engage in mock battle. At the end of each man’s performance, he raises his sword in a demonstration of bravery as he leaps high into the air for a dramatic finale.

2. What domains of ICH are involved?

* Social practices, rituals and festive events;
* Performing arts (to some extent – the performance aspect is over emphasized by the national theatre);
* Oral expressions (the chants during the dance).

3. Which communities or groups practise or perform the element and identify with it?

* The Taraqa of Countries H and J in the Middle East.
* Each of the nomadic Taraqa clans has its own slightly different version of the dance, varying its form and the rhythm of the music and the nature of the sword performance.

4. Where is this practice located?

* Countries H and J in the Middle East

5. When does it take place?

* At social occasions such as weddings, naming ceremonies, camel races and horsemanship competitions.

6. Do some people have particular roles or responsibilities in enacting or transmitting the element?

* Men among the Taraqa (over the age of 15) perform it (some chanting and clapping, some dancing).
* Older men (Taraqa masters) teach young men how to perform the dance.
* Other men, women and children form the audience. Women also play an important part in helping the men to prepare their swords and dress for the occasion.

7. What social and cultural functions does the element perform for the community concerned? What is its significance to the communities or groups concerned?

* It is central to Taraqa identity, bringing them together as a community at their social events.
* It is believed to provide protection from evil spirits and demons, especially during marriage processions where evil spirits are often thought to target people’s happiness.

8. How is the element transmitted?

* Young boys inherit or are given a sword from their father at 15. They learn from masters of the sword dance within each clan and are allowed to practise their skills in the wedding processions of relatives.

9. Is the practice or transmission of the element threatened in any way?

* The frequency of performance of the dance has declined as young Taraqa men have moved to towns in large numbers since the 1950s. Also, the focus on sword throwing within the sword dance performances at the national theatre and on television have shifted the emphasis away from the social meaning of the dance and transformed it into more of a spectacular event, a change considered problematic by Taraqa sword dancers.

1. . Frequently referred to as the ‘Intangible Heritage Convention’, the ‘2003 Convention’ and, for the purpose of this unit, simply the ‘Convention’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. . UNESCO, *Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (referred to in this unit as Basic Texts), Paris, UNESCO. Available at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00503>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)