

Communities and memories: a global perspective

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Audiovisual documentation and its role in the transmission of knowledge

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Abstract

One of the key issues in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is the transmission of knowledge. I shall discuss how audiovisual recordings and the accompanying written documentation could play a role in the transmission of knowledge, in particular of the performing arts. Documenting intangible cultural heritage is not the same as passing on the repertoire of a performing art. However, documentation could enhance, for instance, visibility inside and outside the community concerned. Further, it may be used for analysis and support the process of transmission. Therefore documentation may play a significant role in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, if it is carried out in the right way. Women play an important role in transmitting cultural knowledge and safeguarding measures should also be addressed to them.

Transmission of knowledge

There is a well-known quotation from Amadou Hampaté Bā (1901-91): 'In Africa, when an old person dies a library burns down' (Condominas 2004:23). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004:60) comments on this statement that '... the library metaphor confuses archive and repertoire,' and she points out that passing on the repertoire through performance is 'different from recording and preserving the repertoire as documentation in an archive.' Of course, we should distinguish between the two processes of documentation and performing. For similar reasons it is important for museums to remember that there is a cultural 'soundscape' connected to the displayed musical instruments.

However, the just quoted expression about an old person representing a library is important and needs attention. It points, for instance, to the fact that communities with oral traditions have no, or only a few, libraries with books (and museums), *in addition to* storytelling and other performances. Their 'libraries' mostly consist of people who have the recognised ability to perform culture. In the present-day situation, for those communities audiovisual libraries may be much more important than libraries with books. Cassette tapes, (V)CDs, DVDs and the Internet have made new forms of orality possible: we may hear and see how the performer performs and preferably also the interaction with the public, with little or no written text. Oral traditions have long been neglected in the past, and this is an important reason why the 2003 UNESCO convention was necessary.

The transmission of knowledge, especially in oral traditions, is threatened by internal developments, but also by wars, natural disasters and globalisation.¹ We should not be afraid for some performing arts to disappear, as long as new forms have the possibility to develop. However, the power structures in our world are not helpful for stimulating cultural diversity. If we only care about money and short-term economic profits, little attention will be given to the power of music and other performing arts that make us see the world in an ‘enchanted’, more spiritual way.

Countries like Japan and the Republic of Korea understood already in the 1950s that some individual artists were instrumental in passing on cultural knowledge to younger generations. These countries made programmes for supporting those ‘living national treasures.’ Unfortunately it seems that these programmes were not always supporting the transmission of knowledge, but implied financial support for the old master. The right way to honour artists is to show respect for their work and give them more facilities to transmit their knowledge to the next generations. Before I shall move to the audiovisual documentation, I want to discuss the important role of women in the transmission of cultural knowledge.

Important role of women in transmission of cultural knowledge

The process of transmitting knowledge is not only threatened when an old man dies, but also when an old *woman* dies.² The role of women in passing on cultural knowledge is still underestimated. This is partially due to the fact that we lack data. It is also due to ideologies that only include gender equality to a limited extent (see also Moghadam and Bagheritari 2007). This has influenced the text of many treaties and conventions that use a ‘gender-neutral’ language.

During the discussions about the text of the 2003 UNESCO convention,³ I managed to get in the words ‘nonformal education’ as one of the means for transmitting knowledge in the definition of ‘safeguarding’, as in non-formal education women play a very important role. This was definitely an improvement on the original definition as given in the Glossary (2002).⁴ I also proposed to include the important role of women in transmitting cultural knowledge. However, this proposal was not accepted, because delegates apparently thought that this was an old-fashioned women’s lib viewpoint: we had passed that stage.

Moghadam and Bagheritari (2007:14) mentioned that, for instance, in storytelling the role of women is very important. I can only confirm this, based on my field recordings from southern

¹ Preamble of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage (ICH): ‘*Recognizing* that the processes of globalization and social transformation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular owing to a lack of resources for safeguarding such heritage....’

² It is remarkable that Kirschenblatt-Gimblett (2004:60) gave the saying as ‘Africa loses a library when an old man dies,’ and not ‘an old person’, as Condominas did (see above).

³ I then represented the Netherlands.

⁴ Article 2.3 of the 2003 UNESCO convention: “‘Safeguarding’ means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and nonformal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.’ The Glossary (2002) had defined safeguarding as: “Adopting measures to ensure the viability of intangible cultural heritage. These measures include the *identification, documentation, [protection,] promotion, revitalisation and transmission* of aspects of this heritage.”

Malawi. It is also true for girls, and I hope you allow me to give an example. In March-April 1971 my wife and I stayed in Fatima Mission in Chiromo in southern Malawi. We asked whether people would know stories that included songs.⁵ The mission post also had a school, and the school girls proved a rich source of information for these *nthano* stories to us. Within a few days we recorded 23 stories. Fifteen of the girls were 12 or 13 years old. They told the stories in turns. The other girls stood around the storyteller and made up the chorus for the songs in the stories.

It is not sufficient to have only the written text of these stories, as the songs (*nyimbo*) include significant information. Obviously, the storyteller will use the song to make the presentation more interesting, and by asking the audience to sing the refrain, the listeners become actively involved in bringing these stories to life. Perhaps more important is that the songs were systematically used when there was communication between human beings and non-human beings, like animals, plants, and the deceased. The deceased would often transform into a snake or bird, and then the human beings would sing to it. In the Malawian *nthano* stories animals and plants also sing to human beings. Whereas the spoken word is used for inter-human communication, the songs are used when communication by speech is apparently not powerful enough. In these Malawian stories, only music has the power to cross the boundary between two worlds, and ask assistance for solving human problems from the non-human beings (see also van Zanten and van Zanten 1995).

Audiovisual example 1: Storytelling by girls in southern Malawi

Nthano story 'Simacheche' told by Fatima Tsinganu, 12 years old, from Sankhulani, Nsanje (Tape 11, item 44, first 56 sec.).

'Once upon a time there lived a certain woman and her husband and they had one son. One day, the boy went hunting. And while he was hunting he found a bird. And after the hunt he took the bird with him. And when he picked it up it started to sing. Whenever I am singing you must sing the chorus "sparrow". Understood? Yes. It sang like this:

Simangule-ngule, simangule-ngule, (it's me) the sparrow, man
A little bird with a long beak,
His name is sparrow, man

And the bird sang in English, it said "yes, yes, I'm a sparrow, man".'

[The boy did not understand what the bird was singing, so he took the bird to his father, who also did not understand the bird's song. Then the bird was taken consecutively to the chief, the Malawian president, Kamuzu Banda, and Queen Elisabeth.]

'And Queen Elizabeth said: "It is not worth worrying about. Go and eat it." And this is where my story ends.'

Girls and women are not only involved in storytelling; there is a great variety of performing arts in which the role of women has not yet been sufficiently investigated, ranging from lullabies and wailing songs to songs for weddings and work, like pounding maize or rice. If

⁵ Such as had been published a few years earlier by Tracey (1967).

we want to document intangible cultural heritage, this field of women's music should be one of the priorities.

In southern Malawi I recorded about 80 pounding songs between 1969 and 1971 (and it could easily have been more). The topics covered, for instance, being in love, scolding your husband about his unfaithful behaviour, the danger of getting syphilis, the absence of men who were working in the South African mines (van Zanten 1991). Below I present a Malawian pounding song that reflects the difficult position of a woman, who after her marriage moves to live with the family of her husband in this patri-local society.

Audiovisual example 2: pounding song (nyimbo za pa ntondo)

Song *Ndi ulule* by Anola Kasasi (21 years) and Margret Jakobo (19 years), Semu Village, Thyolo, 30 December 1970. (T10-57, first 31 sec.).

'I reveal a secret
 Sorry!
 You, mother-in-law you have no pity
 You took my soap and stone
 When my child comes, how will it wash itself?
 Sorry!'

In my fieldwork in Indonesia the important role of women in the performing arts was confirmed. The Sundanese arts represent female aspects of human communication (van Zanten 1989:192 and 1994:86–7), an idea that has been taken up by Sean Williams in her analysis of gender in Sundanese music (Williams 1998, 81; see also van Zanten 2008). Hence safeguarding measures should be directed to the right persons and quite often these are women.

Audiovisual documentation

In the *Glossary* (2002) for the 2003 UNESCO convention 'documentation' is defined as 'the recording of intangible cultural heritage in tangible forms.' We may ask why we need these tangible forms, that is, books and audiovisual recordings, for intangible culture. After all, in the performing arts, the essence lies in the performance, especially in oral traditions, and not in some (audiovisual) recording of a performance.

Too much emphasis on the importance of documentation may distract us from the heart of the matter: the performance itself. Nowadays anyone can easily make audiovisual recordings with a mobile phone. It sometimes seems as if we are no longer interested in what we see and hear with our own eyes and ears, but only in the registration on a mobile phone after the event has happened. So, what can the audiovisual documentation of intangible cultural heritage contribute to the safeguarding of the performing process?

First of all, we should not underestimate the importance of using audiovisual means to make the performing arts visible (and audible) to a wider public. The 2003 Convention mentions education, awareness-raising, encouraging "dialogue which respects cultural diversity" and visibility in several articles (1, 14 and 16). Audiovisual recordings may be used for teaching, for scientific analysis, for making CDs/ DVDs, for television broadcasts, etc. My recordings also offered me a valuable possibility to check whether it really sounded as I had remembered.

Audiovisual recordings can play a role in education and awareness-raising. As an example I would like to present a short part of a discussion with an Indonesian performer. On 19 November 1996 I had recorded the recitation of an epic story (*sijobang*) by Datuk Kodo, near Payakumbuh, West Sumatra. The performance of the episode lasted for about two hours and ended around 2:30 in the morning. After the performance, when most other people in the room were sleeping, we discussed in a relaxed setting, the purpose of these recordings and copyright issues. I recorded this discussion on my DAT recorder, and below I quote the relevant section of our two hours long discussion in translation.

[Datuk Kodo] There were people who said, 'The recordings of your performance will be sold on cassette tape in the Netherlands.' I said, 'Let him go ahead.' If people like the music, it will be impossible for them to learn *sijobang* from these cassettes; that is impossible.

[WvZ] Yes, this is just a start, to draw their attention....

[Datuk Kodo] Yes, that is it! When they hear it, they want to know more, meet the people and go to Indonesia. That is good.

I will not discuss the issue of copyright here. It is clear that Datuk Kodo wants to teach students who are genuinely interested in the Minangkabau performing arts, Randai theatre and *sijobang* storytelling. The recordings I made may help to attract the attention of people who might be interested in his performing arts. This is a common attitude of musicians. They are not so much interested in financial rewards, but rather in the recognition that their 'technology of enchantment'⁶ deserves respect. This is why musicians also care about transmitting their musical knowledge.

My main informant on Tembang Sunda Cianjuran music in West Java, Uking Sukri (1925-1994), also used to stress the importance of documentation, as he wanted the music to stay and he was afraid that it would otherwise disappear. However, I did not share his feeling that Cianjuran would soon disappear, and that in future Cianjuran music would only be found in Leiden University! The Baduy minority group in West Java also expressed a keen interest in my audiovisual documentation.⁷

Conclusion

According to Kirschenblatt-Gimblatt (2004:59) "heritage interventions attempt to slow the rate of change." This may especially be true when the rate of change is for a great deal determined by forces outside the cultural environment concerned. However, it is easy to say in a rich country that we don't need such interventions, but the situation is different for people in poorer regions of the world, who also quite often suffered from the fact that their oral traditions were not taken seriously. They sometimes have to face the future, starting from a problematic present. In the context of the 2003 UNESCO convention audiovisual recordings could be very useful. I would advocate recordings that may also be used for transmitting knowledge in new situations, for instance, formal instead of non-formal education.

⁶ A term used by Alfred Gell (1999:163): 'The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form.'

⁷ See further, for instance, my recorded presentation on prior informed consent for WIPO: www.wipo.int/tk/en/folklore/culturalheritage/resources.html

Ethnomusicologists should pay attention to the transmission of knowledge when making audiovisual recordings. For instance, we need more data about the educational settings involved. It is a pity that post-modernists show little interest in empirical data; the ethnomusicological literature is not rich in examples of the relation between physical ‘facts’ and social ‘facts’. Of course it is difficult to define what a ‘social fact’ is. However, technology is definitely part of the performing arts and it is not the right approach to look just at the ideas, the symbolic meanings, that are represented.

On the other hand, documentation should not be an aim in itself. We should not try to register every detail, forgetting that our camera always captures only a fraction of what can be seen. Like any type of research we should make clear what we want to achieve with our documentation, otherwise we shall end up with many hours of audiovisual registrations that no one will examine. The circumstances in which the audiovisual recordings were made should be registered carefully. Further, the recordings should be analysed immediately, and not just stored for the future. In the field of cultural heritage we should aim for recordings that can be used for the transmission of knowledge and new teaching methods, and focus more on women.

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