CASE STUDY 24

Safeguarding through a living human treasures system
in the Philippines[[1]](#footnote-1)

#### Living Human Treasures

One of the biggest threats to the viability of ICH is posed by the declining numbers both of practitioners and of those who are in position to learn from them. An effective way to safeguard ICH is to encourage experienced practitioners to continue to transmit their knowledge and skills and to encourage younger people to appropriate them.

In the 1990s, inspired by the Republic of Korea, UNESCO promoted the Living Human Treasures systems. These systems were created in over twenty countries. They differ widely from country to country, but most recognize key practitioners of ICH and reward them in some way in order to encourage the transmission of their skills and knowledge to others.

Some of the systems yielded good results, but today UNESCO would not promote the system in the same way (see Unit 3: ‘Living Human Treasures’). Nevertheless, effective systems whereby skilled practitioners are encouraged to continue practising and transmitting their skills (in old or new ways) are still needed. The National Living Treasures Award system in the Philippines assists practitioners to practise traditional Filipino skills and transmit them to others.

#### GAMABA system in the Philippines

In 1992 the Philippines created a National Living Treasures (NLT) Award, otherwise known as the Gawad sa Manlilikha ng Bayan (GAMABA), through Republic Act No. 7355. The NLT system was established in order to:

* acknowledge the importance of traditional folk artists;
* revitalize the artistic traditions of communities;
* provide mechanisms for identifying and assisting qualified traditional folk artists to transfer their skills to the community; and
* create opportunities for popularizing their works locally and internationally.

National Living Treasures are defined as citizens or groups of citizens engaged in any uniquely Filipino traditional art whose distinctive skills have reached a high level of technical and artistic excellence. The Award is given to practitioners in traditional Filipino folk arts, such as folk architecture, maritime transport, weaving, carving, performing arts, literature, graphic and plastic arts, ornament, textile or fibre art, pottery and so on.

The Award was first given in 1993 (three Awardees), then in 1998 (two Awardees), 2000 (three Awardees) and 2004 (three Awardees). The National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) was designated as the organization responsible for the implementation of the NLT system. In implementing it, the NCCA is required to identify traditional artists, adopt a programme ensuring the transmission of their skills and promote among the Filipino people an appreciation of these skills.

#### Selecting Awardees

The NCCA created a special Committee (known as the GAMABA Committee), which works with a rotating Ad Hoc Panel of Experts in traditional folk arts to conduct a thorough search, fair selection and careful review of nominees for the Award.

Nominations for the GAMABA may come from the Ad Hoc Panel of Experts, the NCCA Sub-commission on Cultural Communities and Traditional Arts, cultural or private institutions, State agencies, local cultural offices, universities and private persons knowledgeable in any of the identified categories.

Once nominations have been received, Ad Hoc Search Committees conduct research and documentation on candidates for the Awards, in accordance with the following criteria:

* They are members of an indigenous or traditional cultural community anywhere in the Philippines that has preserved its customs, beliefs, rituals and traditions.
* They have engaged in a folk-art tradition that has been in existence and documented for at least fifty years.
* They have consistently performed or produced, over a significant period, works of superior and distinctive quality.
* They possess a mastery of the tools and materials needed by the art, and have an established reputation in the art as master and maker of works of extraordinary technical quality.
* They have passed on and/or will pass on their skills to other members of the community.

The assessment and selection process is conducted discreetly, i.e. without the nominee or the community concerned being aware of the nomination. The search process can take a long time as the Philippines is a large country with many ethnolinguistic groups.

Once the search process is complete, selected nominees are recommended to an Ad Hoc Panel of Reviewers which evaluates the candidates. Recommendations are then submitted to the NCCA Board of Commissioners for confirmation. Before the conferment of the Award, Awardees are informed of their obligations and rights. A Memorandum of Agreement is then signed between the Awardee and the NCCA.

Finally, the President of the Philippines confers the Award during a public ceremony in Manila.

#### Responsibilities of and benefits for Awardees

The NLT Awardees are obliged to transmit their skills through apprenticeship and other effective training methods. Each of the Awardees is encouraged to set up their own training centre (usually a home-based apprenticeship programme). The Awardees develop their own training methods and send monthly reports on their work; they are also expected to promote their art in cooperation with the NCCA and to donate samples or documentation of their works to the National Museum. In return, Awardees receive official recognition, an initial grant, a monthly grant and various personal allowances. The monthly grants may be withdrawn if the Awardees do not fulfil their obligations.

Based on the monthly reports submitted by Awardees, on interviews and on feedback to the GAMABA Committee, the Award has mainly had positive effects on the Awardees although a few problems have been noted. In general, the Awardees have gained prestige in their respective communities. The Awards have also been a source of pride for the communities concerned and have been instrumental in revitalizing dying traditions such as *inabal* weaving.

#### Broader impact of the Awards on ICH promotion in the Philippines

The NLT system generates most national attention during the Award ceremonies. To increase the visibility of the ICH safeguarded through the system, Awardees have now been included in textbooks for elementary school students and travelling exhibitions have been organized. Awardees are invited to give demonstrations locally, nationally and sometimes internationally.

The Awardees also raise awareness about the ICH by organizing festivals or competitions in their communities. Samaon Sulaiman, one of the Awardees and a *kutyapi* (two-stringed lute) player, organized a competition for all his students. The winners were given their own instruments rather than cash prizes. The competition thus raised awareness about the skills associated with *kutyapi* playing, assisted the best students in acquiring instruments and also gave welcome business to the few remaining *kutyapi* instrument-makers.

The detailed and discreet selection process under the NLT system in the Philippines ensures a thorough search for, and a fair selection and careful review of, Awardees.

This means that several years’ preparation is necessary to identify them. The Awards are thus not made every year, although a number of new Awards are planned for 2011. Reports show that the objectives of the system are being met.

For further information:

* The Awardees are listed on this website:
http://en.wikipilipinas.org/index.php?title=Category:GAMABA\_ Awardees
* National Living Treasures guidelines and Awardees:
http://www.ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca/org-awards/org-awards-gamaba-guidelines.php
* Rules and Regulations on the Selection of the National Living Treasures; and Gamaba Committee Membership Rules: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00057-EN.pdf
* <Page> dedicated to Living Human Treasures on the UNESCO website: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=es&pg=00311&topic=lht&cp=ph
1. . Thanks are due to Cecilia Picache (who is in charge of the GAMABA office) for her assistance in developing this case study. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)