

Frequently Asked Questions about Intangible Heritage

by Amar Galla

Chair, ICOM-ASPAC

> The theme of the ICOM General Conference in 2004 is "Museums and Intangible Heritage". Why is the term "cultural" omitted?

Intangible heritage concerns both natural and cultural resources. There are many ICOM members who work in science and natural history museums dealing with the cultural dimension and knowledge-base of the collections and programmes. Documentation on traditional knowledge about bio-diversity is an invaluable intangible element of natural heritage. *The National Natural History Museum in New Delhi and the Lawrence Durrell Zoo in Belize both integrate local knowledge and perceptions of science and the environment into their core activities.*

> Can intangible heritage be a vehicle for education and cultural action?

In addressing intangible heritage, museums face the challenge of contextualising past collections as well as the challenge of present-day relevance. *The National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, informed by its thinking about intangible heritage, brings together collections from Dutch colonial history and present-day multi-cultural population groups, formed in the aftermath of colonialism and through immigration.*

> Are curators involved with intangible heritage?

More than ever. Intangible heritage challenges the profession to address community-centred conservation. *The conservators at the UBC Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver have used innovative approaches informed by traditional knowledge systems to rethink conservation practice. They integrate cross-cultural and living heritage techniques and knowledge into their work.*

> Do we need new documentation tools for dealing with intangible heritage?

Appropriate documentation tools are crucial for the effective integration of intangible heritage into museological practice. Libraries and archives have been at the forefront in dealing with intangible heritage. *The AFRICOM Handbook of Standards - Documenting African Collections focused on collections; this best practice tool now faces the challenge*

of elaborating standards for the documentation of intangible heritage. In most African countries, intangible heritage is the basis for the pan-African movement called African Renaissance, and the indigenous terms used to designate heritage refer to living heritage.

> Is intangible heritage the concern of museums only?

Intangible heritage is relevant to all forms of heritage, whether movable or immovable, tangible or intangible, creative or developmental. Intangible heritage demands interdisciplinary collaboration. *The National Underground Rail Road Freedom Centre in Cincinnati is a unique new museum that brings together collections, documents, art, historic houses, heritage structures, cultural routes and landscapes, neighbourhoods, community histories and voices together centred on the theme of freedom and the history of slavery in the U.S.A.*

> Where do museums stand on the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage?

ICOM strongly supports UNESCO's efforts towards the safeguarding and promotion of intangible heritage, and stresses the importance of the inputs of professional bodies such as ICOM, ICOMOS, IFLA and ICA in the implementation of the Convention. The UNESCO Convention is a significant first step in renewing our relation to cultural heritage, by promoting integrated approaches to tangible and intangible heritage.

Contact: Amareswar Galla

Chair ICOM-ASPAC

Director, Sustainable Heritage Development,

Australian National University,

Canberra, Australia

Tel. (+61) 419 273 041

Fax (+61) 2 6298 3908

Email a.galla@anu.edu.au

UNESCO: Safeguarding the Intangible Heritage

At its 32nd General Conference in October 2003, UNESCO adopted a *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, conceived as complementing the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (the "World Heritage Convention") which was adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1972 and which safeguards tangible heritage of exceptional value to humanity.

> The *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* contains the following working definition of intangible cultural heritage: "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills - as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith - that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and it provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity"

(July 2003). The UNESCO Convention is a standard-set-

Intangible Cultural Heritage at the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

by **Nguyen Van Huy**

Director, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

Since the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology opened in 1997, its goal has been to present the intangible cultural heritage within the museum setting. Traditional skills, oral traditions and social practices are presented in craft demonstrations, folk performances, workshops, exhibitions and projects.

> With limited staff and experience, the Museum has encountered some difficulties, including the choice of approach, the identification of issues to address, finding ethnic groups to work with, and difficulties of logistics and funding. We are faced with such questions as: "how organise performances in the museum so that they are different from those at the theatre or on television, while nevertheless attracting visitors?"; "what aspects of intangible culture should be presented and how?"; "what ethnic groups should be chosen?"; "how can we help people understand the need to preserve their traditions?"; "how raise funds for these activities?", and so on. To overcome these difficulties, our method is "learning by doing". We train ourselves to carry out such work through study tours to foreign museums, working with museum experts and local people, and also through experimentation. We identify intangible cultural heritage which is to be preserved or reinvigorated, then work closely with local communities, prioritising the preservation and presentation of traditions that risk disappearing, and reviving those that are very important to people's lives but have already vanished.

> For instance, in 2001, we invited craftspeople from Dong Ho village to demonstrate toy-making at the Museum. They were the only surviving artisans of this craft. Many visitors, including children, came to the Museum to learn to make toys. In addition to documenting all activities on video and photo, we interviewed the craftspeople about their lives and their trade. These documentary materials became particularly valuable when one of the craftspeople passed away two years later. We mounted another project, in 2000, when we received a grant from the Ford Foundation to help revive a tradition of puppetry of the Tay people in Tham Roc village, Thai Nguyen province, that had died out some 50 years previously. The Museum staff worked with puppeteers in choosing puppets, practising with them and training the younger generation to perform. The project resulted in an ethnographic film on the process of reestablishing this art-form, which helped people to understand why a tradition should be revived, and how to do so. The project also involved a performance of Tay puppeteers at the Museum, and puppet products sold at the Museum shop. Thus the traditional skills involved in making and manipulating puppets were reestablished, the project brought financial benefits, and the bond between members of the community was strengthened.

> Presenting intangible cultural heritage requires the Museum to develop new skills, knowledges and methodologies: subjects of study and for presentation are no longer simply objects and artefacts, but living people and living culture. This calls for further research and capacity-building, closer relationships with local communities, and available staff and funding for these activities.

Contact: Nguyen Van Huy

Director, Vietnam Museum of Ethnology

Nguyen Van Huyen Road, Cau Giay district, Hanoi, Vietnam

Tel. (+84) 4 836 0350 - Fax (+84) 4 836 0351

Email lathuy@vme.org.vn

ting and binding legal instrument, alongside existent instruments in the field of

intangible heritage, such as those concerned with intellectual property as it relates to the use of biological or environmental resources.

> The domains of expression covered by the Convention include languages, oral literature (myth, songs, games, genealogies), performing arts and body techniques (including rituals, sport, mime), knowledges and know-how (concerning nature and the universe, learning, healing and culinary techniques, traditional craftsmanship, production techniques), and narrative forms in all their diversity. In all these areas, the act of creation is embodied in skills and knowledges, not in any concrete object. The Convention additionally addresses the following issues around intangible heritage: the relation between tangible and intangible cultural heritage; the living and cross-border nature of intangible cultural heritage; measures for protecting this heritage; and the need for concerted coordination between local, national and international instances in order to achieve this.

> The Programmes relating to the Convention include an international Proclamation designating the "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" (see back cover of this issue of *ICOM News* for two examples) and the compilation of a *List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* as well as a *List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*.

> Intangible cultural heritage is threatened today by cultural standardisation due to globalisation, tourism, migration, the degradation of the environment, industrialisation, rural exodus and armed conflict. It is a living fabric with which history is constituted, a source of identity, creativity and of cultural diversity. While tangible cultural heritage is designed to survive long after the death of the person who produced or commissioned it, the fate of the intangible heritage is much more closely related to its creators, as it depends on oral transmission. For all these reasons, adequate measures must be developed to safeguard this heritage, which the UNESCO Convention formulates.

> ICOM National Committees could usefully contact their National Commission for UNESCO - or Permanent Delegation, where the latter does not exist - to ensure that the voice of the museum world is heard in the planning of the implementation of the Convention.