Preserving intangibility: Who, What, Where?

By

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Introduction

A recent development in the study of culture has been a focus on *Intangible cultural heritage*. UNESCO has been among the major actors in this process. Such a focus could be seen as a natural development within UNESCO, since the organization had commissioned the report 'Our Creative diversity' in the early 90's which provided an expanded concept of culture (World Commission for Culture and Development 1995).

UNESCO defines intangible heritage as "*embracing all forms of traditional and popular or folk culture, i.e. collective works originating in a given community and based on tradition. They include oral traditions, customs, languages, music, dance, rituals, festivities...*" [1] These traditions may be expressed either through forms of cultural expression, or as cultural spaces which bring together various cultural activities. (UNESCO. 2001)

A focus on intangible cultural heritage must: "*give precedence to ways of presenting traditional and popular cultures that emphasize the living or past aspects of those cultures (showing their surroundings, ways of life and the works, skills and techniques they have produced)*" [2]. In other words, such a focus is context oriented.

UNESCO promotes a multicultural focus on preservation, both in regard for ethnicity, and for differences between rural and urban traditions. Educational institutions should therefore "*design and introduce into both formal and out-of-school curricula the teaching and study of folklore in an appropriate manner laying particular emphasis on respect for folklore in the widest sense of the term, taking into account not only village and other rural cultures but also those created in urban areas by diverse social groups*" (UNESCO 1989)

Although UNESCO views change as an integral dimension of culture, change through globalization still becomes a formidable threat to tradition: *"local intangible cultural heritage is rapidly being replaced by a standardized international culture, fostered not only by socio- economic 'modernization' but also by the tremendous progress of information and transport techniques."* [3]

In UNESCO's 'living human treasures' program, importance is therefore placed on discovering who tradition bearers are, giving them acknowledgment, and making sure that their knowledge is transmitted to further generations: *"... the holders of the heritage must be identified and given official recognition."* [4]

Similarly, the "Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" aims

- *"to sensitize and mobilize opinion in favour of the recognition of the value of oral and intangible heritage and of the need to safeguard and revitalize it;*
- *to evaluate and list the oral and intangible heritage sites in the world;*
- *to encourage countries to establish national inventories of the oral and intangible heritage and to take legal and administrative measures to protect it;*
- *to promote the participation of traditional artists and local practitioners"* (UNESCO 2001)

With these concepts in mind, I wish to discuss 3 models for the preservation of intangible heritage that are used in Norway: Music competition, the 'district musician' system and academic folk music studies

Music competition

A Norwegian *kappleik* is a judged competition in traditional song, dance or instrumental performance. Judges evaluate tradition bearers, and provide recognition through an award system. The first Norwegian

kappleiks were held in the late 1800's, and the competitions have always been a type of grass-roots movement organized by amateur folk music associations, with little outside funding. These competitions have acted as important meeting places for musicians, where people could learn about their own intangible traditions, and the traditions of neighboring areas.

Fiddle is the most important instrument in older Norwegian folk music. Both 8-stringed Hardanger fiddle and standard violin are considered traditional, but are played primarily in separate regions. Hardanger fiddle is traditionally a solo instrument, both when played for dancing and in concert. "Old" Norwegian instruments (such as various folk-flutes, horns and stringed "langeleik" zithers) have been included in kappleik competitions, but always as solo instruments. Modern instruments (such as accordion, guitar and bass) were not accepted, and certainly not group playing.

Beginning in the 1980's, attempts were made by the National Folk Music organization towards kappleik revitalization. The organization began to accept styles from ALL of Norway at kappleiks, in addition to creating categories for new-composition and group playing. This provoked many "traditionalists", and in 1986, conservative musicians formed a separate organization, aiming to preserve solo playing(see Mørkhagen 1987; Goertzen 1997). Today, the two competing organizations attract somewhat different participant groups. *Kappleiks* arranged today by the original, liberal, organization are most "popular" among the general population, but many of the best players don't perform at these competitions, due to ideological differences.

The kappleik model shows a system for identifying tradition bearers and providing recognition that depends on whose authority is accepted. In this case, two different groups are claiming 'tradition' as their own, with divergent conceptions of what makes up the tradition. Disputes of this kind may lead to cultural change, but they simultaneously act to concretize ideas of tradition at grass root levels.

District musician

During the past few decades, many counties and municipalities have adopted the institution of 'district musician'. A district musician may have performing, teaching, and administrative duties within a county or municipality. Some district musicians are classically trained, but many areas use the district musician system as a way of promoting local folk music. In Buskerud County, a local folk singer has taken the job of teaching traditional songs in primary schools, and leading the county folk music center. This singer travels all over the county, acting as a key figure in the coordination of folk activities.

We could say that intangible heritage always has tangible aspects, in that tradition bearers live in a material world. Objects may both serve practical functions and carry symbolic meaning. One example of this could be instrument maker Nils Stuvstad, who made several hundred *sjøfløyta* during his lifetime. *Sjøfløyta* are Norwegian flutes which were originally imported 'overseas' from Germany in the 1600's. When Mr. Stuvstad died in the 1980's, his workshop was donated to Buskerud county. The workshop is now part of the museum exhibition at Buskerud Folk music center. The exhibition is open to the general public, but perhaps serves it's most important purpose as a resource in folk music courses, where instrument making and playing is taught. Both the objects and the context around the objects (making, playing, teaching, etc.) are part of the intangible heritage.

The leader of Buskerud Folk music center has contact with a large network of musicians. Many of the best musicians are asked to become part-time teachers. Courses at the Folk music center in Buskerud attract people from outside the community, as well as being an important way of keeping local traditions alive. Courses at the center are funded from both national and regional levels.

One annual course at the center teaches the making and playing 'Seljefløyte', a type of Norwegian folk instrument. Seljefløyte is a willow-flute that can

only be made in early summer, when sap is running in the young shoots. The wooden core of a willow branch is removed to leave a bark tube. A fipple is carved in one end, and the musician plays a scale by blowing overtones while covering and uncovering the end of the flute. Over a 3-day period, students get intensive tuition in the instrument, and give a concert for the local community on the last day.

In this example, an official government body gives recognition to the district musician as a tradition bearer, who then further gives recognition to the folk musicians she employs to teach.

Academic folk music studies

For over ten years, *Telemark University College* has offered a 2-year program in folk music studies at their Rauland campus. The 2002 study-plan lists the following goals:

> *The main aim of the program is that students develop an understanding of the rich variation in form and function that we have within Norwegian folk music. Core material will be discussed from a wide methodical perspective, where viewpoints from music, cultural history and social science together shall create the basis for study. Throughout their studies, students shall obtain competence and experience in spreading knowledge about our folk music. Students shall also develop their expertise in singing, instrumental performance and dancing.* [5]

Most students do not come from a folk-music background, but their study period becomes an intense immersion in traditional culture. First year students study mostly at the Rauland campus, while second year students often do local concert tours, much in the same way as district musicians do.

The program at Rauland actually provides an integration of all three models through

- Coursework and instrumental tutoring at Rauland
- Attending short courses in other districts, such as at Buskerud Folk Music Center.
- Inviting guest musicians to hold workshops at Rauland.
- A student-organized *Kappleik* in January
- Student concert tours.

The teachers in the Rauland program are all recognized folk musicians with academic backgrounds. Students who complete the folk music program often continue in their studies towards a degree in ethnomusicology, anthropology or ethnology. In this way, the Rauland program provides the impetus towards the creation of new authorities, but primarily towards formation of 'experts' rather than practicing tradition bearers on a grass-roots level.

Conclusion

Each of the above models is relevant to the UNESCO definitions, but in different ways. The first model (competition) shows how conflicting concepts of tradition and innovation can lead to fragmentation, while simultaneously promoting creativity and possible multiple-traditions. Tradition bearers gain recognition in this model through receiving awards in *kappleiks*, which may act as important symbolic capital in becoming an 'authority' who can influence the development of the tradition. The second and third models show two different levels of 'top down' intervention to preserve intangible heritage. These also employ screening processes in choosing who becomes an authority, but not necessarily the same criteria as people on the grass roots level.

The socioeconomic organization of intangible heritage is an important factor in discovering its viability and reproductive possibilities. Is the tradition self-sufficient, or is it dependent on financial support from outside organizations/governments? The first example shows a tradition that survives primarily without outside intervention or financial support. The second and third examples appear to be closer to how UNESCO envisions the reproduction of cultural heritage in modern society: Heritage preservation becomes the responsibility of formal institutions, rather than traditions reproducing themselves.

The question of whether 'top down' definitions of culture create static, unchanging social forms is relevant here. Recent critics of the report 'Our Creative Diversity' (Wright 1998, Eriksen 2001) point out a 'conservationist' attitude towards cultural pluralism. Wright (1998) says, for example, that "UNESCO, in its vision of a new ethical world order, maps out a world made of 'cultures' as discrete entities, without engaging with the issue of contestation over the power to define." Similarly, Prott (1999) states that "the principles of sustainable cultural development require that the members of a culture are themselves empowered to preserve and develop it."

For us to promote intangible cultural heritage as 'living tradition', we need to understand how processes of authority

recognition function, as well as realize that the borders of any tradition may be fluid or solid, fuzzy or sharp depending on the context we view them from.

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Footnotes:

[1] http://www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/html_eng/index_en.shtml

[2] ibid.

[3] http://www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/treasures/html_eng/method.shtml

[4] ibid.

[5] Taken from "Emneplan for Folkemusikk 1" at http://www-not.hit.no/efl/fagplaner/2002-2003/629-folkemusikk1.pdf (author's translation)

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