INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE: PRESERVATION, SUSTAINABILITY, AND UNESCO

KEITH HOWARD

At the level of UNESCO, notwithstanding the initiative to release audio recordings of 'disappearing' traditional music developed from 1961 onwards by the ethnomusicologist Alain Daniélou through the UNESCO-affiliated International Music Council, concerns for the Intangible Cultural Heritage essentially began to be raised at the 1971 General Assembly in Mexico. The Bolivian president asked, after Simon and Garfunkel had a year earlier released a cover (albeit with new lyrics) of the Bolivian song '*El Cóndor pasa*', why UNESCO was not protecting local ownership of music. Simon later claimed he had been told by the composer of another cover, Jorge Milchberg, that the melody was eighteenth-century but the song had been written just 57 years earlier in 1913. By this time, UNESCO policies for the tangible heritage were well developed, after the efforts to save Abu Simbel in Egypt and the treasures of Venice from flooding (which led to the 1964 Venice Charter), and with the documentation and preservation efforts of, for example, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) and the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS). As the intangible came into focus during the 1980s and 1990s, so the preservation ethos typically reflected procedures applied to the tangible, although by then arguments about making material culture meaningful through communicating an understanding of its production and use had become commonplace (Vergo 1989; Woodhead and Stansfield 1994; Dean 1996). This was clear when the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau was added to UNESCO's World Heritage Sites in 1979, memorializing what had happened there more than the site itself. Policy makers for the intangible heritage had to wrestle with balancing preservation and sustainability: we can see this playing out in three decades of academic work, with the term 'sustainable' becoming increasingly fashionable, linking to the shift towards 'applied ethnomusicology' (for which, see Titon 2015 and Schippers 2015).

Discourse on preservation has often evaded the challenge of maintaining performance and creation activities that define artistic practice; where discussions of cultural performance emanating from anthropologists since the 1940s have emphasised bottom-up approaches, preservation agendas that focus on documenting, collecting and archiving rather than performance feed back into tourism, and into state-led attempts to promote national identity. These encourage top-down approaches: performance arts festivals are promoted at home and abroad (Jansen-Verbeke 2009: 61–5); craft objects are reproduced in infinite quantities for distribution and sale. Where promotion becomes the motivation, so multiple locals can be appropriated; state music and dance companies represent transform the intangible into a commodity for national development, but devalue the economic and social stakes of people who in previous times created or produced it (Skounti 2009). Rights of ownership emerge, issues associated with industrial production, but these have the potential to harm local communities, accruing benefits to some at the detriment of others. Bluntly put, local communities struggle to compete with more economically savvy urban professional craftsmen and performers, who are better placed to negotiate and claim ownership rights, and with the commodified and commodifying cultural industry. However, if measures of control and validation are required, these are created then enshrined in sets of guidelines, rules and regulations. These, in turn, need to be policed, either by agencies of bureaucrats or – we might hope – by members of the academic community.

The essential point to note is that among the academic community there is no consensus about exactly what the preservation, conservation, or sustainability of the intangible heritage entails. Broadly stated, polemics against preservation, in which cultural traditions are critiqued for being frozen in an ahistorical time rather like a display within a museum, are less frequent today than they were at the beginning of the new millennium. So, despite the past being a foreign country where things were done differently (L.P.Hartley 1971: 7), and as scepticism towards government intervention wanes, our contemporary zeitgeist shifts to an acceptance of a past that is both alive and venerated (Bharucha 1993: 20). Typically, we now argue that intangible heritage should not just be preserved, but should be created and recreated, developed and 'revalorized…through new dimensions' (Jansen-Verbeke 2009: 57–8). Such a dynamic approach characterizes contemporary ethnomusicology, as the Geneva-based scholar, archivist and promoter Laurent Aubert has it: 'The nature of tradition is not to preserve intact a heritage from the past, but to enrich it according to present circumstances, and transmit the result to future generations' (Aubert 2007: 10). This raises the challenge of authenticity (and associated concepts, such as the *wŏnhyŏng* archetype in Korea and *yuanshengtai* 'original ecology' in China; see Rees 2012; Gorfinkel 2012; Howard 2012; Maliangkay 2012), and imposes a concern with cultural rights, where the life of a community (and ownership by a community) will be deemed at least as important as an individual's right to artistic production and participation (Weintraub 2009: 2–5). Hence, harnessing local ownership and the enthusiasm of local consumers becomes a seemingly unassailable, democratic principle (see, for example, folklorists such as Abrahams 1968; Bauman 1971; Ben-Amos 1971; Hymes 1975). It is coupled to an awareness of the importance of those who create and perform (see, for example, Hufford 1994: 3). At the same time, though, we typically argue against what Adrienne Kaeppler and others have referred to as 'airport art' – the staged shows and souvenir trinkets designed for tourists – and against the repackaging of what Guillermo Gómez-Pena (2001) brings together under the term 'lite difference'. World music, for instance, is expected to be 'sophisticated but not obtrusive, easy to take but not at all bland, unfamiliar without being patronizing' (Spencer 1992); it is listened to by 'audio tourists' (Kassabian 2004, 2012) as they imbibe Hollywood's attempts to 'ventriloquize the world' (Shohat and Stam 1994), and as they experience the hyper-real 'shoppertainment' and 'eatertainment' consumption of giant shopping malls and food courts.

In such a maelstrom, the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage ought to have brought some clarity. It began by stating the importance of the intangible as 'a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantor of sustainable development'. It recognized, and indeed had already set this out in the 2002 *Cultural Diversity: Common Heritage, Plural Identities* document, that globalization and social transformation had brought 'grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction'. To enable efforts to protect heritage, the Convention set up the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, with members elected from states that signed up. Importantly, member states that sign enter a legal undertaking to protect intangible heritage; hence heritage items submitted by states and appointed to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity require plans for documentation, maintenance, and promotion. This is policed by a committee consisting of members selected from the six UNESCO electoral groups, in proportion to the number of state signatories to the Convention within each. 172 member states are now signatories, and the Representative List has 365 'elements', some of which are also inscribed on a List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding.

The Convention changes things, but also makes it incontrovertibly clear that member states are in charge. UNESCO is the sum of its parts – its member states – rather than a monolithic organisation, although, and as Anthony Seeger recently remarked in a critique of the *Journal of Folklore* volume *UNESCO on the Ground* (Foster and Gilman, 2016), many scholarly reports of local cultural heritage ignore this, misplacing where top-down processes and practices originate. One result is that the Representative List is becoming, year on year, increasingly unbalanced: by 2016, there were 31 Chinese, 21 Japanese and 19 Korean appointments, reflecting the strength (and financial contributions) of East Asian member states, but zero appointments from Scandinavia, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom.

Contrasting the Convention, but with the Convention taking over from it and, indeed, inscribing all its appointments onto the subsequent Representative List, were the 2001, 2003 and 2005 proclamations of Masterpieces in the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. These arguably had a more equitable geographical spread, with the 19 Masterpiece appointments in 2001 reflecting both political expediency and extra-local support. China, Japan and Korea were allowed to submit one nomination each, and the cultural space of the Semeiskie 'old believers' in the Russian Federation was appointed alongside Georgian polyphonic singing, the Garifuna language, and dance and music in Belize. In 2003 and 2005, again, China, Japan and Korea were allowed to submit one nomination each, each of which was appointed. The 28 appointments in 2003 included the melodic and modal system known as *maqam* in Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan with Uzbekistan, and other arts and crafts from Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Polynesia, South America and the Caribbean. The 43 Masterpieces proclaimed in 2005 included eight from Asia, nine from Africa, 11 from Europe, four from the Middle East, seven from Latin America and the Caribbean, and four that were multinational.

The Masterpiece programme, coupled to a sequence of documents that concluded prior to the 2003 Convention with a revision of guidelines for systems appointing Living Human Treasures – the craftsmen and artists, rather than the craft or art itself – effectively tamed scholarly critique: academics were employed both by local groups and state authorities to prepare candidacy files for specific intangible arts and crafts, and were commissioned by UNESCO, through its affiliated organizations such as the International Council for Traditional Music) – but not by member states – to evaluate these same files. Each nomination process began with the submission of a candidature file. Each member state could submit one national candidature, although additional multinational candidatures were also permitted. The files were required to include documentation, but also action plans for preservation overseen by national bodies. They were also expected to identify archival resources and outline strategies for promotion, training methods to be employed for specialists and support mechanisms. UNESCO's affiliates then commissioned reports by experts, and an international jury scrutinized both the files and the reports.

The Convention shifted responsibility back to member states. It thereby recognised the paymasters – state governments and their affiliated institutions and agencies – but diminished international scrutiny. Not dissimilar to the motivations behind Brexit or Donald Trump, state control tends to balance the local or national with the global. One can see this in a positive light, as UNESCO's eighth Director-General, Koichiro Matsuura, has it: 'in the context of increasing globalization…more and more peoples and communities of the world have begun to recognize the importance of their cultural heritage" (Matsuura 2005: 17). Or, to quote the 1993 UNESCO *Guidelines* for 'Living Human Treasures':

> 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.

The flip side of Arjun Appadurai's deterritorialization, then, is what Anthony Giddens describes as a 'weighing of anchors' to conjoin 'proximity and distance' (1991:142), or of what John Tomlinson terms reterritorialization: 'The impact of globalization becomes…a matter of the interplay of an institutional-technological impetus towards globality with counterpoised "localizing" forces' (2003:270).

But the Convention gives the potential to a state to do something rather different, and this is implicit in Anthony Seeger's commentary on the Australian-led project, 'Sustainable Futures: towards an ecology of musical diversity':

> There's an active process in the disappearance of many traditions around the world. Some of them are being disappeared by majority groups...others are being disappeared by missionaries or religious groups...others are being disappeared by copyright legislation' (http://musecology.griffith.edu.au/About; website now deleted).

'Sustainable Futures' isolated factors implicated in the decline of music traditions: technological developments, infrastructural challenges, socio-economic changes, failing education systems, and loss of prestige. It then documented these within five 'domains': systems of learning, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, regulations and infrastructure, and media and the music industry (Grant 2014; Schippers and Grant 2015; Schippers and Grant 2016). The project's legacy is a tool for communities to use to assess the sustainability of their own music traditions. Communities, though, are not states, despite the best attempts at forging nationalist agendas; the Convention, then, assumes that states will embrace indigenous communities and their cultures, but that embrace subjugates indigeneity, environmentalism, and, ultimately, local craftsmen and artists. As 'local' becomes 'national', so borders fix a nation and its culture, ignoring ethnicities that traverse different states. So, too, choices are made, which obscure and mystify identity. Was it local or national that David Lowenthal had in mind when he argued how memorializing the past could help avoid modernist amnesia (1985: xxiv)? – an appeal not dissimilar to Milan Kundera's comment in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* that 'the struggle of power is the struggle of memory over forgetting'. Was it local or national that Svetlana Boym had in mind when she commented that the global epidemic of nostalgia is ‘an affective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world’ (2007: 9).

China, with its one state but 56 ethnicities, illustrates well the shift that the Convention has brought. In the third Masterpiece round, in 2005, the Chinese appointment was ‘Uyghur Muqam of Xinjiang’, complementing, but at a Chinese level, the *maqam* Masterpiece appointments of Iraq, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and trumpeting that the Uyghur were Chinese not Turks. Then, in 2009, among the Chinese performance arts added to the Representative List were ‘Farmer’s Dance of China’s Korean ethnic group’, ‘Gesar epic tradition’, ‘Manas’, ‘Mongolian art of singing, Khoomei’ and ‘Tibetan opera’. Ignoring the two Tibetan genres, Mongolia proper responded, and Mongolia’s *khöömei* was added to the list a year later, in 2010. Korea was slower to respond; where China classified the genre as *nongak*, it uploaded a supporting video that erroneously featured the contemporary four-musician staged form of *samulnori*, and it took five years before the Republic of Korea added *nongak* as a Korean form to the list in 2014. Again, Kyrgyzstan might rightly consider ‘Manas’ part of its heritage, but, as one part of the epic trilogy, the Kyrgyz form was only added to the list in 2013. Korea is not blame-free, though: its appointment of ‘*Gangneung Danoje’* as a Masterpiece in 2005 ignored the Chinese roots of this festival, while the Republic of Korea’s appointment of the ‘national’ folksong ‘*Arirang*’ in 2012 was only made truly national in 2014 when the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea had ‘*Arirang*’ inscribed as its own heritage on the list.

To conclude, let me bring together my comments pertaining to academic involvement. The first point to make concerns nostalgia. Loss is a common theme within conservationist interventions (Cleere 2001; Meskell 2002; Holtorf 2006; Rowlands 2007), but it also marks how generations of scholars have sought ways, like Alan Lomax (e.g., 1972), to counter the perceived cultural grey-out brought by modernisation, and to capture and compare cultural traditions before they disappear, as Erich von Hornbostel put it as a key reason for setting up the Berlin Phonogramm Archiv. Nostalgia gets a bad press, but what actually marks out preservation agendas and sustainability agendas as different? The second point is that cultural heritage agendas began with the tangible, and only over time added the intangible. Not surprisingly, then, much of the literature fuses concerns and strategies for the tangible, particularly documenting and evaluating, or collecting and archiving, onto the intangible. We have a way to go before we reach equality, when states, agencies and institutions will fund an intangible, transient and non-permanent performance as readily as they will a museum or art gallery that exists in a physical, geographic space as a tangible permanent structure full of tangible objects. Finally, my third point is that our acceptance of UNESCO's preservation efforts has effectively been bought. This is not meant in a negative way; rather, participatory roles, much in keeping with activist or applied research, have been offered and accepted, impacting on Ivory Tower observations and distancing. Academics became expert witnesses and expert guides, helping to prepare candidature files for UNESCO's Masterpieces and, subsequently, for the Representative List. They became part of the judging process, commissioned to produce reports for UNESCO through, for example, the International Council for Traditional Music. Subsequent to the appointment of a genre, of course, the academic role reverts to observation. And it is within this frame, charting impacts, successes and failures within the myriad global schemes that now exist for the intangible cultural heritage that today's ethnographers – ethnomusicologists and others – situate themselves.