

Intangible Heritage

**Raftis, Alkis: "Intangible Heritage", Tradition and Art 061, p. 12-13, Athens, I.O.F.A.,
January – February 2002.**

On 18 May 2001, for the first time, ` proclaimed 19 of the world's most remarkable examples of the oral and intangible heritage. Selected by an 8-member jury, they were chosen for their outstanding value as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The proclamation emphasizes the importance of protecting this outstanding but endangered heritage - cultural spaces and forms of popular and traditional expression - and of preserving cultural diversity.

Definition

The new proclamation 74-*+:

- 1. forms of popular and traditional expression - such as languages, oral literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, costumes, craftwork know-how, architecture;**
- 2. cultural spaces - places where popular and traditional cultural activities take place in a concentrated manner (sites for story-telling, rituals, marketplaces, festivals etc.) or on a regular basis (daily rituals, annual processions).**

The oral and intangible heritage has been defined by international experts convened by UNESCO, as "peoples' learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are

important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity".

The oral and intangible heritage encompasses complex, broad and diverse forms of living heritage in constant evolution.

UNESCO Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura calls it a "melting pot for creative expression and a driving force for living cultures."

Why ?

The oral and intangible heritage has gained international recognition as a vital factor in cultural identity, promotion of creativity and the preservation of cultural diversity. It plays an essential role in national and international development, tolerance and harmonious interaction between cultures.

In an era of globalization, many forms of this cultural heritage are in danger of disappearing, threatened by cultural standardization, armed conflict, tourism, industrialization, rural exodus, migration and environmental deterioration.

Objectives

The proclamation's main objectives are to:

- raise awareness and recognize the importance of oral and intangible heritage and the need to safeguard and revitalize it;**
- evaluate and take stock of the world's oral and intangible heritage;**
- encourage countries to establish national inventories of the intangible heritage and provide legal and administrative measures for its protection;**
- promote the participation of traditional artists and local creators in identifying and revitalizing the intangible heritage.**

The proclamation encourages governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities to identify, safeguard, revitalize and promote their oral and intangible heritage.

It also aims to encourage individuals, groups, institutions and organizations to contribute to its management, preservation, protection and promotion.

Criteria

The candidatures are judged on their outstanding value as masterpieces of human creative genius, in that they represent:

- . a strong concentration of intangible cultural heritage of outstanding value;**
- . a popular and traditional cultural expression of outstanding value from a historical, artistic, ethnological, linguistic or literary point of view.**

They must:

- . give wide evidence of their roots in the cultural tradition or cultural history of the community concerned;**
- . demonstrate their role as a means of affirming the cultural identity of the peoples and cultural communities concerned; their importance as a source of inspiration and intercultural exchange and as a means of bringing peoples or communities closer together, and their contemporary cultural and social role in the community concerned;**
- . provide proof of excellence in the application of skill and technical qualities;**
- affirm their value as unique testimonies of living cultural traditions;**
- . risk disappearing due either to the lack of means for safeguarding and protection it or to processes of rapid change, urbanization, or to acculturation;**
- . have a solid action plan for revitalization, safeguarding and promotion.**

History

UNESCO, the United Nations organization responsible for culture, leads international efforts to safeguard the world's heritage.

Since 1972, the World Heritage List, currently featuring 690 of the planet's most remarkable cultural and natural sites, has pioneered efforts in preserving the tangible heritage. As the guardian of cultural heritage, UNESCO seeks to extend that concept by promoting the oral and intangible heritage, in a geographically balanced way. UNESCO's Director-General believes that the intangible cultural heritage is "an equally fundamental part of the heritage of humankind".

For the last 20 years, UNESCO has been at the forefront of oral and intangible heritage preservation with an international instrument, programmes and publications including:

- Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore (1989);
- Living Human Treasures System;
- Collection of Traditional Music of the World;
- *Handbook for the Collection of Traditional Music and Musical Instruments;*
- Atlas of the World's *Languages in Danger of Disappearing;*
- Intergovernmental Conference on African Language Policies.

Since the World Heritage Convention was adopted 30 years ago, many countries have expressed interest in safeguarding the intangible heritage. In 1997, the General Conference decided that an international distinction entitled "Proclamation by UNESCO of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" should be created.

Reaffirming UNESCO's commitment to cultural heritage, the new proclamation reinforces strategic objectives in its culture mandate:

- **Promoting the preparation and implementation of standard-setting instruments in the field of culture;**
- **Protecting cultural diversity and encouraging pluralism and dialogue between cultures and civilizations;**
- **Enhancing the linkages between culture and development through capacity-building and sharing of knowledge.**