

## **Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Philippines: A State of the Knowledge Report on Safeguarding**

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It may well be important to mention at the outset that the Philippines as an archipelago in Southeast Asia represents a vast ecology of intangible cultural heritage that is significantly shaped by its equally lush tropical environment. Its biodiversity, which is one of the richest in the world with one of the highest levels of endemic incidences, is key in understanding its heritage, with both nature and culture conceiving and then sustaining the life-force of tradition and its dynamic history. Therefore, efforts to safeguard this complex universe are contingent on a range of elements that may be traced to both the “human” and the “natural,” from neglect to calamity, from migration to the density of cities, from political agenda to the socialization of young people, from spirits that dwell in forests to the immense talent of the Filipino, and on to the 171 living languages that mark lively ethnicities.

It must also be said that the knowledge on intangible cultural heritage may be inflected with post-colonial critique. The issue of identity in the Philippines is certainly delicate, mainly conditioned by its colonial history under Spain and America. In other words, the anxiety for identity within the scheme of intangible cultural heritage is inextricably linked to the analysis of selfhood after centuries of “otherness” and involves such questions as authenticity and hybridity.

This paper surveys key aspects of the task of safeguarding this heritage.

### *Government*

The initiatives of the nation-state are traced to the principles embodied in the Constitution that vests in government the duty to protect art and culture as well as the necessity of the political establishment to create a national consensus of cultural identity. The question, however, is if this national consensus on culture translates into an inclusive and reflexive community of consent among the different agents in the field of cultural production.

#### A. Legislation

In terms of legislation, the most recent National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 is by far the most comprehensive legislation on cultural heritage, with the following objectives: to protect,

preserve, conserve and promote the nation's cultural heritage, its property and histories, and the ethnicity of local communities; to establish and strengthen cultural institutions; and to protect cultural workers and ensure their professional development and well-being. The definition of cultural property includes intangible cultural heritage and indigenous property.

A salient piece of law is the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997, the core of which pertains to rights: ancestral domain, self-governance, cultural integrity, social justice and human rights. Since intangible cultural heritage is fundamentally linked to land and entitlement to nature and culture, this legislation is paramount because it resists the assimilation of indigenous culture into a dominant national culture.

#### B. Institution

The Philippine Intangible Cultural Heritage Committee was constituted to programme the safeguarding of the country's intangible cultural heritage, working with experts from different affiliations as well as non-government organizations. It works toward a national inventory from the data of its partners. One of its projects was to call for an Intangible Cultural Heritage Forum that reflected on the varied concerns in the field. It has also worked with the Non-Timber Forest Task Force (NTFTF), which helps market the works of the indigenous communities and protects them from exploitation; and the AlunAlun Dance Company, which transmits the knowledge of the dance Pangalay to the next generation through the schools.

One of the main agencies that looks after matters pertaining to intangible cultural heritage is the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. It has formed a committee specifically focused on intangible cultural heritage and its inventory. It must be pointed out that this Commission was built on a unique vision and structure, having been born in the wake of a dictatorship that largely centralised culture. The Commission was imagined to represent the art and culture community through people chosen by the community who sit in committees at different levels, not as bureaucrats but as cultural workers. And so, the various members of these committees, while not particularly assigned to intangible cultural heritage, contribute to the lively awareness of it as part of their own functions in their respective fields, which broadly are the arts, cultural heritage, cultural dissemination, and cultural communities and traditional arts.

Apart from this Commission, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, which was the lynchpin of the cultural policy of Imelda Marcos for around 15 years, has appreciable documentation on this subject. It launched its encyclopedia and *Discover the Arts (Tuklas Sining)*

project in the early nineties and, in the process of putting this together, did field work and documentation on intangible cultural heritage as part of an overview of Philippine art and culture. The Center had a similar undertaking when it set up the Museum of Filipino Culture in 1986.

The National Museum has reference collections of ethnographic artifacts embedded in intangible cultural heritage, as well as a herbarium that also refers to local knowledge of flora. It also confers the designation of “National Cultural Treasure” on both tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

The UNESCO-Philippines has for its part participated in this endeavour through the Memory of the World Committee that has successfully nominated intangible cultural heritage for the international registry: the radio broadcast of the Philippine “people power” revolution in 1986 and the Jose Maceda music collection of 1,760 hours of recorded music from 68 ethnolinguistic groups. Maceda is a National Artist for music.

The Commission on Filipino Language maintains the Filipino Language Data Base.

The National Commission on Indigenous Peoples is the primary government agency mandated to defend the rights of indigenous people in the areas of land tenure, development and peace, and human rights. The Office of Muslim Affairs has related functions, with emphasis on the well-being of the Muslim population in the country.

### C. Honours

Fourth in the hierarchy of honours in the Philippines is the National Living Treasures or Gawad sa Manlilikha ng Bayan, instituted in 1992 to honour the achievements of individuals or groups who have engaged in folk art traditions which have been in existence and documented for at least fifty years. This is equivalent to the National Artist award given to artists working within the modern fine arts system. In relation to the National Living Treasures and beyond, Schools of Living Traditions have been set up as sites where living masters, culture bearers, or culture specialists impart skills and techniques for a limited period. Eleven individuals have so far been named.

### *Academe*

The academe has undoubtedly enlivened the discourse on intangible cultural heritage, placing it in theoretical and historical contexts and thus enhancing the awareness of it. A good compendium is Shiro Saito’s *Philippine Ethnography: A Critically Annotated and Selected Bibliography* (1972). The academe in the Philippines has in recent times seen the emergence of

“studies centres” across the islands that specifically undertake research in local culture, much of which may be considered intangible cultural heritage. Notable examples of these are the Cebuano and Kapampangan Studies Centers, which supplement the resources of libraries, archives, schools, museums, and so on.

### *Epics and Folklore*

The most important achievement in the domain of the safeguarding of the Philippine epic is the proclamation of the Ifugao *Hudhud* and the Maranao *Darangen* in the list of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001 and 2005 respectively. To further foster the cherishing of the epic *Hudhud*, for instance, Schools of Living Tradition dedicated to it were opened and other programmes were launched.

The exceptional efforts of the French anthropologist Nicole Revel to build an archive of Philippine epics merit attention and commendation. Her recent anthology *Literature of Voice: Epics in the Philippines* (2009) complements her path-breaking Philippine Oral Epic Archives (1992-2001), collating 67 epics from 17 cultural communities. It consists of “three sets of data: sound archive, video-sound archive and computerized texts with transcriptions in the respective phonologies of 16 vernacular languages of the Philippines and 2 of Indonesia, with translations in either English, Tagalog, French or Malay depending upon the one who established the first manuscript and his linguistic competence.” Revel’s latest book is on the epic *Silungan Baltapa (The Voyage to Heaven of a Sama Hero)* of the Sama people.

Herminia Meñez Coben’s *Verbal Arts in Philippine Indigenous Communities: Poetics, Society, and History* likewise enriches the literature. Equally exemplary is the life work of Damiana Eugenio who has compiled indispensable volumes on Philippine folklore: epics, proverbs, myths, riddles, and metrical romances.

### *Cultural Education*

The National Committee on Cultural Education of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts has begun its Philippine Cultural Education Plan. It aims to develop an encompassing platform for cultural education and the development of curriculum and instructional materials for formal, non-formal, and informal education in the Philippines. To accomplish this goal, it has initiated a National Cultural Mapping Project to consolidate a national cultural index preliminarily

based on 300 entries per region. The categories of this index include natural and built heritage, intangible heritage, and movable heritage. It has worked with several partners across the country.

### *Popular Literature*

Although not as systematic as ethnographies or folklore studies, popular publications have reinforced support for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. This takes the form of books like *Dream Weavers* on the t'nalak textile and the dreams that animate them; *Soul Book* on Philippine myths of the afterlife; and *Halupi* on a variety of aspects of Philippine cultural life; and *Philippine Ethnic Patterns: A Design Sourcebook* on the many motifs of Philippine artifacts. All these examples take up specialist material but convey information not necessarily as specialized data.

### *Spectacles*

The promotion of intangible cultural heritage sometimes takes on the dimension of a festival and spectacle, a phenomenon that could be traced to how the Marcos government convened large-scale performances to project national unity under its auspices. In this situation, heritage is appropriated in many ways: tourism, local politics, entertainment. It has been observed that in festivals all over the country, spectacles of culture have become staple presentations, with heritage used for texture and colour. This is an interesting aspect of the subject that must be studied in relation to the practice of safeguarding.

Let me end this presentation with some issues that might prove relevant in the long term to discussions on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

First, it can be proposed that we think beyond preservation and explore ways in which intangible cultural heritage becomes contemporaneous with a global society and history. In the Philippines, scholars and cultural workers have advanced the idea of “re-indigenization” because they feel that the state has de-indigenized the structures supposedly for the self-determination of indigenous peoples. In the field of contemporary art, artists like Roberto Feleo have done research on mythology and reinscribed it in contemporary art language.

Second, it can be suggested that we rethink the notion of intangibility and finally grapple with the dilemmas of the fine line between the tangible and the intangible. It might be that the dualism no longer holds, in light of post-colonial theory and practice.

Finally, it can be argued that intangible cultural heritage must not be reduced to the typification and normativization of culture. The fertile states of the affective or the aesthetic deserve to find a central place in the daunting task of safeguarding that which oftentimes slips through the limits of our consciousness, the language of our discourse, and the instruments of our instinct to preserve.

*International Seminar*  
*on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage:*

**Current Situations and Challenges on the Safeguarding  
Measures in the Asia-Pacific Region**

Published on 5 March 2010 by the Department of Intangible Cultural Heritage,  
National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo  
13-43 Ueno Park, Taito-ku, Tokyo,  
10-8713 JAPAN  
Tel 81-3-3823-2316

無形文化遺産国際研究会

アジア太平洋諸国における保護措置の現状と課題

平成 22 年 3 月 5 日印刷

編集・発行 独立行政法人国立文化財機構  
東京文化財研究所 無形文化遺産部  
〒110-8713 東京都台東区上野公園 13-43  
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