



Drawing-up a nation-wide inventory of intangible heritage in Portugal

Paulo Ferreira da Costa

Drawing-up a nation-wide inventory of intangible heritage in Portugal

● **Paulo Ferreira da Costa**

Institute for Museums and Conservation, Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

The Institute for Museums and Conservation is the body of the Ministry of Culture which is responsible for promoting the study, documentation, recording and safeguarding of Portuguese intangible heritage by developing standards, guidelines and information systems for inventorying and providing public access to IH. The drawing up of the National Inventory of Intangible Heritage is a task to which the Institute of Museums and Conservation is presently committed according to both its mission statement and to the legal framework soon to be implemented under Portuguese Heritage Law. The text discusses the main legislative, institutional and scientific issues that must be taken into consideration in order to implement this inventory and that must be considered as opportunities and/or strengths in the implementation of the National Inventory of IH and, simultaneously, as key factors for the success of the Portuguese administration's strategy for the safeguarding of IH.

The legal, institutional and scientific framework

In recent years a set of important measures has been developed in Portugal aimed at safeguarding intangible heritage (IH), both at the legislative, and at the institutional, level.

The first of these measures coincided with the coming into force of a new heritage law in 2001. This established

a specific paradigm for the safeguarding of IH within the general measures dedicated to the protection of Portuguese cultural heritage. This paradigm for IH can be seen as innovative, for it considers all elements of IH as being of equal importance, no matter how different their social, historical or geographical scope may be, thus not subjecting any element of IH to the hierarchical system of legal protection that is applied to movable and

immovable heritage under the law. That legal paradigm is also innovative because it is clearly based on an integrated approach to both tangible and intangible heritage. Further developments in Portuguese heritage law relating to the safeguarding of IH are currently in the making and are expected to come into operation in 2010, both as an expression of the ratification of UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (operating in Portugal since August 2008), and as an expression of recent work at the Institute for Museums and Conservation to establish a system for creating a national inventory of IH.

At the institutional level, the main measures being developed in Portugal are largely derived from the restructuring of the administration of cultural heritage in 2007. New agencies with competencies in IH were created within the Ministry of Culture. At a central level, there is the Institute for Museums and Conservation (IMC) to which the mission of defining and implementing the national cultural policy for the safeguarding of IH is assigned, and at a regional level there is a set of five bodies in charge of cultural administration that support the documentation of IH according to the directives and guidelines produced by the IMC.

Although it was only created in 2007, the Institute for Museums and Conservation followed on from the work of the Portuguese Institute for Museums (1991/2007), a former part of the Ministry of Culture which had a long history in the management of Portuguese heritage. The IMC currently administers thirty-four national museums and palaces covering art, archaeology and ethnographic collections of outstanding importance for Portugal's national heritage. Beyond the safeguarding of IH, the IMC's mission is dedicated to the development and implementation of national cultural policy in the area of movable heritage, namely on matters relating to

museums' collections, conservation and restoration and legally protected cultural property. The IMC is also responsible for the co-ordination of the Portuguese Network of Museums, which presently consists of a hundred and twenty-five museums.

As the central agency for IH in Portugal, the IMC has a department exclusively dedicated to the safeguarding of IH through its study, documentation and recording. Its main task, in the short term, is to create a nation-wide inventory of IH, as well as to produce and edit inventory standards and guidelines for the accurate management of information within the database that supports that inventory. The nation-wide inventory of Portuguese IH will be an on-line, freely accessible database in order to meet UNESCO's demands regarding the participation of communities, groups and individuals in the safeguarding of its IH and the making of IH inventories.

This inventory will be founded on IMC's long and solid experience in creating the digital inventory of Portugal's movable heritage and promoting online access to it. The future database is expected to be fully operational at the beginning of 2010. It will, in fact, appear in an updated version of IMC's own software (Matriz© and MatrizNet©) for the management of information regarding museum collections, and it will be of fundamental importance in promoting an integrated approach to both tangible and intangible culture among cultural institutions in Portugal. This database is also expected to make a major contribution to the visibility of many institutions that have for a long time played an important role in documenting IH in Portugal, such as ethnology and ethnographic museums, and universities and research centres for anthropological studies. This scientific context and the information already available on Portuguese IH should thus be seen as a major strength when it comes to formulating a plan of action for safeguarding IH in

Portugal, as well as for the implementation of a nation-wide inventory of IH.

The role of Portuguese museums in safeguarding IH

As a first step in raising awareness about the importance of safeguarding IH, in 2008 the Institute for Museums and Conservation organised a wide debate on the main issues raised in the Portuguese context by UNESCO's 2003 *Convention*, in particular from the point of view of museums and the role they play in Portugal in documenting and safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage. A series of six conferences under the overall title *Museums and Intangible Heritage: agents, boundaries, identities* took place between February and November that year.

The legal, institutional and scientific issues referred to above were some of the main issues to be debated. Public discussion also considered our main strengths for the implementation of a nation-wide inventory of IH in the Portuguese context, such as the inventories and studies of traditional culture that have been being produced for over a century, mainly by anthropologists and other social scientists and by ethnological and ethnographic museums. Each conference was dedicated to a given theme raised by UNESCO's 2003 *Convention* and/or by the operational directives for its implementation, as follows:

1. Portuguese masks: authenticity and re-invention

(*Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis, Oporto, February 2008*)

In small villages in the north-east of Portugal there used to be a number of mid-winter festivals that traditionally involved the presence of masked men. Those festivals could be understood as rites of passage both for the community, marking the beginning of a new year, and for young men, marking their transition to adulthood. These social practices were exclusive to this cultural area of Portugal but have been abandoned in most villages since the 1960s. However, since the 1980s many of those practices have been re-invented or re-created to promote those villages and their region for folklore and touristic purposes. Women were formerly forbidden to participate in these rites, but today women take the place of men in some villages in order to revive the local festival, and now they too are the bearers of the masks and the local 'tradition'. Such examples of revivals and re-inventions

were the theme for debating whether such transformations of social practices should be considered 'traditional' or 'authentic', and what should be their assessment according to UNESCO's *Convention* on IH.

2. Listing, protecting and assessing how representative different traditions are

(*Museu Nacional do Teatro, Lisbon, April 2008*)

According to the UNESCO *Convention*, the definition of intangible heritage largely coincides with cultural property produced or used in a popular or folk context. But in fact it is not specific to ethnography museums; many 'art' Museums also deal with IH. This is the case in the Portuguese National Museums of Music, Theatre and Costume, which presented their points of view in the first part of the conference, regarding their work on IH from the perspective of the study, documentation and inventorying of their respective collections. The second part of the conference was dedicated to the presentation, by a representative from UNESCO's Portuguese office, of the thematic scope, pre-requisites and mechanisms for safeguarding IH according to UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. This was followed by a presentation of work-in-progress in redefining the Regulation of Portuguese Heritage Law for Intangible Cultural Heritage, which will be of the utmost importance in the definition and implementation of a nation-wide inventory of IH. From a comparison of both protection mechanisms it became clear that the applicability of the first to the Portuguese social context would greatly depend on the implementation of the latter.

3. Memory, identity and project

(*Museu da Luz, Mourão, May 2008*)

The first part of the conference focused on the Museu da Luz, a small museum in the south of Portugal which was conceived as a memorial site, as well as an institution for documenting the tangible and intangible heritage of a small village whose population was entirely displaced as a consequence of the construction of a dam that flooded its original location. The second part of the conference was dedicated to film and sound archives, as well as to several projects documenting IH in the region where that museum is located. Overall, the conference was dedicated to the role that local museums and archives play in the safeguarding of IH, as well as to recognising the importance of IH as a major source of identity for local communities.

4. Knowledge and techniques: from recording to transmission

(*Ecomuseu Municipal do Seixal, June 2008*)

Museums often play an important role not only in recording elements of the intangible heritage of a given community, but also in its transmission for future generations. In cases where the transmission of such practices has been definitively interrupted, and where, according to UNESCO's definition, the practices can no longer be considered as 'living heritage', the study of social and individual memories becomes of utmost importance in order to document cultural property that would otherwise not be fully understood. Two key examples of these different ways of understanding and using IH from the perspective of museums were confronted in the conference, both dealt with the gunpowder industry and its documentation in two different museums in the Lisbon area. Other contributions focused mainly on science and technology museums and collections. Among the themes under discussion was the fact that many social practices are difficult to record and safeguard if media such as photography, sound and film are the only tools available, thus stressing the importance of the role researchers and their written registries play in documenting various elements of IH - mnemonic and traditional knowledge processes, for example.

5. Portuguese fieldwork: what do anthropologists do?

(*Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas, Lisbon, October 2008*)

Inspired by the truism *anthropology is what anthropologists do* the conference took place in the university where, thirty years ago, modern anthropology became part of postgraduate studies in Portugal. The conference opened with a brief portrayal of the development of the discipline in Portugal since its inception in about 1870 up to the present day, which made it clear that the scientific background is extremely important for the building of any action plan for safeguarding IH in Portugal. The speakers at the conference mostly talked about the current diversity of types of fieldwork and other subjects of interest to Portuguese anthropologists. One of the main issues discussed in the conference was which sorts of fieldwork and subjects should - or should not - be considered as intangible heritage under the UNESCO *Convention*.

6. Global museums and intercultural dialogue

(*Museu Nacional de Etnologia, Lisbon, November 2008*)

The last conference of the series was entirely dedicated to the role ethnographic and ethnology museums play in the modern world, notably in the context of multicultural societies, as well as to the challenges and opportunities that inventorying and documenting intangible cultural heritage presents today. The importance of ethnographic collections in the strengthening of relations between museums and their communities, together with the creation of archives for the documentation of intangible heritage within museums to form a basis for intercultural dialogue, constituted the main theme of the conference. The conference took place within the context of the *European Year of Intercultural Dialogue*, as well as in the context of the theme ICOM chose for 2008 - *Museums: agents of social change and development*.

This conference was held in the National Museum of Ethnology in Lisbon which was created in 1962 and is a 'cutting edge' scientific institution which sets a new standard for Portuguese ethnographic museums. Together with the National Museum of Ethnology, two other major ethnology museums presented their strategies for documenting and displaying intangible cultural heritage: they were the Canadian Museum of Civilization (Quebec) and the Musée d'Ethnographie de Genève.

All sorts of different museums were involved in this series of conferences - national museums, municipal and local museums, as well as specialist museums of ethnology/ethnography, art (music, theatre, and costume), science and industry. Three different kinds of professionals were involved in the debate: museum professionals (museum directors, programmers and registrars), anthropologists (researchers, scholars, museum professionals, etc.) and anthropological film-makers. Given the significance of anthropology for the study of IH in the Portuguese scientific context, one of the conferences was exclusively dedicated to this discipline and some of its fields of interest and activity. Thirty-four speakers contributed to the making of the series of conferences and they were attended by six hundred and five participants.

Conclusion

The series of conferences afforded an important opportunity to debate the definition of IH according to both UNESCO's 2003 *Convention* and the operational directives for its implementation, as well as to debate their applicability to the Portuguese social context. In fact, one of the main issues raised by the debate was the fact that over the last forty years Portugal has been undergoing major social changes and Portuguese IH has therefore also undergone major changes. Many traditions have disappeared, others have changed dramatically and some new folklore-based traditions have been invented. Although it is sometimes very hard to distinguish between tradition and representation of tradition, the nation-wide inventory of IH clearly must distinguish between them, and, most importantly, must document the role and significance each element of IH plays amongst its bearers at any given place and time. 🇵🇹