

Preserving intangible cultural heritage in Indonesia¹

A pilot project on oral tradition and language preservation

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Abstract

This paper describes approaches to cultural heritage conservation and protection that emphasize local community participation and give greater attention to “Indigenous Knowledge” (IK). The paper explores ways that indigenous people can preserve their cultural heritage, including their IK, so that it remains a vibrant and self-identified part of community life.

IK is a holistic concept, structured and transmitted through indigenous languages. IK cannot be preserved outside the local and linguistic context in which it makes sense. Giving full recognition to the close bond between culture, IK and indigenous languages, and acknowledging the function of language as an irreplaceable resource of IK, UNESCO Jakarta, working with SIL Jakarta, supports programs to safeguard endangered languages and to integrate IK and indigenous languages into education. The programs that UNESCO Jakarta is developing stress that indigenous languages are valuable resources for IK so that preserving languages should go further than just documenting their structure. Rather, the preservation of indigenous languages should be closely linked with language development.

For UNESCO Jakarta, working with and for indigenous languages is a new field. But considering that Indonesia, with over 700 spoken languages, has a rich and diverse linguistic and multi-cultural heritage, designing projects that help to preserve and safeguard as well as develop endangered languages is an important step towards maintaining this diversity.

The paper addresses several issues relating to the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage. It explores various tools and techniques that support cultural and linguistic maintenance. An appendix presents a brief description of a planned pilot project to preserve the oral traditions and indigenous languages of ethnic minority groups in Kalimantan, Indonesia. As the actual project itself is still under consideration, only the project’s main objectives and challenges are presented here.² Because this is a new field for UNESCO Jakarta, the planned project is considered as a first step towards further research and projects on this important topic.

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous peoples have the right to be Indigenous. They cannot exist as images and reflections of a non-Indigenous society (Coolangatta Statement, 1999).

The world's population of indigenous people³ now numbers some 350 million individuals representing nearly 6000 languages and cultures.⁴ Although cultures themselves are dynamic,

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² A first draft of this pilot project was presented at the Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Minority Communities in Asia, 6-8 November 2003, Bangkok, Thailand. UNESCO Jakarta received helpful comments that have been used in reformulating certain ideas and objectives.

³ "Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-

vibrant and evolving, they are fragile in the face of political, social and economic changes. Because cultural diversity helps to make our world rich and vital, UNESCO considers the safeguarding of indigenous cultures and cultural diversity in general one of its major tasks.

Intangible cultural heritage of minority peoples

Those involved in cultural preservation have been especially concerned that tangible forms of cultural expressions be restored and maintained. Vast monuments like the temple of Borobudur and other works of art such as paintings and sculptures are expressions of human creativity and also impressive technical achievements. There has thus been a widespread emphasis on preserving those works of art that contribute to humanity's visible heritage (Condominas, 2003, p. 20). The less visible aspects of the world's cultural heritage have, until recently, received less attention.

UNESCO has responded to the warnings of researchers and anthropologists that intangible cultural expressions such as oral traditions and literature, visual arts, music and performing arts, especially of minority peoples, are fragile and easily lost (Ibid.) Among the actions taken by UNESCO was the recently formulated Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.⁵ As stated during the convention, language is the main vehicle by which intangible cultural heritage, such as oral traditions and literature, is maintained. Thus, the safeguarding and preserving of languages is an important factor in the process of safeguarding cultures, especially among minority peoples whose cultural heritage is at greatest risk. Due to their smaller populations and their lack of political influence, minority people often face difficulties in achieving their goals, especially with respect to maintaining their own languages and cultures. One result of the large gap between indigenous and national cultures is that the majority population often perceives the minority groups among them as technically and economically backward. This has led to a certain blindness concerning the importance of safeguarding the less powerful languages and cultures (Condominas, 2003, p. 21). Even so, efforts to safeguard the traditional cultures of ethnic minorities have been initiated in several countries.

Indonesia - a multi-cultural island state

Indonesia, an archipelago of over eighteen thousand islands, has a rich and diverse multi-cultural and linguistic heritage. Over 700 languages⁶ are spoken by approximately 300 different ethnic groups (SIL International). The largest ethnic groups are the Javanese at 45 percent of the total population, the Sundanese at 14 percent, the Madurese, 7.5 percent, and coastal Malays, 7.5 percent. In 1992, 26 percent of the population consisted of numerous small ethnic groups or minorities, representing the major part of Indonesia's ethnic diversity (CIA, internet). Indonesia's national motto "Unity in Diversity" (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika) reflects the government's

dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal systems". Definition accepted by the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations, from *Study of the Problem of Discrimination Against Indigenous Populations*, J. Martinez Cobo, United Nations Special Rapporteur (1987).

⁴ Please refer to: www.unesco.org/culture/indigenous/index.shtml.

⁵ Please refer to *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, 29 September - 17 October 2003. Paris, 32nd Session.

⁶Based on information from Stephen A. Wurm and Shiro Hattori (eds.) *Language Atlas of the Pacific Area*, Canberra, 1981-83, pp. 38-45. Since the last available data on endangered languages in Indonesia is from the early 80s, updating of the endangered language inventory is urgently needed in order to build a reliable source for future projects.

recognition and acceptance of the cultural, ethnical, linguistic and religious diversity of its people.⁷

CULTURAL PRESERVATION

A culture can never be reduced to its artifacts while it is being lived (Williams, 1960, p. 11).

Before beginning a discussion on preserving cultural diversity, it is helpful to find a working definition of “culture”. UNESCO operates with a broad definition of culture as

...the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs (UNESCO, 1982).

Integrated in this broad framework are all aspects of people's lives—their ideas and values, their knowledge about and ways of interacting with the surrounding world and their verbal and visual creations and expressions.

Traditional and alternative approaches to culture preservation

Historically, “cultural preservation” was one of the tasks of colonizers and others from the West who collected cultural artifacts and brought them back to be studied and exhibited in European museums. Scientific studies by Westerners of non-Western cultures systematically displaced cultures from their original frameworks and led to interpretations of non-western cultures based on Western values (Kreps, 2003, p. 46). Although conventional museum practices did help to physically preserve some tangible aspects of different cultures, scientific and unilateral interpretations overlooked expressions of intangible culture within the indigenous communities (Ibid. p. 1).

On a popular level, Western interpretations of other cultures supported the notion of cultural superiority and were used to justify colonial control of non-western societies and indigenous peoples. On a deeper level, continuous imbalance of power in controlling cultural representation contributed to general views that a western-oriented education system was the best means to promote economic development.

In recent decades alternative approaches led to a re-thinking of the priorities and processes of culture preservation. A new discourse emerged, emphasizing the need to include multiple voices and perspectives, especially those of the indigenous people themselves, and giving greater attention to indigenous knowledge (IK).⁸ IK is unique to a given culture and society, reflecting and constructing people's ways of understanding and communicating with their world.⁹ Indigenous knowledge systems use tools of transmission different from western knowledge

⁷For additional information please see: Directorate of Foreign Information Services, 'Pancasila, the State Philosophy', In: *Indonesia. An Official Handbook*, Department of Information, Republic of Indonesia, 1999. Online at http://www.indonesia-ottawa.org/Handbook99/main_menu.htm.

⁸ Please refer to ICOM/UNESCO (1997:1) Policy Statement, where it is argued that "museums should become an integral part of societies around them [...] (and) should be an institution in the service of society and development". Furthermore it is stated that "new equations in the relationship between museums and indigenous peoples in different parts of the world" are to be set up.

⁹ Op.cit. Kreps, pp. 8-11 and www.idrc.ca/cbnrm/documents/CBNRM/Toolkit/intro4.htm.

systems.¹⁰ Whereas the western approach tends to be field specific, written and generated through universities, research institutes and professional bodies, IK systems tend to be holistic and deeply rooted in oral traditions.¹¹ Because of these differences, Western models and practices may be inappropriate for studying and preserving non-western cultures. Integrating IK and indigenous concepts in the cultural preservation process is an important step towards a dynamic and people-centered approach to cultural preservation.¹²

As noted above, cultural heritage preservation has traditionally been dominated by the preservation of tangible forms of culture (often in Western museums) that represent communities' histories. The new alternative approaches, including IK, acknowledge the importance, not only of preserving a community's past, but also of preserving vital elements of its living culture and its continuing development. In this sense cultural heritage is more than material culture; it includes the collective memory, language, oral traditions or everyday experiences (Kreps, 2003, p. 10).

IK is rooted in and transmitted through oral tradition—the "passing of knowledge from one generation to the next orally" (Hart, 1995). When recording oral traditions, the cultural knowledge contained within stories and songs is also recorded. In societies where the loss of IK is imminent, recordings can help to maintain knowledge that has been collected through generations.

However, collecting and recording data and material is but one part of the preservation task, the other being the storing and usage of the collected material. New approaches focus on the storage and usage of ethnographic material within the indigenous community, rather than extracting the material from its original context. In this new approach, museums become community and/or cultural centers having several functions, ranging from exhibiting collections of valued art objects to hosting educational programmes and training courses and serving as platforms for cultural representation. The creation of cultural centers should be based on local people's needs and traditions, placing the centers within the local community's decision-making process. Professional museologists and ethnologists can play a role in the development of the centers, for example, by assisting with technical training. Applying this "new museum concept" to the preservation of intangible heritage means that the collected material such as records of oral tradition will stay within the context in which they were created. By using these materials in the learning process of indigenous children, the materials will also be tools of transmission, passing on knowledge from one generation to the next.

LANGUAGE AND ORAL TRADITION

¹⁰ M. Battiste (2002:5) notes that IK has been understood (by Western scholars) as the binary opposite to so-called "Western", "Scientific", "Modern" or "Eurocentric" knowledge. A. Agrawal (1995) states that although there are differences between indigenous and Western knowledge systems in terms of substantive, methodological, epistemological and contextual grounds, a distinction in terms of indigenous and Western can cause problems, especially when defining the content of these categories.

¹¹ According to J. Studley (1998) one consequence of the differences between indigenous knowledge generation and the western tradition concerning methods of data collection, storage, analysis and interpretation is that Western scholars trained in the "scientific" tradition have difficulty appreciating data generated by unfamiliar methods. Studley (1998) further states that only "few Western scholars are able to accept indigenous knowledge as valid in and of itself."

¹² In her book *Liberating Culture* (2003) Christina Kreps discusses cross-cultural perspectives on museum, curation, and cultural heritage preservation, in order to further "liberate" culture from the hegemony of the management regimes of Eurocentric museology.

Our languages contain a significant part of the world's knowledge and wisdom. When a language is lost, much of the knowledge that language represents is also gone. Our words, our ways of saying things are different ways of being, thinking, seeing, and acting (Reyhner, 1996, internet).

Danger of extinction

The new, alternative approaches to cultural heritage preservation recognize the importance of preserving vital and living elements of cultures. Because cultural expressions, such as oral traditions, have an intangible character, the danger of losing them is sometimes underestimated. There are several factors that contribute to the extinction of indigenous people's intangible heritage and indigenous knowledge. Dr. Marie Battiste identifies several factors that have contributed to the loss of IK among Canada's indigenous peoples:

...the persistent and aggressive plan of assimilation [on the part of] the Canadian government and churches throughout the past century, the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge in educational institutions committed to Eurocentric knowledge, and the losses of Aboriginal languages and heritages through modernization and urbanization of Aboriginal people (Battiste, 2002, p 5).

It is important to note that local communities themselves often do not see the importance of preserving their oral traditions, their IK and their languages. They consider their own cultural heritage as backward and as a hindrance to their ability to access "modern society" and economic wealth. It is essential, therefore, not only to create a political environment that values and respects minority cultures but also to encourage communities to become aware of their own cultural treasures and to help them find ways to preserve those treasures (Condominas, 2001, p. 23).

Activities to promote survival

Language is the most significant vehicle for communicating and preserving intangible heritage and IK. Languages not only carry the historical experience of a people group, they also codify, preserve and express distinctive bodies of knowledge (Kingsada, 2003, p. 43). Reyhner argues that

Many of the keys to the psychological, social, and physical survival of human kind may well be held by the smaller speech communities of the world. These keys will be lost as languages and cultures die. Our languages are joint creative productions that each generation adds to. Languages contain generations of wisdom, going back into antiquity (Reyhner, 1996).

The necessity for revitalizing and preserving indigenous languages through recording oral traditions thus becomes evident. Because each language has certain terms and expressions describing things or ideas that reflect the knowledge gathered by one people over generations (Hart, 1995), the documentation of language and language use within different situations (e.g., story telling, songs, rituals, everyday life) can be a first step towards developing and preserving indigenous languages. It is important, however, that as language is an irreplaceable source of cultural knowledge and serves to transmit cultural values, the process of language revitalization and preservation must take place within the local and linguistic context in which it makes sense.

It has already been mentioned that recording oral tradition can help to maintain cultural knowledge contained in traditional stories and songs. The recording (audio and video) of rituals and dances is a valuable means for preserving records of cultural activities and expressions and offers an alternative means for passing them on to future generations.

Conclusion

Condominas (2001, p. 22) notes that, "a traditional popular culture should be considered from the standpoint of the group which created it and which keeps it alive." New approaches to preserving cultural heritage emphasize that indigenous people themselves should record and collect the variety of language use and cultural activities in their communities although researchers from outside the communities can provide assistance in planning the methods for observing, collecting and recording data. When minority people take the lead in data collection, they are able to choose and select the information, expressions and rituals that they perceive as important, wish to preserve and pass on. They are also encouraged to recognise their own cultural heritage as being worthy of preserving and passing on to future generations.

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Appendix. Pilot project on preserving cultural heritage in Indonesia

The main objective of the pilot project, to be undertaken in Central Kalimantan, Indonesia, is the documentation of oral traditions in order to maintain IK and revitalise the indigenous languages that serve as vehicles for cultural expression. Local communities will be active participants in the process of recording, documenting, interpreting and using the collected material. The idea is that the reproductions stay close to their original forms of expression and that they stay intact within the community.¹³

The pilot project will begin by organising several community workshops to introduce the aims and objectives of the project and to train local community members in the technical skills of data collection and interpretation. Eventually, the recorded material could provide the basis for a local archive on culture and oral traditions. It could also be part of a cultural center, be included in the education system and be used for cultural representation.

¹³ It has to be considered, that using technology as facilitator to faster access indigenous knowledge raises issues of legal rights and ownership. (Id. Kreps, p.108)