

4. Documenting ICH in sound and image

A participatory approach to safeguarding intangible heritage

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Documentation of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) poses a series of new questions and challenges within the heritage practice. How do we document a heritage that is alive, through the heads, hands and practices of people? Heritage that is neither tangible nor fixed but intangible and dynamic. Heritage that lives within a community, which by its active practice also acts to transmit and realize a future for this living heritage. Such living heritage processes require different, explicitly participatory and dynamic approaches for documentation – for which audiovisual forms of recording seem appropriate. This article unravels the conceptual confusion between different ‘intangible’ heritage practices and then looks at examples of practice in Flanders and in existing related research methods such as visual anthropology and oral history.

First step: unravel the many intangibles

Based on our recent observations, there is a need to untangle the many intangible heritages appearing in the contemporary heritage field. Obviously it makes no sense to mingle and confuse the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of

cultural practices and skills, as defined by the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage,¹ with other types of ‘intangibles’. Some other types of ‘intangible heritage’ discernible are:

- the intangible heritage values we attribute to material heritage (think for example of the ‘spirit of place’);
- the intangibles we know in ‘the lived/experienced’ expressions of history and heritage, like memories or oral history; and
- intangible heritage in the sense of the sound and image content present in collections.

All of these ‘intangibles’ are rather recent concepts, methods and insights of often participatory and experience-oriented heritage working processes. However, because the ‘intangible’ approaches also have distinct implications for the work to be done, it is key to clarify which approach is applied, as well as to pronounce whether or not one aims to adopt the specific approach of ICH as defined in the 2003 convention’s framework. How different the heritage work will be, and how this also affects documentation of this ICH as living cultural processes in sound and image, are questions further developed below.

Participatory and community-driven audiovisual documentation

ICH being a young heritage discipline, heritage professionals, researchers and tradition bearers are all challenged to look for methods and approaches suited for its documentation. The living culture of ICH could benefit very much from the

¹ Article 2.1 of the convention defines ICH as: “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” (UNESCO, 2003).

possibilities that audiovisual documentation in moving image and sound has to offer. Indeed, documenting in sound and image seems one of the most appropriate ways to capture the moving and dynamic human practices ICH consists in.

The cultural heritage field still stands at the very beginning of exploring ICH. Moreover, not only do we need to develop the experience of moving media, but we also need a shift in the habits and premises we have been applying in the heritage practices. In this, much is to be learned on the one hand from the participatory 'spirit of the convention' and, on the other hand, from neighbouring scientific research disciplines and methods already applying audiovisual strategies.

The UNESCO convention advances a clear vision concerning the priority and the central role of the heritage communities in any decisive safeguarding activity:

Within the framework of its safeguarding activities of the intangible cultural heritage, each State Party shall endeavour to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management (UNESCO, 2003, Article 15: Participation of communities, groups and individuals).

In other words, when measures are taken to ensure the viability of ICH, like the identification, documentation, research, preservation, promotion and transmission thereof, the bearers of the ICH should at least be consulted and preferably be involved, or even at the helm. The convention's operational directives (2012) elaborate further on the subject with more detailed and explicit formulations:

Research institutes, centres of expertise, museums, archives, libraries, documentation centres and similar entities play an important role in collecting, documenting, archiving and conserving data on intangible cultural heritage, as well as in providing information and raising awareness about its importance. In order to enhance their awareness-raising functions about intangible cultural heritage, these entities are encouraged to...

- (a) involve practitioners and bearers of intangible cultural heritage when organizing exhibitions, lectures, seminars, debates and training on their heritage;
- (b) introduce and develop participatory approaches to presenting intangible cultural heritage as living heritage in constant evolution;
- (c) focus on the continuous recreation and transmission of knowledge and skills necessary for

- safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, rather than on the objects that are associated to it;
- (d) employ, when appropriate, information and communication technologies to communicate the meaning and value of intangible cultural heritage;
- (e) involve practitioners and bearers in their management, putting in place participatory systems for local development (UNESCO, 2012, IV.1.3, p.109).

It may be clear that working in the context of the UNESCO convention is not comparable to taking care of objects as heritage. It involves sustaining a living cultural process, practised and re-created day by day by human beings who are the holders of the ICH in the first and last instance.

Consequently, the active participation of communities in the audiovisual documentation of their ICH will have an effect on the documentation process. For instance what would be visualized and how if an external heritage professional or researcher documents ICH in cooperation with the community, and would it differ from the approach of a community member who learns the skills to document this ICH, supported by a heritage professional? Not only do the themes and visualization of the subject matter, but also the aim of the documentation will have an impact on the process and methodology. Is the documentation meant as a portrayal of the element of ICH itself at a given time? Or will the documentation happen with the aim of transmitting the practical knowledge, skills and techniques for a procession, craft technique or dance? Those questions and answers determine the subject of the images, shots and overall approach of registration and visualization.

For example, when documenting a procession with the aim of transmission, one might not only document the result of the procession itself, as a festive event, but also record specific moments and actions in the preparation phase, such as behind-the-scenes preparations or rituals. Similarly, audiovisual documentation of a craft process following the interaction of master and pupil could demonstrate some unexpected aspects 'of making', having an impact on the focus, timing and sequence of the filmmaking.

Status quo: participatory projects in Flanders

Over the years several heritage workers in Flanders have experimented with the documentation of ICH. At a 2014 conference focused on participatory documentation in ICH,²

² The conference, titled In Sound and Image: The Participatory Documentation of ICH, was held 16 September 2014 and was a cooperation between the NGO tapis plein, the cultural heritage cell of Mechelen and www.immaterieelerfgoed.be. See www.immaterieelerfgoed.be/Detail/thema/17.

we mapped executed initiatives. We found out that the projects differ depending on the approach used: on the one hand we see projects where the documentation is done by the community involved, with or without support from a professional heritage worker; on the other hand we see projects where documentation is done by an external person, not a member of the ICH community.

Within the first category, different methods were tested, from participatory photography and participatory video to interviews in sound and image. Within a project on guild traditions, for example, Landelijk Expertise centrum voor Cultuur van Alledag (LECA)³ applied the method of participatory photography. Four amateur photographers, also guild members, were asked to capture their guild life in images: how do they experience their heritage? First the guild members determined in consensus which topics and parts of their tradition they wanted to visualize through the images. Eventually they made a selection from the old and new images collected (Fig. 1). The images deemed most representative were included in a publication (Top, 2013).

Another example relates to the documentation of agricultural cultivation methods. In order to pass on the knowledge and traditional cultivating methods for growing chicory, the project “Vlaams-Brabants grondwitloof. EU!”⁴ sought to document the knowledge of the older generation of growers by interviewing 15 of them (Fig. 2). Two people with knowledge of the cultivation process conducted the interviews, using a questionnaire. The collected information was compiled and further discussed with the interviewees in a group. The project culminated in a script and information sessions for new cultivators and an interactive quiz on chicory for the broader public.

In other projects, instead of the community itself documenting, the documentation was performed by an external person, such as a heritage worker, researcher or artist. Depending on the objectives, again the method will differ, from more artistic-oriented projects to documentaries and observation with the aim of transmitting ICH. To encourage the transmission of shadow play, for example, Het Firmament, a performing arts heritage centre,⁵ helped organize a master class led by an expert in the techniques of silhouette theatre (Fig. 3). Participants collaborated with the



FIGURE 1. Guard of honour at the wedding of a guildsman of the St. George Guild of St. Lenaarts, 2011. © Hoge Gilde raad der Kempen

3 Centre of Expertise on Everyday Culture, Flanders; see www.lecavzw.be.

4 See www.proeftuinherent.be; www.immaterieelerfgoed.be/Detail/hoe/279.

5 See www.hetfirmament.be. The shadow play training was held in cooperation with GEN 2020 and t,arsenaal.



FIGURE 2. Traditional cultivating methods for growing chicory. © Nationale Proeftuin voor Witloof



FIGURE 3. Shadow play. © Kristin Rogge

expert to co-create a new show using those techniques. This learning and creative process was fully documented by Het Firmament using film and in-depth interviews with the instructor and participants. The footage was also used by the participants during the production process to analyse and improve their personal skills and techniques.

Based on this mapping we could state that although some projects in Flanders explored and experimented with documenting ICH in sound and image, a shared knowledge and reflection and more elaborate praxis on this subject appeared to be still in its infancy in 2014. The methodologies, however, clearly provide room for further exploration, reflection, experimentation and expertise sharing for a thorough participatory documentation of ICH with the aim of safeguarding and transmitting it.

The heritage worker as cultural broker

In regard to the heritage communities and the safeguarding of ICH, as well as its documentation, heritage workers in Flanders have taken up the roles of *brokers*, *mediators* and *translators* of the values within the 2003 convention. Cultural brokerage is in many cases a key factor throughout processes of safeguarding ICH involving many different actors. The heritage worker raises awareness on ICH and related challenges and can support and coach heritage communities in their safeguarding practice, based on the communities' needs, if they so desire (Casteleyn, Janssens and Neyrinck, 2014). At the same time, the brokering heritage professionals or organizations strive to develop and test new safeguarding methodologies in general, and for the audiovisual documentation of ICH in particular. As awareness of the need for further exploration of methodologies for the participative documentation of ICH grows, people and organizations in Flanders are engaging in new experiments for developing methodological and practical experience.

Concerning the audiovisual documentation of performing arts, for example, Het Firmament organized a participative conference: #Documenting Performing Arts. Participants explored different cases and methods to document processes of creation and performance. Afterwards panellists commented on the day, and the public entered the debate. During the conference it became obvious that the first step in the process of documenting performing arts was to determine the goal (or goals) of the documentation (e.g. promotion, research, efficiency improvement, re-enactment, transmission, art education) in combination with the particular phase in the art process (e.g. creation, performance, impact on the audience, transmission). The role of the heritage worker in this process is to coach the community in determining exactly its goal and phase and to raise awareness of the importance of

this step in the documentation process in order to determine the proper approach.⁶

Another example is a project of the travellers community that is being set up. The project is an interesting example of how professional heritage workers strive to combine the support of heritage communities in their safeguarding process with experiments on methodologies and gaining expertise they can afterwards share with other communities and heritage workers.

First, the project applies participatory video in addition to more regularly used methods such as interviews. Participatory video aims to strengthen the capacities of people to tell their own stories which they can then use to mobilize the community for a particular purpose. In this project the travellers community will participate actively in the mapping and documentation of their heritage through this method of participative video. They have governance over the decisions to be taken in the process of the production of the film: they will determine the subject(s) for the film, based on what they themselves deem important, and they will execute the filmmaking as much as possible. The heritage workers will (only) have a supporting role in this process.

Second, the project aims to develop expertise in the heritage sector on the possibilities and use of participatory (audiovisual) methods in the documentation of living heritage. Through technical workshops and working with the community, methodological experience will be developed as much as experience in how to support communities in this process– the dos and don'ts. This experience in turn will be shared through the development of manuals for heritage workers (how to support the communities) and for communities (how to document).⁷

Conclusion

In the current heritage practice, ICH documentation shows resemblances and connections to the discipline of visual anthropology,⁸ as well as to the methods of oral history.⁹

⁶ Insights formulated during the participative conference #Documenting Performing Arts: How to Capture Creation and Performance, Brussels, 10 September 2015; see Het Firmament (2015).

⁷ The project is a cooperation between the travellers community in Flanders, Minderhedenforum and many partner organizations in the cultural heritage field in Flanders and Brussels.

⁸ Visual anthropology is a discipline that examines how reality can be imagined by visual media such as photography, film or video. The captured images, according to visual anthropology, do not only give information on the culture of those who are represented but also about the culture of the person who makes the images. Thus what is represented gives us no objective reality, but rather a reality told by a person with his/her own preferences, background and opinions. Two specific methods are particularly relevant to ICH documentation: observational cinema and photo-elicitation.

⁹ Oral history is a historical research method in which the historian attempts to (re)construct or examine the past by interviewing witnesses. The method suggests a fixed range of activities and steps, including the determination of the research question; localization of

Given the nature of documenting ICH, it may not be surprising how those neighbouring scientific disciplines and methodologies offer inspiration to heritage practices. ICH being a young but widely developing heritage discipline all over the world, much remains to be learned from exchanging diverse and international experiences of participatory documenting ICH in sound and image, as well as from further methodology research and development. This is a challenge to take forward in cross-disciplinary cooperation!

References

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the witnesses and selection; preparation and conducting of the interviews; processing of the interviews and disclosure of the interviews and collected material in a historical argument. Although this method starts from a historical perspective, and is oriented towards examining the past, parts of the process and methodology can be inspirational or used for ICH documentation. This requires, of course, that the research and questionnaire focus on the dynamics of the ICH and the current practice.

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