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Understanding UNESCO: The Importance of Understanding the Organization in Evaluations of Its ICH Programs

ABSTRACT:

When people attribute a position or action to UNESCO, they rarely specify to which of its many parts they refer. UNESCO is a nation-state based organization located in Paris, advised by hundreds of affiliated NGOs, with many national and regional centers and institutions and national commissions in many nations. Even when its member nation-states sign its conventions, their national cultural policies can vary widely in how the conventions are implemented. The complexity UNESCO's organization suggest that discussions of policies attributed to it must be grounded in an understanding of its structure and the relative autonomy, or lack of it, among its various parts. This paper presents such a description of UNESCO from the perspective of an international NGO, the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) and makes observations about the involvement of different parts of UNESCO in the discussions of on-the-ground events described in the other chapters.

One of the great difficulties in evaluating the effectiveness of UNESCO intangible cultural heritage programs at the local level is that the acronym (or "brand," as Michael Dylan Foster suggests in his paper) *UNESCO* is widely used, but the particular actors to which the term is applied are rarely indicated. UNESCO is not monolithic, and it has a number of distinct components that range from centralized to extremely decentralized. The final text of the 2003

Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter just 2003 Convention), was hammered out during months of debate and reflects a complex consensus. Its “Representative Lists” are described in the abstract wording of the 2003 Convention. But the methods used to select nominations and the actions taken to “safeguard” them are decided at different levels (national, provincial, or local) in different countries, each with its own history, government, and cultural policies. My contribution to this volume is an attempt to describe the various components of UNESCO and to illustrate some of its actions by referring to the papers in this volume. I will suggest that ethnographic discussions of UNESCO need to examine which parts of UNESCO are involved in specific activities and how they work together (or not) in specific cases. When governments, the press, or local artists use the acronym UNESCO they also rarely specify the UNESCO actors to which they refer. does not explain what has affected them.

My own experience with UNESCO was most intense between 1997 and 2005, when I was President and later Secretary General of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM), an international professional organization then in what was called “formal consultative relations with UNESCO.” I was also the editor of the ICTM/UNESCO CD series for a time. As Secretary General, I was in charge of coordinating the scientific and technical evaluations of the Masterpieces nominations for 2003 and 2005. I saw the nomination files, edited and signed the evaluations by specialists of over fifty nominations, and attended the International Jury meetings as a nonvoting NGO observer.¹ I have followed some of the cultural activities since, especially in the area of Intangible Cultural Heritage. Here is my NGO-based view of UNESCO.²

The Components of UNESCO

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a very large and complex institution with 195 member states, hundreds of affiliated advisory nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), an often overextended and under-supported professional staff of about two thousand, a central headquarters in Paris, about sixty-five field offices and institutes, National Commissions in almost every country, and “instruments” or agreements that have a profound effect on educational, scientific, and cultural policies in many countries. The most important recent conventions in the area of culture have been on intangible cultural heritage and cultural diversity.³ UNESCO’s huge multilingual and multimedia website is helpful but somewhat difficult to navigate: <http://www.unesco.org>.

The reason I mention member states first in my description is that the member nations of UNESCO ultimately decide its policies and provide the funding for the organization. The countries do not contribute equal amounts. The United States, when it is a member and paying its assessment, funds the largest percentage of the budget, about 22 percent. Along with Japan (assessed at 15 percent), Germany (8 percent), and France (6 percent), over 50 percent of the budget comes from four countries. But every country has an equal vote in the biannual General Conference to decide on UNESCO policies and projects and to determine its budget. Many UNESCO programs give priority to regions with the least resources rather than to those that contribute the most.⁴ Ultimately the employees of the organization serve and create programs that are of interest to the governments of member states. In my experience, UNESCO does not have a great deal of money to fund specific projects; much its budget is spent holding meetings where plans are made and wording is hammered out. The actual funding for most cultural activities comes not from the UNESCO budget but from the budgets of each country.⁵

Within the constraints established by the member states and the limited budget at its command, the UNESCO staff, under the leadership of UNESCO's Director-General, develops priorities and assigns proposed budgets to different programs. Almost every biennium has its own priorities (for the draft plan for 2014–17 see <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002200/220074e.pdf>). In my experience, many UNESCO staff are overextended—new initiatives are started while earlier ones still require attention—and frustrated by a lack of infrastructural and budgetary support. Like many large organizations, its bureaucracy is complex, its accounting is difficult, and its decision making is often very slow. There can be some conflict between many of the ambitious program builders working to develop new projects and the career support staff that are not always sympathetic to them and the extra work their projects require. This bureaucratic complexity and delay is not unique to UNESCO—they are somewhat similar to my experiences at the Smithsonian Institution and with the Brazilian federal bureaucracy. Any new UNESCO project requires a person extremely capable of working within the bureaucracy and also with the Ambassadors of member states. They also strengthen their cases by enlisting the expertise of affiliated NGOs, which are also an important part of the organization.

Most UNESCO staff members are not subject-matter specialists (there are some very eminent exceptions). Most of them are generalists who consult international networks of specialists when devising their programs. Over three hundred NGOs and a number of foundations have some kind of formal affiliation with UNESCO. International NGOs tend to have international objectives, a diverse executive board with representatives from a wide number of countries, and some kind of national representation in different countries. The association with UNESCO is advisory—the NGOs are not formed by UNESCO, and they have their own

objectives, boards, and policies. But they may be called upon by UNESCO for advice in their areas of competence. For example, the ICTM was formally expected to provide expertise in the area of traditional music. Other organizations were responsible for ritual, festivals, theater, anthropology, folklore, etc.). The ICTM is a member-supported organization whose structure includes a network of National Commissions or liaison officers appointed by the executive board. It supports its activities entirely from member dues and other activities, but because of its status it was able apply to UNESCO for travel funds for a few scholars to attend its World Conferences that could not otherwise have attended. The ICTM was also regularly invited to send a representative to an annual meeting of NGOs in Paris, at its own expense. At the meeting of UNESCO NGOs I attended in the 1990s, it seemed that the NGOs in health and education were larger and better represented than those in culture. Education and science seemed to be far larger concerns than culture at the time. UNESCO has repeatedly changed its relations with its NGOs and foundations, and this has happened again since my visits in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is important to remember, however, that official links to subject-matter expertise and international networks of specialists lie in the relations between UNESCO and its affiliated NGOs and Foundations.

Although UNESCO is often identified with its iconic (if vastly overcrowded) headquarters in Paris, its employees also work in the sixty-five field offices. These can largely be divided into what are called “cluster offices” that serve several adjacent nations and “national offices” that only serve one country, although there are some other types (for a complete list see <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/bfc/all-offices/>). The staff in the field offices works with the National Commissions and helps the different nations take advantage of UNESCO initiatives that might prove to be useful to them. Africa has long been a priority area for UNESCO, and the

involvement of members of a field office in selecting and preparing the complex nomination paperwork for the Vimbuza healing dance described by Lisa Gilman is part of their job.

Members of field offices can also be appointed to serve on National Commissions. Some of their staff members are very well trained and actively engaged in stimulating projects related to UNESCO programs. Similarly, Leah Lowthorp describes the direct involvement of the New Delhi regional office in the Kutiyattam project.

An additional important component of UNESCO, at times essential for the development and forwarding of plans to the main office, is its National Commissions. National Commissions are committees whose members are appointed by the government of each nation that act as liaisons between national governments or organizations and UNESCO (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0022/002269/226924e.pdf>). UNESCO is the only branch of the United Nations that has affiliated national organizations like this, and they have played very important, if variable, roles in certain cultural activities. Nations often coordinate UNESCO conventions with their own national institutions involved with education, science, and culture, but these institutions are so varied around the world that the same UNESCO “program” may be administered very differently from country to country—even though they are all charged with implementing UNESCO goals and activities.⁶

Here are two examples where NGOs and National Commissions were involved in activities initiated by the Intangible Heritage office. Noriko Aikawa-Faure (2005, 2009) describes the dissatisfaction of nations in Africa and other parts of the world with UNESCO heritage policies that privileged monuments and buildings but did not recognize the importance of other kinds of heritage (later called *Intangible Cultural Heritage*). The first “instrument” developed by UNESCO to address intangible heritage was the 1989 “Recommendation on the

Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore.” Aikawa-Faure describes how the decision came about to develop a new “instrument” that ultimately became the 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage (conventions are more powerful than recommendations—they are binding on the countries that sign them). In her 2009 essay she described the process in considerable detail. First, the Intangible Cultural Heritage unit of UNESCO convened eight regional conferences to discuss the earlier recommendation and intangible cultural heritage (summarized in Seeger 2001) in eight different countries representing regions (Czech Republic, Mexico, Japan, Finland, Uzbekistan, Ghana, New Caledonia, and Lebanon). The participants from each nation attending the conference were selected by their country’s National Commission. Representatives of certain international NGOs were also invited by the UNESCO office to participate. These meetings extended over a period of four years. Following those regional meetings a “Global Assessment” meeting was held at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, DC, hosted by the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage.

A second example of roles assigned to National Commissions and NGOs was the nomination process for the Masterpieces of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Nominations of proposed “masterpieces of intangible cultural heritage” had to be submitted to UNESCO for evaluation by a country’s National Commission. The Commissions could only submit one nomination every two years. After a review by UNESCO staff to be sure it was complete, each nomination required a “technical and scientific review” by one or more of the appropriate UNESCO NGOs (described in Seeger 2009). This may have favored proposals by communities having some kind of connection with the National Commissions—or at least whose supporters had contacts there. The National Commissions were gatekeepers in this program; the NGOs

made recommendations to an International Jury that met in Paris and decided what nominations to forward to the Director-General to proclaim as masterpieces.

The National Commissions and the member states enjoy a relatively high degree of autonomy from UNESCO headquarters in Paris. UNESCO can make recommendations, offer training or technical assistance, and sometimes provide funding, but it cannot interfere with the internal operations of its member nations. This became particularly clear to me with respect to the action plans submitted with the nominations of items of intangible cultural heritage for the Masterpieces program, and I am pretty sure it continues to this day with the nominations to the “Representative Lists” of the 2003 Convention. The only influence Intangible Cultural Heritage unit staff seemed to have on the implementation of the action plans was when UNESCO funded them.. Otherwise, nations decided on the policies and often did not fully fund the action plans they had submitted. The contrast between the honor of being elected to the Representative List and the tangible rewards to local tradition-bearers has often been quite large, as several authors mention here.

The Components of UNESCO and the Contributions in This Volume

Lisa Gilman’s detailed paper on the Vimbuza dance and healing ritual in Malawi, proclaimed as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage in 2005 and now on the Representative List, is a good example of the involvement of several parts of UNESCO. She reports that the Senior Program Officer of the Malawi National Commission “contributed to the nomination process”. Similar to some other cases I am familiar with, one of the reasons this form was chosen was because there was already sufficient information about the dance and ritual to enable the preparation of the large nomination dossier that had to be submitted to the Paris office of

UNESCO by a certain deadline. It would have been difficult to start from scratch with a form of heritage with little prior attention and study. UNESCO deadlines are always tight and the application requirements for the Masterpieces program were exigent and extensive—many questions required detailed answers in a specific order, outlined in a special candidature brochure provided by the Paris office.

Many nations had difficulty assembling all of the required documentation. Gilman was fortunate to be able to see the application. Very often these documents are not made available to researchers or the public. The action plan for safeguarding Vimbuza was prepared by the local Field Office of UNESCO and “the government,” and a number of earlier steps were carried out in 2007–9 with funding awarded directly by the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage office in Paris, using funds granted to the program by Japan. Gilman discovered that most people in the rural areas had never heard of UNESCO and were puzzled at the choice of Vimbuza. UNESCO is certainly better known in national capitals and by government bureaucrats than by the general population in most countries, and local residents would not be familiar with the difficulty of the application process that may have guided the selection of Vimbuza. Gilman provides really helpful and rarely available information on the different perspectives on whether the UNESCO listing and funding had been beneficial. She argues that the process in Malawi was from the top down, and the important decisions were made at the national level. In my experience this was often but not always the case. There were a few good examples of “bottom up” projects among the Masterpiece nominations. What is needed, however, is an unusual alliance between motivated local populations and literate specialists who are able to write a successful proposal.

Michael Dylan Foster’s paper on the Toshidon ritual reveals a rather different situation from that of Malawi. Members of the local community were somewhat familiar with UNESCO,

and the nomination was exciting and important to them. They were thrilled by the selection but concerned about the effects of policies on the informality of Toshidon. Unlike the single Vimbuza dance and ritual that could be proclaimed as a Masterpiece in 2005, Toshidon was one of thirteen ICH elements from Japan entered on the Representative List in 2009. The ability to nominate multiple forms to the Representative List created by the 2003 Convention made it possible for countries to avoid singling out one form and somewhat reduced the apparently arbitrary nature of the selection process described by Gilman in the Vimbuza case. Foster does not provide information about the involvement of the UNESCO National Commission or the UNESCO Field Office, and it appears that the nomination was entirely managed by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs. Japan would not have received any money from UNESCO for undertaking its action plans. While the local residents refer to “UNESCO,” in their case the relevant agencies were actually those of the Japanese government and entrepreneurs involved in tourism. UNESCO, as such, was only involved when the nomination was voted to the List at the 2009 meeting of the nation-states signers of the 2003 Convention. UNESCO as a brand, or “floating signifier” , may be important within Japan, but UNESCO as a policy-making body has very little direct influence on Japanese cultural heritage policy, which has its own very long and important history dating back at least to 1950 (Arisawa 2012). Foster’s conclusion, that there are many different UNESCOs, anticipates my own general point: it is difficult to pinpoint a single “UNESCO” given its many different constituent parts.

Carol Silverman’s paper on the failed nominations of the Macedonian Teškoto dance reveals the difficulty culture workers in some countries have had in preparing documents that meet all the requirements of the UNESCO ICH guidelines. It is not clear whether the Macedonian authors of the nominations had UNESCO technical assistance in preparing the

nominations. Macedonia nominated the dance for the 2003 and 2005 rounds of the Masterpieces project, but Silverman is probably correct in suggesting that the language of the nomination dossiers, the omission of mention of the Roma minority groups normally employed as musicians, and other features of the dossiers hindered the dance's approval by the International Jury that made the final decisions on the nominations (the nomination and selection process is described in Seeger 2009). Communications between national cultural organizations and the Paris office of UNESCO sometimes resulted in misunderstandings and incomplete or flawed applications for UNESCO designations.

Leah Lowthorp's description of the aftermath of the UNESCO proclamation of the Kutiyattam of Kerala as a Masterpiece in 2001 (the first Proclamation of the Masterpieces project at UNESCO) focuses on the aftermath of the implementation of the action plan. Her case reveals the continued involvement of the New Delhi office of UNESCO in the action plan, which was not always the case. The paper is richly detailed, and reveals important aspects of the impact of the implementation of action plans. Her discussion of the UNESCO "tool box" is important, because much seems to remain the same while other things have changed. . Comparing the 1989 Recommendations on Folklore with the 2003 Convention, one can see some profound differences as well as some similarities. The statement in the Convention that there is no fixed, authentic, form to most ICH was a hard-fought wording supported by ethnomusicologists and anthropologists but resisted by non-academics more accustomed to using "authentic" and "original." Committees consisting of representatives of NGOs and nation-states debated the wording of the convention for many weeks. The final wording was often a mixture of various positions, especially in the definitions. The more significant the document, the more contentious and difficult the wording. Readers of the 2003 Convention may well puzzle over the lengthy

definitions and the detailed listing of what is and is not included. Each word may be extremely important to one group or another. This is why the toolkit can be described as both the same and different—both old and new elements are there. China has been extremely active in the area of ICH for a number of reasons and the country has a tendency toward top-down cultural policies (though not always; see Rees 2012). The nomination process to the local, provincial, and national lists, as well as nomination to the UNESCO Representative Lists, is quite complex and has left many groups of artists puzzled, resentful, and in conflict with one another. Here again, these decisions are not UNESCO's but rather the specific implementation of cultural policy by government agencies. Ziying You's observation that the effects of ICH policies can disempower local communities and people is a very important lesson to take away from this case, though in some of the other cases (Malawi and Japan) that does not seem to have occurred uniformly. The unhappiness of local artists about not receiving much money from their collaboration with ICH projects is not unique to China. It has been reported in many other countries, among them the shamans on Cheju Island, South Korea.

Kyoim Yun's paper addresses the impact on local shamans of inscription in the Representative List and raises important issues of the moral, intellectual, and practical implications of UNESCO policies on an island province that has received three different designations—as a World Heritage Site, as a Bioserve, and, most recently, as the site of an element of intangible cultural heritage that has been inscribed on the Representative List. Her paper describes a complex situation. It appears to me that the problems described stem from the South Korean decision to propose to nominate shamanism to the Representative List, which does not seem to have been suggested by a UNESCO unit. South Korea had a very elaborate system for preserving cultural heritage long before the UNESCO Convention, one that has been

discussed by Keith Howard (2012). The failure of attempts to make this form of South Korean shamanism a tourist spectacle is an important caution to those who conflate UNESCO lists with income from hordes of wealthy tourists.

Conclusion

The case studies presented in this volume are all extremely valuable for the ethnographic perspectives they provide on local perceptions about elements of ICH that have been nominated to the UNESCO Lists. Each also contributes thoughtful reflections on Intangible Cultural Heritage in general. My contribution to this has been an attempt to show how the results attributed to UNESCO are in fact influenced to different degrees by central UNESCO policies, the participation of NGOs, the actions of National Commissions and the cultural policies of each country. . Because UNESCO has so many components it can be difficult to figure out why things happen the way they do. . Our ethnographies need to be as attuned to the specifics of what part of UNESCO (and even what individuals within them) we refer to as they are to what different members of local communities think about the effects of UNESCO-attributed policies on their own lives. The cultural policies of most of the countries in the world have been profoundly influenced by UNESCO, but not all in the same way. This can lead to significant differences “on the ground.”

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Notes

1. The documents relating to the evaluations of the Masterpieces nominations are confidential, though I make some general references to them here. Participants in the selection were told we could discuss nominations that were approved but asked to respect the member states of those that were not approved by not discussing the deliberations about their nominations.

2. I am very grateful to ICTM Secretary General Dieter Christensen and ICTM Board Members Krister Malm and Wim Van Zanten for their perspectives on UNESCO over the years, but they are not to blame for any errors in my presentation.

3. The UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions was passed in 2005 and emphasizes the right of states to “protect and promote diversity of cultural expressions” (UNESCO 2005).

4. This is quite different from US politics and may be the source of some of the frustration of US governmental bodies with UNESCO. The largest donor, in this case, does not get any necessary advantage in policy making.

5. An exception to this general statement was the funding made available to some countries to enable them to prepare their plans to safeguard the heritage that had been proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage. Two papers correctly mention direct funding from UNESCO, which was sometimes granted to countries that could not afford to implement their action plans. But the entire Masterpieces program was funded by “extra budgetary” money (a targeted donation) from Japan. UNESCO more often adds a piece of tangible, intangible, or natural heritage to the representative list and then expects the nations themselves to support its safeguarding.

6. An example of these differences is that the ministry of culture in some countries is also responsible for tourism, while in others culture may be part of the ministry of education or combined with sports. The potential for tourism has never been a selection criterion for UNESCO safeguarding. Proposals that highlighted the benefits of tourism were not well received in the Masterpieces nominations, partly because the impact of tourism is not necessarily beneficial. But there is no question that tourism is on the minds of national, regional, and municipal leaders, as well as performers themselves. In some cases, however, the imagined hordes of tourists do not appear, as Kyoim Yun describes in this volume.

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