

UNESCO Meeting in Rio: Steps toward a Convention . . .

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Readers of Talk Story will recall that the Center renewed its relationship with UNESCO (begun in the 1970s by Ralph Rinzler) by sponsoring a 1999 meeting that brought to conclusion a four-year evaluation process assessing the conceptualization and implementation of UNESCO's 1989 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore. (The published proceedings have been posted on the Web at <http://www.folklife.si.edu/unesco/>). That meeting called for the development of a new international instrument, framed to reflect the historical changes that have occurred in the decades since the original document was developed, and invested with the authority of an international convention. The first step in this process was the March 2000 Experts Round Table meeting in Turin, at which we presented an invited paper that recommended a set of terms along with their conceptual and operational definitions to be used in developing the new convention. For historical reasons, the consensus of the meeting was to adopt the term "intangible cultural heritage" (henceforth, ICH) for what was formerly called folklore and traditional culture and to define it as:

Peoples' learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity.

Participants at the Turin roundtable also concluded that the definition and development of safeguarding projects must emphasize the central role to be played by the active agency of culture bearers. The next step was to have been a meeting to define the "scope" of the term ICH. But something interesting happened. The UNESCO program to declare Masterpieces of World Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage held a series of meetings, declared a list of 19 worthy awardees, and evidently opened - to the imaginations of UNESCO high officialdom and others -- a vision of a convention on ICH that would be an arena for the agency of national governments to proclaim the richness of their cultural heritage. In a word, UNESCO's institutional will became focused on adopting the Masterpieces program as UNESCO's sole project in a new convention on ICH. Thus the next meeting was reoriented from defining the "scope" of ICH to defining "priority domains" for an international convention. This is a subtle change, but it shifts the agency in defining what is to be safeguarded from the culture-bearers themselves, as was the agreement reached at Turin, where "scope" was considered to be coterminous with the bounds of "culture," and places that agency in national governments acting through UNESCO.

This set the agenda for the few participants in the Rio meeting who had also met in Turin (the largest single group in attendance at Rio, besides Brazilians with UNESCO associations, were those reporting on the positive results of the recently announced Masterpieces awards). That agenda had two elements: (1) rejecting the notion of "priority domains" to be set by UNESCO and (2) maintaining some institutional space for local agency in defining UNESCO's role in the new convention to safeguard ICH -

that is, not allowing the Masterpieces to be UNESCO's sole project in the area. The role we had in mind for UNESCO was to establish and maintain an Internet-accessible database of "best practices" in safeguarding ICH - projects built on local agency and a "holistic" approach (i.e., one that includes economic and social as well as cultural dimensions). This would facilitate consultation among culture-bearing groups so they might devise and develop strategies that suit their local needs.

The first item of the agenda, to reject the notion of priority domains, was effectively accomplished by a report conveyed by Ralph Regenvanu, a cultural worker from Vanuatu. He informed a plenary session that even in the meetings of the Masterpieces committee, the implications of the Turin findings helped members totally reject that notion. The outcome regarding the second item of the agenda -- to retain the possibility of creating a UNESCO-sponsored institutional structure that assists local agency to devise and develop ways of safeguarding ICH - is less clear. On one hand, acting in plenary sessions and in smaller meetings, and greatly assisted by Gerald Pocius, a colleague in folklore who represented the UNESCO committee of Canada, the veterans of Turin were able to keep the Action Plan developed by the meeting from becoming a ringing endorsement for the Masterpieces program as the sole content of a new convention. On the other hand, that Action Plan, which was the subject of many last-minute negotiations, has not yet been published in official form. And the New York meeting that was to have followed Rio B a UNESCO-sponsored meeting of three veterans of Turin, an anthropologist, a jurist, and a folklorist to develop legal terminology in preparation for the meeting of UNESCO legal experts in Paris later this year that will actually draft the document B was canceled "for financial reasons."

The Center continues to support an engagement with UNESCO and to try to help UNESCO's many representatives and workers realize their goals of assisting local culture-bearers to safeguard their own ICH. Stay tuned.