Experimenting with participation in dialogue

Community involvement in identifying and researching Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands

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Contact sessions with the communities © Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is well known for its bottom up approaches, with a strong role for "communities, groups and individuals". Experimenting with participatory approaches should be at the core of intangible safeguarding. Surprisingly enough there is not much documentation on how to involve communities. Drawing from his experience working at the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage (DICH), the author shares his experiences in the Netherlands experimenting with participatory research. That participation implies dialogue also in a broader sense, becomes clear in some of the ethical dilemmas DICH was faced with. On a more theoretical level the article draws its inspiration from the American Public Folklore tradition and from Participatory Action Research, especially in health care.

Keywords: intangible heritage, participatory research, public folklore, the Netherlands

Introduction

> *"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."* (article 15, UNESCO 2003 Convention).
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> "*Research institutes should "develop joint approaches" and should "involve practitioners and bearers of intangible cultural heritage when organizing exhibitions, lectures, seminars, debates and training on their heritage*" (Operational Directives, 2018 version, articles 80 and 88).

Considering the importance of community involvement in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, it is somewhat surprising that there is not much documentation on the practical side of "involving communities". A recent French Companion takes as its starting point the collector or researcher who should reflect on "his belonging or not to the community in which he works" (Lempereur, 2017: 122). According to this manual, it is all about "entrer en dialogue" with the communities (Lempereur, 2017: 164). In an even more recent handbook on intangible heritage safeguarding, Janet Blake mentions experiments in countries such as Belgium, that focus on a specific role of NGOs specializing in ICH "since they can often serve as a bridge between communities and state agencies" (Blake, 2018: 18). In this observation, Blake implicitly refers to the concept of "cultural brokerage", which was introduced in the context of the Convention by Marc Jacobs, Jorijn Neyrinck and Albert van der Zeijden in 2014, in a theme issue of the Belgian/Dutch scholarly magazine Volkskunde (Jacobs et al., 2014). The concept proved successful and was incorporated in the 2018 version of the Operational Directives (OD 170 and 171).

In this article I propose to present how the Netherlands have experimented with participatory approaches involving "communities, groups and individuals", especially in the field of research and development. Working with communities, the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage experienced several challenges that communities are faced with that needed more reflection and research. The Dutch Centre decided to develop a research agenda in order to involve the communities as much as possible. In our approach we derived much inspiration from the Participatory Action Research approach, as developed in other research disciplines, especially in connection with health care. This approach proved worthwhile, especially in relation with the emancipatory role of this kind of research and the possible dilemmas it might raise. Also, it will build on experiences in the American public folklore tradition, that puts much weight on dialogical approaches towards intangible heritage.

Participatory approaches in inventorying intangible heritage in the Netherlands

When the Netherlands ratified the Convention in 2012 the first question was: how to involve the communities in the inventorying process? As we all know the concept of "communities, groups and sometimes individuals" is rather vague in the convention text. In this we have to bear in mind that we must interpret the concept of "community" in an open and dynamic way (Waterton & Smith, 2010: 5).

Like the colleagues in our neighbouring region Flanders, the Netherlands decided to adopt a proposal system. An Inventory for which communities themselves could put forward "their" intangible heritage. Attached to this proposal the communities should fill in a form in which they give an overview of the strong and weak points of their intangible heritage and possible obstructions that may stand in the way of handing it over to a new generation.

In the process we discovered that there are quite a few community associations in the Netherlands willing to act as custodians for a specific element of intangible heritage. Take for instance the flower

procession in the southern town of Zundert, one of the first elements that was inscribed in the Dutch Inventory. In Zundert there is a very active community association which every year organizes the flower procession. This community association does not only organize the flower procession. It is also active in a more custodian sense. The organizing committee arranges courses, "academies" and workshops for children, to get them acquainted and familiar with the flower procession and the art and skills which are connected with it, for instance the skill to build these very elaborate procession cars and decorate them with flowers. The organizing committee is also very strong in developing educational projects for schools.

Unfortunately, what we also discovered is that the inventorying system only works for organized elements of intangible heritage. In an article in the European Journal of International Law, Lucas Lixinski has suggested that it is probably a question of scale (Lixinski, 2011). Community involvement is easy to manage in a local tradition like the flower procession in Zundert. But in the case of a national and even international tradition it is not so easy. Lixinski found that in these kind of proposals, where a community is not so easily defined, representative bodies, commercial organizations and even occasionally official government bodies become the rule. The tradition of *All Souls* in the Netherlands is a nice example of this. It is a cultural practice to take care of the graves every second of November and as such has a powerful meaning for the bereaved. It is observable that the tradition is very popular when visiting the cemeteries. During the first week of November the graves are overloaded with flowers.

Who could represent a tradition such as this or, more focused than that, who could take on the role of custodian in such a tradition? In the old days it would definitely have been the churches, which used to organize most of the activities, with services in the church and in the cemeteries. Nowadays, most of the activities are organized by the cemeteries themselves. We found out that they are organizing all kind of activities, engaging professional ritual helpers and even artists to come up with new kinds of secular rites for the bereaved to cope with their grief. In a way, the cemetery administrators stepped into the role that was formerly assigned to the church. But can these cemetery administrators act as representatives for the communities, especially because they might also have a commercial interest? In the end, it was decided that the nomination would be carried out by De Terebinth, an organization of volunteers which until then mainly dealt with the safeguarding of the material heritage connected with cemeteries. The association of cemetery managers, the LOB, stepped in to represent the cemetery officials, so often responsible for the new rituals on death and dying. A third party which was raised is the National Funeral Museum in the Netherlands, which is located on the largest cemetery ground in the Netherlands: de Nieuwe Ooster in Amsterdam. Professional organizations can often be useful because they are experienced experts in developing, for instance, educational programs, which often form an indispensable part of a safeguarding plan. That there is a challenge is also clear. In the case of *All Souls* in the end it did not work. Terebinth, for one, decided to drop out. The new board decided to concentrate on the material/tangible side of the funeral heritage once again. There is now some talk of involving the professional grief workers. In any case, it is clear that there is a challenge in trying to involve "a community".

Scale too small

In contrast, focusing on crafts, the scale is also of importance, but this time because the scale was too small. In most cases there are only a few people left who are master of a specific craft. How can you safeguard the skills and the knowledge which are needed in practicing this handicraft? Who can make a safeguarding plan and put it into practice? These questions are too big to deal with by individual artisans themselves. The Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage decided to organize a *Year of the Crafts*, in which we cooperated with educational training institutions but also with museums to counter the

somewhat old-fashioned image of the crafts as something from the past. At present the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage is experimenting with a so-called crafts laboratory within the premises of the Dutch Open Air Museum (of which DICH is now a part), in bringing together crafts people and designers to experiment with innovation. In the case of safeguarding such a small scale element of intangible heritage, community involvement should always be organized in one way or the other. You need a facilitating body doing this, that brings the individual practitioners together**.**

Developing a research agenda on ICH

The same challenges arose working on a research agenda for ICH. Working in the field, communities are sometimes faced with broader questions. These broader questions can be very practical: for instance questions like: how to make an intangible heritage event more attractive for tourists? How to deal with discussions within society that might endanger the intangible heritage at hand, for instance discussions about the use of animals in the tradition? How to deal with the close connection between tangible and intangible heritage, for instance in the case of the craft of the miller, the first nomination of the Netherlands for the Representative List of UNESCO? How to involve the youth, not just in the "traditional" traditions but also in recognizing new social practices, important for youths but perhaps not yet "recognized" by heritage institutions such as the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage?

To tackle the most important challenges of the communities, the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage decided to develop a research agenda. The topics selected all have practical relevance for the communities.

The topics selected were:
* controversial intangible heritage
* intangible heritage and ethnic diversity
* intangible heritage and youth cultures
* intangible and tangible heritage
* intangible heritage and tourism

What we do is offering the communities research and reflection on the challenges they are faced with. And also offering them tools with which they can work. The starting point is always a challenge. In the case of ethnic diversity, it was a group of practitioners in the superdiverse city district of West-Kruiskade in Rotterdam that wanted to nominate the "intangible heritage of the West-Kruiskade" for the Dutch National Inventory. For the Dutch Centre it was initially useful to reflect on the art and nature of intangible heritage in such a superdiverse context, superdiverse in the sense that following refugee crises all over the world European city districts such as West-Kruiskade nowadays harbour more than 160 ethnicities, for which British sociologist Steven Vertovec coined the phrase 'superdiversity', and explore the characteristics of communities in such a city district. The Dutch Centre organized several conferences on the topic, that also involved the heritage bearers themselves who were responsible for organizing public feasts such as *Diwali*, *Keti Koti* and the *Chinese dragon festival* in the public space of West-Kruiskade. Consequently, it resulted not only in the nomination for the Dutch Inventory but also in a number of scholarly articles presenting more reflection on the topic of superdiversity and intangible heritage (Van der Zeijden, 2017a and 2017b).

In the case of controversial intangible heritage there was also an engaging and pressing issue: the dispute about *Black Pete* in the popular children's feasts of Saint Nicholas in the Netherlands. This popular children's feast includes a phantasy figure with blackface make up, nowadays considered by action groups as a negative stereotype of black people. The Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage commissioned a report, for which all the relevant stakeholders were interviewed and in which possible directions were suggested. The Dutch Centre thought that there could also be a role for professional heritage institutions. It arranged an expert meeting for professional heritage organizations such as museums about how these professional heritage institutions could work as a cultural broker bringing different

stakeholders together. One of the museum directors present suggested that a possible role of museums could be adding creativity to the debate by offering alternative narrative scenarios that could be considered more inclusive (Van der Zeijden, 2014).
Of a more practical nature was the centre's involvement with the topic of intangible heritage and tourism. The starting point here was a practical case study from Alkmaar, where there was some dispute between the heritage bearers of the Kaasdragersgilde and the city council of Alkmaar. The local city council opted for an extension of the opening hours of the cheese market that the cheese bearers did not want. A student from the Rotterdam School of Applied Sciences made an inventory of all the relevant stakeholders and their wishes, so as to develop a model of how possible disagreements between the different stakeholders could be overcome.

Applied science

This type of research might easily be described as "applied science" or, in a more emancipatory fashion, "action research", in which the cooperation with the communities stands out as paramount. Most "pure" or "fundamental" sciences tend to have a more practical or "applied" counterpart. In the field of folklore or "tradition based culture" this field of research was labelled, at least in the west, as "public folklore". In the United States this became a flourishing discipline that almost outran and superseded the so-called "pure folklore scholarship". This might come as a bit of a surprise. The United States has a strong tradition in critical folklore studies, very suspicious of popularization and revitalizing age old "traditional" traditions, often for political or commercial reasons (tourism!). This kind of political use of folklore was discredited by Richard Dorson (1916-1981) as "fakelore", a commercial residue of the real and "authentic" folklore (Bendix, 1997: 188-218). "Public folklorists" such as Norman Spitzer and Robert Baron showed that "public folklore" can also be a serious and self-conscious enterprise, just as critical of its own tools as mainstream "critical" folklore studies. Public folklorists adopt strict procedures in working for and with the public, based on a clear set of ethical principles of professional responsibility (AFSNET).

Talking to American public folklorists such as Robert Baron, I am always impressed by the high level of reflection in their work and their richly filled practical toolkit which enables them to work in a responsible manner for and with the public. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett was correct in her statement that the dichotomy between pure and applied folklore is a mistaken dichotomy, between "critical" folklore studies and a suspected "uncritical" public folklore (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1988). Both have to take into account ideology, national political interests, and economic concerns. On the other hand, Robert Baron showed that one should also be critical of "critical heritage studies", introducing concepts such as "shared authority", "more equitably representing community perspectives in its scholarship". Interestingly, Baron also made a connection with the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: "US public folklore dialogism points to how ICH scholars, professionals and heritage authorities can integrate their multiple roles to foster community involvement that is empowering and represents a community's perspective (…) Innovative public folklore approaches for sharing authority could be productively replicated in ICH programmes elsewhere, with acknowledgement of the power asymmetries that inevitably persist." (Baron, 2016: 12)

Dialogue

For our goal it is important to note that the American public folklorists call for "dialogical modes of presentation", to "equip communities to represent their traditions on their own terms" (Baron, 2016: 3). It is all about "narrative ownership" and how to involve communities in the public discourse of what is always a multi layered and multi perspective reality, calling for a shared authority "in a mutual construction of meaning". The American public folklorists have much experience with dialogically constructed modes of presentation that both engage professional public folklorists, community members

and audiences in their representations of heritage to the public. They present it as "cultural conversations" into which audiences are invited to take part, for instance during a festival (Baron, 2016: 7). This model and the attached possible techniques, might also be useful in intangible heritage safeguarding, especially when dealing with intangible heritage that is contested or disputed.

Action research

Where the American Public Folklorists stress the importance of dialogue, the Action Research in Health care stresses the emancipatory approach (Roued-Cunliffe, 2017). Especially in health care research there is a strong tradition of what is called "Participatory Action Research" in which community involvement is the starting point (Kindon, 2007; Bergold & Thomas, 2012). Crucial in my understanding is that participatory research is not just a question of participation but also one of who is setting the agenda and even more importantly: who benefits? This is a central concern in the UNESCO Convention when talking about the "ethics" of intangible heritage safeguarding (UNESCO, 2003). One of the central notions of participatory research is that communities should be involved in decisions on matters that concern them.

It goes without saying that participatory research focuses on topics with practical relevance for the communities. The first experiments focused on social health care, still the central topic of most of the textbooks on participatory research (e.g. Bradbury, 2015). In a way, the question of health care research has much in common with participatory research in connection with the Intangible Heritage Convention. Both involve researchers and "researched" and both involve "communities", that should somehow benefit from the research. Participatory research is often presented as part of an emancipation process for "action", of empowering "ordinary people" to turn academic production into a more flexible and socially owned process, thus breaking through the old hierarchical structures that are still dominant in most of the academic research (Kindon, 2007: 1-6).

Does participatory research involve a specific methodology? Most textbooks on participatory research talk about "a methodological openness in conducting a genuinely democratic and non-coercive research" (Kindon, 2007: 2). It is about developing "context-specific methods", but apparently every method available in the social sciences could be suitable, from semi-structured interviews to more quantitative surveys and research methods. What is specific is that because of the focus on communities, there should always be exchange between the researchers and the communities. This is one of the reasons that in most research conducted on behalf of the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage interviews with community representatives always form an integral part of the research. These community representatives are essential in defining what the research should be about and where it should lead. What health care and intangible heritage safeguarding have in common is what one might call the "engineering" approach. Where health care research is meant to improve health care conditions to the benefit of people in need of a better health care, the purpose of intangible heritage research is to develop "research methodologies, with a view to effective safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage" (article 13, UNESCO 2003 Convention).

Ethical questions

Participatory research is meant to give the communities a decisive say in what is researched. This research should also develop practical results to the benefit of the communities. This seems easy enough. But in the process, the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage discovered that it was sometimes faced with ethical dilemmas. The three cases I want to present are: ethical questions in connection with tourism, ethical questions in connection with health and animal rights, ethical questions in connection with ethnicity.

Tourism: who is benefiting?

Tourism proved to be an interesting topic involving the relevant communities in developing a research agenda. In line with the bottom up approach of

UNESCO, DICH started by consulting the community associations with intangible heritage on the Dutch inventory. During one of the regularly held contact sessions with the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage, the challenges and dilemmas in connection with tourism were discussed. The most pressing challenges that were put on the table by the community associations were: how to make your intangible heritage more attractive for tourists? How to attract younger audiences? This is mainly a question of "engineering": how to develop interesting tools that communities can use in enlivening their intangible heritage. The starting point of the tourism project was a pilot in the Dutch province of Overijssel. In this we worked together with the Schools of Higher Learning/Applied Sciences specializing in tourism. What we did in Overijssel was exploring the possibilities of touristic intangible heritage routes in Overijssel and made them visible on the internet. Communities are faced with specific challenges, for which they seek practical and workable solutions. They are looking for practical guidelines and inspiring examples (For a Swiss example: *Lebendige traditionen*).

But in the background there loomed a larger issue, in connection with, what UNESCO calls, the risk of "over-commercialization". A matter of great concern for the communities was: how to attract more visitors without losing the elements that are of key value for the practitioners? We saw it already when discussing the example of the Cheese market in Alkmaar, for which the local city government wanted to attract more tourists. The larger issue is in fact: who is benefiting from the project, just the recreational entrepreneurs? In this respect we have to take into account that the intangible heritage communities have to deal with far more powerful partners than they are. How can we find the proper balance between the interests of the tourism industry on the one hand and the heritage custodians on the other? In this context UNESCO calls for an approach as to "ensure that communities, groups and individuals concerned are the primary beneficiaries of any tourism associated with their own intangible cultural heritage while promoting their lead role in managing such tourism" (Operational Directives, art. 187). In achieving a sustainable mix it is important to chart the relevant stakeholders: the recreational entrepreneurs, relevant heritage institutions and also the local governments with local policies in connection with cultural tourism. From the perspective of the UNESCO Convention we should try to empower the heritage communities. In this sense ICH research can also be called "action" research, of empowering "ordinary people".

Ethical dilemmas in connection with health and animal rights

Sometimes the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage had to deal with ethical dilemmas. What to think of the tradition of smoking a pipe, which was put forward by the Dutch Federation for Pipesmokers functioning as an umbrella organization for thirteen local pipe smoke organizations? According to these organizations, sociability is paramaount: smoking is not the goal but only the means to something far broader. At the same time, the pipe smokers were well aware of the discussions about smoking. This is one of the reasons that the Federation emphasizes the cultural aspect and often is co-organizer of exhibitions about the rich cultural history in connection with pipe smoking. It should be realized that the pipe smokers associations do not have direct commercial or political interests. All the same, there is a web link on the Federations Website to an international forum against the anti-smokers lobby*: "Also enough of the anti-smoking lobby? Take a look here and air your opinion!*" [1]

The issue is of course that smoking is bad for your health. It is a cultural practice that is disputed nowadays: there are action groups within Dutch society that want to ban smoking, and this no doubt poses a challenge for the tradition bearers who want to safeguard this tradition. This was the question put forward by the heritage bearers representing the

[1] (Ook genoeg van de anti-rook-lobby? Kijk hier eens en ventileer je mening! - http://www.pijprokers.nl/pages/links.php).

tradition on the Dutch Inventory: how to deal with the recent discussion that might jeopardize this tradition? Obviously, the challenge at hand raises some ethical issues, which also should be taken into account. Pipesmoking is not an isolated example: the firework tradition in the Netherlands is also disputed heritage on the Dutch Inventory.

What should be the role of the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage? Supporting the heritage communities in all their needs? Or should it also give the floor to the opponents, the more or less marginalized groups that fight for better health and environmental policies – in the tradition of Action Research? Of course, the focus of DICH is on the intangible heritage aspect. Apart from this the Ethical principles of the ICH convention stipulates that "Each community, group or individual should assess the value of its own intangible cultural heritage and this intangible cultural heritage should not be subject to external judgements of value or worth." But in the case of disputed heritage the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage strongly feels that it should also take into account "the other side", and adopt a broader definition of "community" than just the practitioners and custodians of a specific element of intangible heritage, a definition of community that also includes the opponents. Thinking about the future of your intangible heritage, you cannot isolate yourself from larger societal discussions. In this, the concept of dialogue and "conversation", as put forward by the American public folklorists, can be useful.

Ethical dilemmas in connection with ethnicity: Who is participating?

Action research tends to focus on the marginalized group within society. As we have seen, it is something that Janet Blake tells us in the context of the Intangible Heritage Convention. It is the issue DICH was confronted with during the discussions on *Black Pete* and in which the opponents asked the Centre to take sides. At least one of the scholars of the academic Meertens Institute felt that the issue of *Black Pete* called for engaged social research and engaged social action (Helsloot, 2012). Or is the job of the cultural broker, to bring the different stakeholders together, promoting dialogue? A cultural broker looking for a compromise might easily alienate himself from the stakeholders whose different viewpoints he would like to bring together. It is easy to say that cultural brokers should situate themselves in a contemporary world "of multiple, if not contending, cultural narratives" and give up the illusion of "a singular, monological reality" (Kurin, 1997: 281). In daily reality you must act and this implies some sort of engagement.

Conclusion: Intangible heritage as a co-creation

For the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage participatory research proved a worthwhile exercise, involving communities in curating and researching intangible heritage, and in that way empowering them and giving them a voice. What we discovered is that in a superdiverse society heritage implies the need for dialogue also in a broader sense, to do justice to multiperspective interpretations of heritage. Safeguarding intangible heritage implies "dialogical heritage", to adopt the phrase of heritage scholar Rodney Harrison, in which heritage "emerges from the relationship between a range of human and non-human actors and their environments", which, according to Harrison, "also might help to connect heritage with broader issues of environmental, political and social concern" (Harrison, 2013: 204). Participatory research offers a useful tool.

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