Finding the 'First Voice' in rural England: the challenges of safeguarding intangible heritage in a national museum

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to explore the challenges of defining intangible heritage and 'community' in England. It uses as its case study the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading: an urban museum *with* a rural theme. The paper examines current theoretical discourse around the concept of the 'first voice' and debate about the role of museums in the preservation of intangible heritage. It then examines the relevance of these concepts to the identification of 'rural' intangible heritage stake holders in England. In this way, it shows the potential for concepts of intangible heritage to influence national museums. However, by applying theory and practice which is designed to support work with well-defined 'originating communities' to a national museum, it also highlights the challenges of initiating community engagement in a multicultural society.

Introduction

To an international audience, the Museum of English Rural Life may seem an unlikely subject for a paper on intangible heritage. The museum itself hosts an internationally renowned collection of objects and archives relating to rural England 1850-1950. The collections were amassed from the 1950s onwards as part of a move to preserve rural heritage during the rapid industrialisation of the post war period. The collections are the tangible remains of what is generally perceived to be a 'lost world'. The communities, craftspeople and places which gave these objects significance have changed irrevocably over the last 60 years. However, does this mean that notions of community, 'first voice' or intangible heritage are of no relevance in this context?

This paper is an attempt to examine the work undertaken by the Museum to preserve the intangible aspects of rural society in England. In order to achieve this it will review current international discourse on the subject of intangible heritage. By applying concepts of 'first voice' to an English case study I hope to illustrate some of the practical and theoretical issues that this

approach poses. An examination of some of our recent and future projects will use this discourse to place our work in a broader strategic context. However, an examination of these case studies also highlights some of the challenges faced when adapting a model of the 'first voice' based primarily upon engagement with specific ethnic communities

Intangible heritage, the 'first voice' and the community: a framework for engagement?
Intangible heritage

The UNESCO 2003 *Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003) identifies the following as types of intangible heritage which may be at risk: oral traditions and expressions including language; performing arts; social practices, rituals and festive events; knowledge and practices concerning nature and

the universe; and traditional craftsmanship. Their strategies for the implementation of the convention include each state party creating inventories of intangible heritage within their territory (article 12); developing various institutions, organisations and partnerships related to the promotion and safeguarding of intangible heritage (article 13); educating and raising awareness amongst the public (article 14); and encouraging the participation of communities, groups and individuals in strategies towards the preservation of intangible heritage (article 15).

The convention situates state agencies as the tools for implementation. In previous editions of this journal both Boylan (2006) and Kurin (2007) have noted the problems that this raises and have discussed the role that museums might play in the implementation of the *Convention's* recommendations. Kurin (2007) suggests a dissonance between safeguarding intangible heritage and

Figure 1
Barge Painter' 'People of the Thames' Exhibition. © Jill Orpen

Figure 2
Blacksmith' MERL Spectacular 2008. © Fil Gierlinski

traditional museological concepts of guardianship. Such frameworks are usually restricted to the physical manifestations of culture, or as Kurin (1994b) puts it, *museums tend to like their culture dead and stuffed*. Boylan's (2006) view is more optimistic but agrees that museums need to engage with new ways of working if they are to embrace this role as guardians of all aspects of cultural heritage. However, as Alivizatou (2008) discussed in a recent article, notions of intangible heritage are not completely at odds with current museological theory. Emerging praxis over the last 20 years show that museum professionals are becoming increasingly sensitive to the need to embrace the intangible and in doing so engage with originating communities.

Several scholars question the dichotomisation of tangible and intangible heritage. In his address to the ICOM conference in Seoul, Pinna (2004) echoed these sentiments, noting that material culture is inextricably linked with living culture. The strength of reaction by indigenous communities to objects in collections illustrates that museum artefacts are not completely divorced from the social and cultural frameworks in which they originally had meaning. Equally, intangible heritage has a traditional place in museological research. For example, when researching social history objects such as those in the Museum of English Rural Life, we understand the physical object alongside the oral and archival evidence relating to it (Brigden 1992). The richness of the interpretation relies on this combination

of tangible and intangible evidence.

In addition to this, certain intangible aspects of cultural heritage rely on material culture in order to create significance. For example, museum objects may be used to reinvigorate certain traditions or may offer models for certain techniques or practices when links with tradition have been weakened. Concepts of the post-modern museum (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) reflect this shift in thinking about collections. Museum professionals are increasingly regarding themselves not as guardians of relics but as active participants in an on-going cultural dialogue. Outstanding work has been undertaken in ecomuseums and community focussed museums over the past 20 years to include communities in the preservation of their own tangible and intangible heritage (Simpson 2001, Galla 2008). This theory and practice has also influenced larger national museums which are increasingly attempting to engage with the various communities whom they serve. However, work in non-community managed museums has illustrated the problems of defining the 'first voice' in multicultural societies, and highlighted the need to create a sustainable strategy for preserving tangible and intangible heritage.

This is clear in Garces Cang's (2007) article on engagement with intangible heritage and first peoples in Japan. He notes that following the UNESCO *Convention* (UNESCO 2003) questions remain relating to the definition of intangible heritage and the identification of its custodians. He points to the model developed at the

Asia Pacific Cultural Centre for UNESCO (ACCU 2006) meeting in Tokyo as a method of differentiating between communities, groups and individuals. Communities are defined as networks with a shared cultural heritage rooted in the practice and transmission of intangible heritage, whereas groups may have shared characteristics but cut across community boundaries, and individuals may serve as the carriers of specific skills or knowledge relating to intangible heritage. He notes that in Japan preservation of intangible heritage is usually mediated via well-established preservationist groups: a view which has strong correlations with the English context.

What is the 'first voice' and how can museums engage with 'it'?

Kurin (2007) has argued that the UNESCO *Convention* does not deal in depth with the practical and theoretical implications of preserving intangible heritage whilst also respecting the complex and ever-changing nature of cultural formations. In relation to this Galla (2008) recently outlined how the concept of the 'first voice' may be used to inform policy related to intangible heritage. In his paper he used the concept of the 'first people' and the 'first voice' to discuss ways in which originating communities may be given control over the preservation of their own tangible and intangible heritage (as outlined in article 15 of the 2003 UNESCO *Convention*). He argues that recent approaches to heritage conservation have often tacked intangible heritage on to traditional methodologies related to tangible heritage. Galla also notes that strategies for preservation are usually outlined by the 'establishment'.

By using case studies, Galla outlines some challenging strategies for embedding the 'first voice' in the process of preservation and on-going cultural activity surrounding museums and other heritage sites. He posits three models for participation of 'first peoples', ranging from consultation, through strategic partnerships, to community cultural action. In the first model museums extract information or advice from the community, in the second the museum outlines the agenda and engages the community as a partner, in the third the community outlines the agenda. Galla notes that most museums are still at the first stage. This provides a useful framework for assessing the current work at the Museum of English Rural Life. However, the case studies used here and elsewhere in the literature on this topic tend to be limited to smaller community-based museums or larger museums of world cultures where it could be argued that the source communities may be relatively easily defined.

However, Galla also outlines the need to be aware of power imbalances and cross-cutting identities within 'first nations'. This issue has previously been raised in Moira Simpson's (2001) and Michael Ames' (1999) work on community voices in museums. The UNESCO *Convention* itself notes that communities have an open character, can be dominant or non-dominant, and are not necessarily linked to specific territories. The *Convention* also acknowledges that one person can belong to several communities.

How then do we identify the carriers and custodians of intangible cultural heritage? Most of the well known case studies relating to the 'first voice' relate to individuals

Figure 3
'Hurdle Makers' © Museum of English Rural Life

Figure 4
Spinners and Weavers' MERL Spectacular 2008. © Fil Gierlinski

who clearly define themselves as having a shared religion, culture, geography, language and history. While theory relating to identity politics can highlight marginalisation within these groups, for example women or young people (Galla 2008), these networks could still be defined as 'a community'. As Alivizatou (2008) outlines, post-modernist theory in anthropology and archaeology has sought to deconstruct this idea of 'cultures'. Hence, the current trend in museums for engaging only with pre-existing, well-established and ethnically-defined communities may ignore the voices of large numbers of marginalised individuals.

It is not hard to determine why this strategy has had so much popularity. Large national or regional museums often have collections, which originated from or have meaning to millions of individuals whose allegiances are not clear-cut. If representatives of 'a community' or 'a group' approach a museum, it makes life much easier. But is this really giving a voice to all the custodians of intangible heritage? It is admirable to provide a space for 'acceptable' counter-narratives, but this approach may favour mobilised, politically active groups. I will attempt to address this dilemma by examining some of the communities, groups and individuals who may speak on the subject of rural England. By discussing the challenges of defining the 'first voice' in a multicultural society and exploring the practical and theoretical issues related to this type of activity, I hope to highlight some of the gaps in the theory and practice of intangible heritage.

Defining English rural life - finding an 'originating community'

The concept of a 'first voice', as outlined by Galla, is useful in trying to identify the stakeholders in the Museum of English Rural Life. Academic writing relating to our subject area talks of the 'death of rural England' (e.g. Howkins 2003) and defines many of the specific cultural networks and ways of working the land which are captured in the museums collections as 'lost'. So what is English rural culture today?

It might be argued that the name of the Museum of English Rural Life describes our originating community quite succinctly. However, when asked to define their nationality, only one of my students (who were born and raised in England) described themselves as 'English'. The rest defined themselves as 'British'. This marks a stark contrast with my home country of Wales where people would usually define their nationality as 'Welsh'. Engagement with a sense of English (as opposed to British) identity is complex. Some far-right groups now use discourse related to multiculturalism to define indigenous English people as a 'threatened ethnic minority'. In this climate the talk of 'true Englishness' takes on an uncomfortable new meaning.

So who is truly English? In his work on the subject of *The English National Character* Mandler (2006) notes that concepts of the national character are constantly in flux. He echoes Benedict Anderson's (1991) work on *imagined communities* in pointing to the fact that national identity is *slippery* and *flexible* (Mandler 2006: 2). This is

necessary as the grouping needs to include a range of people who you will never meet but must nonetheless identify with. He notes that discourse on this subject is fought over by various political factions and interest groups. Cohen (1982) in his work on social structures and 'belonging' in Britain argued that over-arching concepts of identity often mask the heterogeneity of local experience. Hence, while the terminology of ethnic identity or biological precedence might be used in this debate, a clear definition of 'Englishness' is inherently elusive.

Even if some easy definition could be found for Englishness, this would not include all those who live in the countryside. While rural England is considerably less ethnically diverse than many urban centres, it is not full of white, middle class, indigenous males (Agyeman and Spooner 1997). How would other voices be encompassed within the common definition of an 'originating community' or 'first voice'? An accurate depiction of rural England today would need to include the voices of traveller and Gypsy groups whose cultural practices often clash with the 'Gorgio' (non-Gypsy) community, and a rapidly growing immigrant agricultural labour force. Giving prominence to a so-called 'first nation' would be impractical and actually serve to further marginalise already socially excluded voices.

There is a further tension between the concept of an indigenous English identity and the concept of the UK as a multicultural society. Museum programming should address the needs of the entire populace and target social exclusion. This means that rural museums do not just serve those who currently live and work in the countryside but also communities who are affected by

rural issues. As a rural museum in an urban site we find ourselves in an even more challenging situation. Systems of dominance, inequality and social exclusion exist in relation to urban-rural experience in the UK. These are determined by complex matrixes of education, class and specific geographic location. If we cannot even draw comparisons between a farmer in the north of England and one in the south, then how do we begin to engage with the multiple groups who have a stake in our collections?

Is there a 'first voice' for the English countryside?

A recent debate in the *Journal of Rural Studies* challenged representations of rural Britain. In it, Philo noted that:

> … there remains a danger of portraying British rural people … as all being 'Mr Averages', as being men in employment, earning enough to live, white and probably English, straight and somehow without sexuality, able in body and sound in mind, and devoid of any other quirks of (say) religious belief or political affiliation (1992: 200).

Following this debate Milbourne's (1997) *Revealing Rural 'Others'* and Cloke and Little's (1997) *Contested Countryside Cultures* both sought to 'give voice' to marginalised communities. These texts noted how concepts of marginalisation may be used to understand the power relationships and identity politics at play within rural locations.

This move to include 'other' voices is further

Figure 5
'Wheelwrights' © Museum of English Rural Life

complicated by Michael Woods (2005) assertion that rural politics are no longer the politics of those who live in rural areas but the politics of various groups relating to the rural. He notes that the past 10-15 years have seen a surge in political activism in the UK with regards to matters of rurality. During the 1990s the organic movement and various animal rights groups staged a number of public campaigns which captured headlines and the popular imagination. This period, and the early 2000s, also saw various unpopular laws and financial measures taken by the government and the EU, and a series of disasters which threatened the livelihood of a number of farmers. House prices were driven up by urban migration to the countryside and the rural demography changed radically as young rural dwellers moved to the cities.

The countryside has become an 'issue' which has captured the imaginations of the political right, left and various unaffiliated interest groups. In an attempt to address the perceived intrusions of 'liberal townies' and an allegedly 'anti-rural' Labour government, pro-countryside groups were established in the late 90s. The views of some of these groups are epitomised in the bumper sticker *you keep your bullshit in Westminster and we'll keep ours in the countryside!* There are a number of individuals and groups who wish to find a 'middle ground' to discuss rural issues in a non-sensationalised way. However, the media representation of rural issues and popular opinion has characterised this debate as a tug of war between liberal urbanites and upper class country dwellers.

The polarisation of public opinion on issues such as fox hunting has made it increasingly difficult to tackle certain rural issues. Hence, despite being situated in the same country as our 'originating community' it is almost impossible to identify with whom we should be collaborating. In the UNESCO *Guidelines on Intangible Heritage* it is noted that communities should not be defined by ethnicity or relationship to a single place. However, much of the work in this area has been undertaken with specific groups who have a shared religion, land and cultural framework. Within England there are cross-cutting ties of religion, political affiliation, regional identity, language, class, gender, sexuality and age. So if we cannot define who or what is English and rural then how do we preserve the intangible heritage of rural England, and furthermore, how do we involve custodians of the 'first voice' in this process?

Intangible heritage and the Museum of English Rural Life

The Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) was established in 1951 with the aim of preserving and celebrating English rural traditions at a time of rapid and irreversible change. It was one of a number of museums established during this period as a reaction to the rapid level of change taking place in agricultural practice and rural culture. While the English countryside had been undergoing significant transformations during the industrial and agricultural revolution, the technological and cultural processes taking place in the 1950s far outstripped previous developments in their scale and intensity.

Early museum staff hunted out artefacts which were rotting in barns and paid scrap metal prices to secure disused machinery. Academic researchers based within the museum also took great pains to capture the traditional knowledge and skills which were threatened by an industrialised and increasingly globalised market. For example, sound equipment and photography were used to record the skills and knowledge of George Lailey, the last traditional pole lathe turner in England. In this way, MERL took a conservationist approach to preserving the intangible and tangible manifestations of a 'disappearing' countryside.

It is important at this point to draw attention the fact that MERL is, and always has been, a university museum. Its roots lie in academic discourse around rurality, and archival evidence indicates that the museum was initially envisaged as a research centre rather than as an organisation for the general public. Like many university museums, it has experienced a shift in priorities during recent years (UMG 2004) and now seeks to combine its research activities with its role as an educational organisation. In Kurin's (2007) article questioning the mechanisms by which intangible heritage may be preserved he addressed both museums and universities separately. I would question whether university museums offer a unique space in which research into intangible heritage can be developed with community groups.

Traditionally, the museum's approach to intangible heritage has been a type of preservation which might fit into Galla's consultation model of participation. However, driven by current museological theory and practice and a desire to make our collections relevant to a modern audience, we have started to question this hierarchy of meaning production. Hence we are now looking for new

ways in which 'other' voices and stories might be given a more central role in the museum. Thus, while the museum has never been community run it is increasingly committed to engaging with various community groups.

Collecting and promoting intangible heritage

An example of this shift in thinking can be seen in the project *Rural Crafts: Take 10* (MERL 2008). This project sought to collect intangible heritage related to traditional crafts. This was achieved through commissioning a series of films documenting the knowledge and skills of rural craftspeople and the final products were collected for the museum and displayed alongside the films. However, this moved beyond simply documenting traditional skills. This research project also sought to chronicle the experience of being amongst a small group of tradition bearers and examined the impending threats to these crafts. In doing so it highlighted that many modern rural craftspeople are not the descendants of an unbroken line of tradition bearers. The decision to maintain traditional crafts in modern Britain is part of a lifestyle choice and the crafts have often been actively revived or preserved. In Britain, tradition-bearers may live in rural settings but increasingly they were not born into that life.

This questions a concept of 'first voice' based on geographical origin or biology and points to the challenges of engaging with communities within which identity is something which is both inherited and actively constructed. It also shows the importance of inventory approaches to preserving intangible heritage. The process of identifying specific craftspeople utilised an earlier survey carried out on behalf of a government agency and several charitable organisations (Collins 2004). The survey had been undertaken by a former member of the museum staff and it sought not only to record numbers of craftspeople but to understand why and how these crafts were being maintained. It also outlined a SWOT analysis of rural crafts in England and provided a valuable starting point for the museum's research. In this way, our position as a university museum made us particularly well placed to undertake this work.

However, as Kurin (2007) makes clear, intangible heritage is not the song on the tape but the actual singing of the song. In relation to this the Museum is also serving as a space in which aspects of intangible heritage may be performed. Hence, a yearly event hosts traditional craftspeople and dance groups who perform for the local urban community. In 2009 we are building on this by holding a series of folk music concerts in the museum using traditional songs and instruments related to the collections. There are some issues with authenticity here as these traditions are largely preserved as a lifestyle choice and have their roots in late 19th and early 20th century folk revivalist movements. Like many other aspects of intangible heritage they are at risk and are a part of the cultural heritage of the UK, so in that respect they are worthy of protection and promotion. Nonetheless, this echoes Garces Cang's (2007) point that national museums often have to rely on existing preservationist movements when engaging with intangible heritage.

Collaborative interpretation

Both these types of activity would fit into the UNESCO definition of intangible heritage. The model of participation would fit somewhere between Galla's first and second model of 'first voice' participation where the impetus for this work lies with the museum but the community is an active participant in this process. However, another way in which we have sought to engage with the community voices is through our exhibition programme. In this we move slightly beyond traditional definitions of intangible heritage to include the beliefs, knowledge, memories and stories of various marginalised rural peoples.

For example, a recent project sought to record oral histories and take portraits of some, now elderly, local members of the Women's Land Army. The WLA was established during World War 1 to address labour shortages in agriculture and was revived during World War 2 with women being brought in to replace male agricultural labourers who were going off to fight. While it was called an 'army' the women were often given little training or support, and following the war were not given relocation funds or pensions (unlike other male and female members of the armed forces). While their efforts fed Britain during the war their endeavours have largely been overlooked leading to them being known as the 'forgotten army'.

The oral histories recorded details of the lives of these

women which provided a richer understanding of their wartime experiences and subsequent life histories. The importance of this was seen in a recent cataloguing programme. Students researched items of WLA uniform in the object collection in the light of the oral histories of their former owners. They commented that the oral histories gave a new meaning to the tangible heritage contained within the object store and found it helped them to empathise with the women involved. However, on a more fundamental level this project also gave a voice to a group who had received little formal recognition for their role in the war effort and addressed the marginalised issue of women's' roles in agricultural production.

While this project was underway another exhibition was being developed related to the national women's organisation, the Women's Institute. Famed in Britain for making cakes and jam and singing the anthem *Jerusalem* in church halls, they are sometimes stereotyped as bearers of traditional gender roles and deemed as a slightly unfashionable community group to engage with. However, this group also stages high profile campaigns related to rural, and women's, issues. They have previously sought to subvert their image by designing bras, and even publishing a calendar showing some of their members naked, to raise money for various cancer charities. In recent years they have worked on projects related to violence against women in rural areas and even the sex slave trade. The group is all female and largely above retirement age – both marginalised categories within rural politics. This exhibition sought to get behind the stereotype and give a voice to this group in a touring exhibition.

What stands out about this exhibition for us is that it involved collaboration with the Women's Library and other regional museums, and most importantly that it was designed by members of the group being represented. Members of the group were given training in exhibition design with the object choice and interpretation of their own design. The exhibition was held in three different museums with elements of the exhibition altered to take into account the local experiences and issues which the group deemed worthy of discussion. This process was not without its problems and did raise questions about the practicalities and ethical issues of engaging with groups in this way. These participants were well educated and were all part of a self-selecting social group - would we be able to recreate this with a more diverse and/or more marginalised community group?

The final project I wish to discuss sought to capture the experiences of young people living in the countryside. The Young Farmers Association asked its members to submit photographs of their lives which were then used to create a touring exhibition. Some were idealistic, others told of the stark realities that face the modern farmer. Photography served as a powerful method for capturing and raising awareness of the lifestyles and beliefs of a group whose voice is rarely heard in museums. We are hoping to engage with young voices again in an upcoming exhibition on the evacuation of urban children to rural settings during the Second World War.

While these projects do raise interesting points about methods of capturing intangible heritage they also raise serious questions about our ability to engage with these communities. While these groups are marginalised by broader narratives relating to 20th century history, they are not what one might traditionally categorise as socially excluded. They also raise questions as to what we might mean by intangible heritage when we are working with groups and individuals rather than communities. These are tradition bearers but they do not always define themselves solely through performance, traditional crafts or festivals. While we are keen to offer a space for the performance and preservation of these more public manifestations of 'culture', we also wish to give a voice to groups who may wish to preserve and promote their ideas, beliefs or knowledge about rural England through our museum.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that while it is impossible to identify a single 'first voice' in rural England this does not absolve museum professionals from the duty of engaging with communities and intangible heritage. The MERL projects have sought to give a space for hidden voices in ways that comply with, and stretch, the UNESCO *Convention*'s definition of intangible heritage. As a museum we are still very much at the stage defined by Galla where we listen to community voices but where few communities have any real say in our wider policy. However, given the problems illustrated above in defining our communities, how could we ensure that these various groups are active participants in our work to preserve intangible heritage? As Kurin (2008) makes

clear, while the 2003 *Convention* gives ample scope for what should be done it does not really address how it should be done.

Given the heterogeneity of rural England, should we have one over-arching group or several smaller advisory groups related to specific issues? Taking into consideration the fact that there are deep divisions between various groups and communities, would work with one group limit our ability to engage with another? Should we contact existing groups and representatives or develop a system for engaging with marginalised voices? How would we find these voices and how can we create frameworks to ensure that they are heard amongst established voices? While I have questioned a model of participation based on self-defined established groups, in some contexts this may be a strategy born out of necessity. In a large museum within a multicultural society, we may realise that though cultural categories are constantly shifting, a fixed and preservationist attitude towards intangible heritage is often all that is feasible.

Hence, we have a long way to go before we are able to create a sustainable strategy for engaging with communities and intangible heritage. Current theory and practice and international regulation pushes museums towards a more active role in the preservation of intangible heritage. However, as Kurin (2007) indicates, the 2003 *Convention* needs to evolve if it is to offer a useful framework for action. I would question whether the UNESCO definitions of intangible heritage cover the whole breadth of intangible ideas, beliefs and experiences which can be preserved and invigorated by museum practice. While this conclusion is slightly unsatisfying, I do not believe that this attempt to use international discourse on intangible heritage and 'the first voice' to understand our work has failed. This is a complex and ongoing debate where a valuable first step is to ask some challenging questions. ■

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