Introduction

It is a great honour for me to participate with you in this symposium on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, and I thank the Chinese Academy of Arts for their invitation. I would like to share with you a few thoughts about policies for safeguarding living culture. In particular I would like to discuss

1. what it means that communities should be involved in this safeguarding process and how we should use the creativity of the members of the communities;
2. why the concept of “authenticity” is not relevant for living culture;
3. the difference between the appreciation of the tangible heritage and the living heritage.

1. Participation of communities, groups and NGOs

One of the important achievements of UNESCO’s 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage is the recognition that all kinds of communities should be involved in the process of safeguarding the cultural heritage. In Article 15 it reads “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.”

Hence it should not just be the professional experts or state agencies that will determine which heritage should be safeguarded and how that should be done. A state cannot safeguard living culture if the people living that culture are not involved. The different parties need to discuss the issues involved and agree upon a common strategy. When respect is shown to the living heritage and its artists or practitioners it gives them a sense of pride, which is the “most powerful driving force in fostering self-motivation for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage” (Aikawa 2004:146).

1 See full text on http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf
This “construction of reality” is a difficult process and the state should play a humble role in it and not act as a party with strong moral and aesthetic judgements on what is “interesting” living culture. The state should only play an important role in major issues like the violation of human rights and in the evaluation of the safeguarding process.

It is clear from Article 2 in the convention, that living culture that advocates religious fanaticism, apartheid, mutilation of women, or that severely harms other groups or individuals by other means, is excluded from safeguarding (see also van Zanten 2004b: 37-38). We agree on that. But what about, for instance, the shan’ge songs, sung in Chinese villages, that may use erotic texts? These do not really harm other people. We may not appreciate some texts, we may not find the music very interesting, but that is a question of taste, and therefore not relevant for the decision process in which the state is involved. The state should refrain as much as possible from value judgements, and even more from getting involved in making living culture “decent” or “more interesting”. The discussion about the values and norms involved should be left to the communities and its members. Otherwise we may end up, for instance, with living culture that fits performances on a stage, but has no longer any relation to the way it is used in the communities.

I shall give an example. The minority group of about 7500 Baduy people in West Java consider their ascetic way of life a necessity for the well-being of the world (van Zanten 2004a). Their religious system and some of their musics are very much connected to the agricultural cycle, and especially the planting and harvesting of rice. However, this small group, living in a special area of 50 square kilometres, cannot escape modernisation and globalisation. Over the years the government tended to treat Baduy music as just entertainment. In this way the music is disconnected from the cultural setting and rituals of the Baduy, the musical sounds are taken to represent the whole complex of music, that is, both the cultural thought patterns and its manifestations in the music-as-sound. This cannot be the right way to solve the problem of change, as it does not respect the living heritage of the Baduy.

In a recent paper, Chérif Khaznadar describes two different conceptions of safeguarding heritage: “one applied to tangible heritage that involves preserving (…) and one applied to intangible heritage that involves creating the conditions needed for its survival and for the natural evolution of the heritage.” (Khaznadar 2004: 5; Italics by present author, WvZ). In the performing arts and other living heritage we need to create the right conditions, so that the participants / artists themselves can use their creativity to find solutions for the changing conditions. And – of course – that may lead to the disappearance of some forms of living culture, hopefully after it has been well documented. However, the disappearance of living culture is unacceptable if it happens in a situation in which only physical, political and economical powers plays a role. For sustainable development we need both biological

2 “For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development.”

3 I also remarked that, instead of buying the old Baduy musical instruments and keeping them outside the Baduy area to be played by non-Baduy people (van Zanten 2004a: 143-5), the local government could have ordered new musical instruments and in this way support the knowledge and skills of the musicians and instrument builders. Unfortunately, all over the world we find many examples of this approach, in which the tangible part is preserved and the related intangible heritage is neglected or forgotten.
diversity and cultural diversity, and we can only achieve this if the cultural bearers of the different communities are involved in this process of safeguarding.

2. The concept of authenticity is not relevant for living culture

Tangible and intangible heritage are interconnected, and almost inseparable. However, in safeguarding living culture we should not apply exactly the same methods that have been used for safeguarding buildings, monuments and sites. Simply said, we can preserve objects in a museum, but we cannot put living culture in a museum, because then it will be dead, that is, separated from the daily life of the members of a community. Living culture is continuously recreated, as it rightly says in the definition of the UNESCO convention of 2003.

Article 10 of the Nara declaration of authenticity (1994) reads: “Authenticity […] appears as the essential qualifying factor concerning values. The understanding of authenticity plays a fundamental role in all scientific studies of the cultural heritage, in conservation and restoration planning, as well as within the inscription procedures used for the World Heritage Convention and other cultural heritage inventories.”

However, the concept of “authenticity” is problematic when dealing with living culture. If we consider certain things “authentic”, it implies that other things are “not authentic”. Let us take language. Can we say that one language is more “authentic” than another language? Of course not. Can we say that guqin music – in 2003 proclaimed as a masterpiece by UNESCO – is more “authentic” than shan’ge songs? Of course not. Is the music played by Afghan musicians that have been living in Geneva, Switzerland, for the last 15 years, “not authentic”? This is not a relevant question. What is relevant is whether this group will be able to find an audience, transmit their knowledge to others, and maybe create a new type of music, based on Afghan music.

Therefore we welcome last month’s Yamato declaration (2004) that explicitly states in article 8: “… considering that intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated, the term ‘authenticity’ as applied to tangible cultural heritage is not relevant when identifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.”

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4 “… This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” Each performance, in the broadest sense of the word, is a recreation of cultural ideas that are manifested in tangible form. For this process the Sundanese from West Java use the word ngahudang-wayangkeun, “to bring something or someone onto the stage” or “to raise a point”, and literally “to raise, put up, a wayang puppet”. In this way other people may hear the “inner voices” of the performer: rituals, music, dance and theatre are the outer manifestations (lahir) of thought or inner life (batin) (van Zanten 1997:41).

5 Similarly, it is not very useful to ask questions about the “original” myth or the “original” song. Usually there are many variants of a myth or a song existing next to each other, and the essential point is how the members of a particular community deal / have a discourse about these different variants. Our studies and policies for safeguarding should be process-oriented and not object-oriented (van Zanten 2004b:37).
3. The difference between the appreciation of the tangible heritage and the living culture

In constructing the text of the 2003 convention (September 2002- June 2003) several “Western” countries repeatedly raised the point that the safeguarding of living heritage could lead to religious and ethnic conflicts, fossilisation and the like. All these countries had ratified the 1972 convention, so why did they behave differently towards the convention on safeguarding living culture? Apparently the safeguarding of tangible world heritage (monuments, buildings, sites, and landscapes) is seen as valuable, but the safeguarding of intangible world heritage is considered too complicated and a potential source of great problems. Therefore some of these countries did not support the 2003 convention and abstained later when it came to voting.

This attitude is at least puzzling and worrying. Yes, the safeguarding of living heritage can have very dangerous implications, like the safeguarding of sites - we need only to think about a city like Jerusalem or the destruction of the Buddha statues in Bamiyan by the Taliban in March 2001. However, based on my experiences with musicians in Malawi and Indonesia, I do not at all feel that safeguarding performing arts is leading us to the wrong track. On the contrary, in the first place it gives performers and audiences a feeling of pride, self-respect, or “identity” if you want. This is especially needed in regions of the world that do not have great buildings, monuments or sites. Condominas (2004:22, 26) states clearly: “…there is a genuinely felt disdain for all works of oral culture, which, like almost all human acts, is contradictory,” and “People say: ‘Ah, if it is in writing, it’s perfect’, but if it is oral they start to criticize. This is a widespread reaction …”

However, subsidising symphony orchestras, safeguarding knowledge about building windmills, and giving awards to artists is ongoing business in Western countries! It can be used for reasons of visibility and raising awareness and respect for living culture. Internationally this is even more urgent. We need to make the creativity of the different communities visible in order to become more humble, learn to see cultural forms in a relativistic way, and show respect for other cultural forms, much needed in this complicated world full of prejudice. The 2003 convention gives a new possibility for the communication process about the place of cultural heritage in our international society. Many politicians are not so good at this, and I daresay it is a form of ethnocentrism that suits their own, short-term interests very well.

If this choice for narrow-economic development, without including cultural factors, prevails, we may all loose in the long term. There is more to human life than just money, and we should be prepared to listen more carefully to the members of other communities in this world. In this respect UNESCO has a very good record, and I hope it will continue to lead the way in this process with the 2003 convention. If we, and UNESCO, succeed in this, the world will be more stable and peaceful.

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6 In the words of the Nobel laureate for literature and UNESCO goodwill ambassador Wole Soyinka (2003:31):

“The primacy of development, especially in its technological aspects, is a seductive but purely fallacious concept wherever posited in opposition to, or even competition with, the preservation of heritage. In nine cases out of ten, there are always alternatives.”
References


- Nara declaration of authenticity (1994) <http://www.international.icomos.org/naradoc_eng.htm>


