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Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Culture

Reflections on the UNESCO World Heritage List

by Peter J. M. Nas

On May 18, 2001, the first UNESCO Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity took place in Paris. Nineteen traditional cultural expressions were inscribed on the World Heritage List. These masterpieces are extremely varied, covering all sorts of sociocultural phenomena ranging from theater and music to folklore and traditional royal and popular rituals. UNESCO has become famous for protecting world heritage, particularly important monuments but also archaeological sites and landscapes. From now on it will explicitly include on its World Heritage List masterpieces of oral and intangible culture that are endangered and deserve to be preserved for future generations. The objective is to encourage the identification, preservation, and promotion of such cultural expressions. Governments, NGOs, and local communities are being stimulated to conserve peoples’ cultural repositories—language, literature, music, dance, games, mythologies, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture, and other arts, as well as traditional forms of communication and information.

National governments, intergovernmental organizations, and nongovernmental organizations may nominate candidates for the list. An application form with questions on identification and documentation, justification, and preservation management along with a description of the cultural expression must accompany the nomination. After expert evaluation the nominations are submitted to an 18-member international jury. Items to be placed on the list must either be “a strong concentration of the intangible cultural heritage of outstanding value” or “a popular and traditional cultural expression of outstanding value from a historical, artistic, ethnological, sociological, anthropological, linguistic, or literary point of view” (UNESCO 2001b). Additional criteria are related to the significance of the cultural phenomenon in the community concerned: historical roots, affirmation of identity, excellence, and uniqueness. The risk of disappearance and the plan of action for preservation also play a crucial role. “Masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity” will be placed on the World Heritage List every two years, and UNESCO will support the cultural phenomena listed and monitor their protection.

This initiative is important for the social sciences and particularly for cultural anthropology in that it explicitly recognizes the value of the collective memory of peoples and the inventory of human cultural phenomena. The variety of cultural phenomena is placed on the world agenda in a practical way and brought to the attention of the mass media and the public. Yet, several questions spring to mind. Why should these cultural phenomena be preserved and revitalized? Can culture and folklore be preserved? Should they be preserved? Might preservation lead to fossilization and alienation from the living sociocultural source, or will it revitalize culture and foster the invention of tradition? What happens to culture and folklore when they are politicized through interna-

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3. UNESCO (2001a). The scientific bodies involved in the evaluation are the International Council for Traditional Music, the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, the International Social Science Council, the International Association for Legal Sciences, the Union Internationale de la Maitrise, and the Comité International Permanent de Linguistique.

4. The members of the jury are Hasan M. Al-Naboodah (United Arab Emirates), Aziza Bennani (Morocco), George Condominas (France), Anzor Erkomaichvili (Georgia), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico), Juan Goytisolo (Morocco), Hideki Hayashida (Japan), Ugne Karvelis (Lithuania), Alpha Oumar Konare (President of the Republic of Mali), Richard Kurin (U.S.A.), Olive W. M. Lewin (Jamaica), H. M. Ronald Muwenda Mutebi II (Uganda), J. H. Kwaibvena Nketia (Ghana), Ralf Regenvanu (Vanuatu), H.R.H. Princess Basma Bint Talal (Jordan), Dawnhee Yim (Republic of Korea), Zuimar Yugar (Bolivia), and Munojat Yulchiewa (Uzbekistan).
tional and national governmental protection programs? Shouldn’t tradition always be subject to change—both invention and development and decline and deterioration? In an attempt to deal realistically and empirically with these questions, I will briefly describe some of the oral and intangible phenomena selected for the World Heritage List.

Examples

THE JONGMYO JERYE

Once a year at the royal ancestral shrine of Jongmyo in Seoul, Korea, the Chonju Yi lineage performs a Confucian ancestor ritual for the kings of the Choson period. This ritual, called Jongmyo Jerye, is accompanied by traditional music. The scheme of the ritual is quite simple: The spirits of the ancestors are invited to the site of the shrine, where incense is burned and food is offered to them. Hundreds of people in traditional costumes participate, and the performance is televised for all Koreans to follow. This beautiful and solemn ritual is deeply rooted in Korean ideology and is a focus of national identity and pride. It is an outstanding cultural expression and fulfills all the UNESCO criteria except that it is not endangered at the moment. The Korean authorities have been very successful in the revitalization of this concentration of intangible culture [IUAES 2001a, ICTM 2001b].

JAMA’EL-FNA PLAZA

Jama’el-Fna Plaza in Marrakech, Morocco, dates to the origin of the city in the 11th century and has become a symbol of the city. It is mentioned in written sources from the 17th century on. Many foreigners have sketched and described it, and since the 1920s it has been protected by law. A triangular space surrounded by public buildings, cafés, restaurants, hotels, and shops in the heart of the city, it is used partly as parking space but mostly for open-air restaurants, juice and fruit stands, the displays of traditional medicine sellers, and performances and spectacles. Some of the activities encountered here are storytelling, acrobatics, music performances, comic theater, dance, animal shows with monkeys, donkeys, pigeons, or scorpions, snake charming, glass eating, fire spitting, fortune telling, astrology, numerology, one-hole miniature golf, preaching, dentistry, traditional (herbal) medicine, and henna tattooing. Of course, commercial activities, ranging from the selling of fruit and bread to water carrying and lamp rental, are also vibrant. The cosmopolitan nature of the plaza and its vitality render it a seedbed of performance skills, oral tradition, and linguistic experiments, with many languages and dialects of Moroccan as well as European stock blending in a playful manner. The stories told and the ways of telling them are based on an old tradition. The drive to attract the attention of spectators has fostered great ingenuity. The number of local, regional, national, and international visitors ranges from several hundred on an average day to several thousand in the case of official festivities.

The vulnerability of Jama’el-Fna Plaza is rooted in the general process of the city’s modernization. In particular, the growing pressure of motorized traffic results in increased levels of air pollution, and cultural activities are in danger of being restricted to facilitate improvements in urban transportation. Furthermore, the authenticity of the place is being increasingly eroded by tourism.

Jama’el-Fna Plaza complies with the main evaluation criteria of UNESCO. It is a strong concentration of intangible Moroccan culture of outstanding character and a popular and traditional cultural expression of outstanding value. As the core of local and regional urbanism it is of historical, artistic, anthropological, and literary importance. It gives ample evidence of being a source of support for the long-standing popular traditions that lie at the basis of urban and Moroccan identity. It is a place of encounters and cultural exchange and the demonstration of professional and performance skills. It is without a doubt a unique testimony of a living cultural tradition that is endangered by modernization and city planning focused not on culture but on transportation. It could become an example of a new type of city planning giving priority to people, culture, encounter, and exchange [IUAES 2001b].

THE SOSSO BALA

The balaphon (or bala) of Sosso is a musical instrument kept in seclusion by the Kouyate family of Nyagassola, Republic of Guinea. Its origins are legendary, as it was first owned and played by King Sumanguru Kanté, who succeeded to the Sosso throne in 1200. A type of xylophone with 16–20 keys, it is part of a set of musical and oral traditions of great antiquity in Sub-Saharan Africa. It plays a central role in the Sunjata epic, a cycle of narratives transmitted orally from generation to generation by professional bards in West Africa that is considered a medieval history of a vast area including Mali, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Gambia, and Senegal. The members of the Kouyate family function as protectors and transmitters of the Sosso bala tradition in its widest sense. Bards, craftsmen, and guards form the core of this valuable cultural space. Preservation and revitalization are being pursued through the construction of a museum and conference room, the organization of festivals and workshops for balaphon players, and the establishment of a library [IUAES 2001c, ICTM 2001b].

THE ELCHE MYSTERY PLAY

The Elche Mystery Play is a medieval religious play depicting the burial, assumption, and coronation of the Virgin Mary that is performed on August 14 and 15 of every year in the Basilica of St. Mary in the walled town of Elche, Valencia, Spain. Its performance involves almost 300 people, including directors, actors, cantors, stagehands, and stewards, and is preceded by a series of ritual
events symbolically testing the actors and cantors. The play has various parts: the death of Mary, the nightly procession, the morning procession, the afternoon funeral procession, and the enactment of the burial, assumption, and coronation in the basilica. Solo singers and choruses play an important role, and ancient aerial machinery is used to enhance the spectacle with special effects. The performance in the basilica is divided into two acts. In the first act the Virgin expresses her wish to see her son Jesus again. An angel holding a palm leaf descends from heaven in an aerial device to tell Mary that her wish will be fulfilled. The Apostles come to help Mary in her transit. After her death her soul is represented by a small image of the Virgin of the Assumption, the patron saint of Elche, and a second aerial device, bearing the angel and four aides, slowly descends to recover it. The second act begins the next day with the preparation for the burial of Mary. This is interrupted by a group of Jews who try to impede the burial. When one of the Jews tries to touch the body of Mary his arm is paralyzed. He recovers after the conversion and baptism of his companions. Then the Jews and Apostles stage the funeral procession, which ends with the placing of Mary’s image in the center of the main stage. An aerial device descends to reunite the soul and body of Mary and take her to heaven, resurrected. Finally, God the Father places an imperial crown on Mary’s head. Her coronation symbolizes her role of Queen of Creation.

Several constraints confront the play. The medieval machinery is increasingly difficult to maintain and replace, and workers capable of operating it are also becoming scarce. The medieval and Valencian character of the play lead to a certain alienation of young people, who no longer speak the Valencian language. The traditional rural population of the area is increasingly leaving to settle in cities. Furthermore, promotion outside Elche by way of concerts has led to strong pressure to perform the play, or parts of it, in other places, potentially endangering its proper continuation in Elche.

Yet, the play is of outstanding value and still very popular and vivid. It complies with the UNESCO criterion of strong concentration of local cultural heritage. It is deeply rooted in the history of the Elche community and supports a local Valencian identity that is threatened by modernization. It is an official national monument and is protected regionally and locally (IUAES 2001d).

LITHUANIAN CROSS CRAFTING

The typical Lithuanian folk tradition of wooden cross crafting as a focus of identity, beliefs, and ceremonies probably began in the 15th century, when Lithuania had already been Christianized, but its roots lie in pre-Christian times. When the Russian Empire annexed Lithuania, the tradition was suppressed, and the erection of crosses became a form of rebellion. After independence, cross crafting was promoted, and from the 1920s on the crosses were used to commemorate national holidays. After World War II, under Soviet occupation, their numbers were sharply reduced. In the 1970s wood sculpture activities of a secular type were established that furthered the preservation of wood-carving skills. This secular folk memorial crafting remained important after independence, while the original cross-carving tradition took off again after years of repression.

The wooden crosses concerned are 1.20 to 2 m tall. The pole is beautifully decorated with floral and geometric motifs. The crosspiece has a small statue of Christ, a saint, or a group of saints. In addition to the pillar-type cross, there is a pillared shrine. The crosses with their saints are erected for purposes of protection or as offerings, to express gratitude or suffering, or in supplication. They are placed near springs, old stones, fields, hills, crossroads, forests, lakes, and so on. Besides individual crosses, ensembles of crosses are also encountered; particularly interesting are the hills of crosses, where a great number of crosses have been put together. Crafting masters make the crosses on commission for a community or an individual. Cross-crafting masters in the country number about 200. A priest consecrates them in a ceremony consisting of blessings and prayers. In the past, rituals were related to calendar-cycle events, church festivals, and harvest festivals. Nowadays they are related more to state events; the old ceremonies have deteriorated.

The intangible aspects of cross crafting—customs, rituals, and religious ceremonies—are highly endangered. Countryside communities are modernizing, and people are leaving them for the cities. Many people are no longer religious, and young people are often not interested in tradition. At the same time, its material aspects have acquired a new function with respect to the formation of national identity. After several periods of suppression, wooden cross art has acquired a new role in nation building and state development. Some of the cross ensembles refer to Soviet oppression and national heroes.

The UNESCO listing is of the crosses and their making, the associated ceremonies, customs, and prayers have probably not been recorded. Crosses and cross crafting represent a popular and traditional expression of outstanding value, particularly from a historical and an artistic point of view, and have deep historical roots. They play an important role in cultural identity with a shift from religious to state and national identity. They are certainly skillfully made and unique. The associated beliefs and customs are in need of protection, but in fact they are so greatly endangered that they can no longer be considered of outstanding quality. Thus the criteria of being a masterpiece and being vulnerable contradict each other in this case (IUAES 2001e).

ENDANGERED CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

About 11,500 people in ten communities in Belize speak the Garifuna language, which is also called Black Carib because, although of the Arawak language family, it has Carib residues and is used by creoles. In only one village do children learn Garifuna as their native language, and no general description or thorough documentation of the language and culture exists (IUAES 2001f).
The Zápara of Ecuador and Peru are probably the descendants of the original settlers of the Amazon. The language of the indigenous Zápara people has not yet been reduced to writing, and scant information exists on the content and character of either the language or the culture. Five speakers of the language remain, and they are prepared and motivated to teach to younger generations their myths about the cosmos and their knowledge of medicinal plant use, but it is not obvious that this culture on the verge of extinction can be saved [IUAES 2001g].

The Rationale: Conservation and Identity Construction

The UNESCO program is based on the conviction that urbanization, modernization, and globalization constitute a great danger for the variety of human culture. These processes endanger the complexity of the cultural inventory and collective memory of peoples. This leads to a tremendous loss of oral and cultural repertoires, traditional social identities, and skills. According to the UNESCO rationale the protection, promotion, and revitalization of cultural configurations will make it possible to conserve these elements for future generations, providing opportunities to exploit them and create new forms of community identification. Although protection may lead to their alienation from the folk source and dependence on national and international governmental organizations, they are nevertheless supposed to be able to play a creative function in the development of humankind. In fact, the paradox is clear; the globalization of these phenomena is being employed to counteract that same globalization.

In the examples above, the danger of disappearance is clearly specified. In the case of the Jongmyo Jerye, elite and state intervention have neutralized the danger, and the ritual has evolved into a national identity marker. Jama'el-Fna Plaza, a very urban place, is endangered by the modernization of the city and particularly motorized traffic. The Elche Mystery Play is jeopardized by a changing rural and linguistic context. Modernization and urbanization are undermining the communities in which the play is rooted. The language of the play is no longer understood, and the exodus of young people from the countryside has reduced interest in taking part in the performance. Lithuanian cross crafting has been suppressed in periods of foreign occupation, and secularization and urbanization have robbed its intangible aspect of much of its significance. The two ethnic groups in Latin America vary in degree of vulnerability, with the Zápara being on the verge of extinction. However—and this is the difficulty with the listing process—new meanings are often attached to these ancient cultural expressions in the framework of national identity formation, and it is only thus that they receive new functions and a reason to be continued.

This means that besides the conservation approach, which has merits of its own, UNESCO is addressing a more profound problem, namely, the search for identity in a changing world, where many communities are uprooted and searching for new certainties and worldviews. This problem lies at the heart of modern anthropological and development theory. According to Manuel Castells (1996–98; see Nas and Houweling 1999), whose work has become one of the dominant paradigms of the turn of the century, new societal structures have evolved with digital technology and communication. These structures have acquired a network logic, and society is in the process of being transformed into a network society. The network society, including production, distribution, family, state, politics, and even crime (which is organized increasingly in criminal networks), and the worlds of finance, business, and communication in particular have already become intertwined on a worldwide scale. Globalization has engendered strong developments at the grassroots level, where communities are being uprooted by the influx of new worldviews related, for example, to religion (secularization) and family (different branches of feminism) and job loss due to the transfer of production units to other countries. According to Castells, this has evoked a strong search for identity at the grassroots level that takes the form of reactive and proactive social movements. Reactive movements such as the Aum Shinrikyo in Japan [known for its gas attack in the Tokyo underground] and the American Militia in the U.S.A. foster a resistance identity based on the feeling that people have lost control over their own lives. They revolt against the new social order and construct new identities around primary units, territorial, religious, or ethnic. Proactive movements such as environmentalism also act against—in this case—environmental degradation, but they have developed some sort of a view on how society could be organized in a new and better way. What is important here is that globalization and localization are creating an identity crisis that generates new forms of identity. Castells distinguishes three types: legitimizing, resistant, and project. It is the struggle for identities that constitutes the focus of the contemporary societal crisis and of the UNESCO initiative.

Some of the UNESCO cases have to be labeled as legitimizing identities. The Jongmyo Jerye in Korea and the cross-crafting complex in Lithuania have become clear national identity markers, although cross crafting also functioned as a resistance identity marker in times of occupation. Other cases have both potentially legitimizing and resistant aspects because of their national and local territorial and ethnic meaning—the Elche Mystery Play with regional Valencian and the Garifuna with transnational connotations. The Zápara and Jama’el-Fna examples represent conservation rather than identity construction.

Conclusion

The UNESCO initiative to include masterpieces of oral and intangible culture on the World Heritage List is very
important both for society and for anthropology. The program has a dual rationale in the areas of conservation and identity construction. As such it responds to modern feelings of alienation at the grassroots level that are a result of modernization, secularization, urbanization, and globalization. It offers clear opportunities for the preservation and revitalization of outstanding traditional cultural expressions. Moreover, the cultural phenomena listed may function as a repository for identity formation on an international, national, regional, and ethnic scale. The UNESCO requirements of “clear risk of disappearance” and “outstanding value” may be contradictory. Some cases are of high quality but therefore not endangered. Other cases may be very vulnerable and have therefore lost some of their quality. Whatever the problems encountered by the international jury in judging the cases, the meaning for society of the proclamation of masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity is without a doubt paramount. The program’s value for cultural anthropology and development studies is also substantial. This is the first time that cultural expressions have been taken as a subject of worldwide intergovernmental policy in such detail. Outstanding traditional cultural expressions, if preserved, may prove to be not only an object of pride but also a source of inspiration for the development of new identities in a changing world. Even when estranged from their original sociocultural context and politicized in new local, national, and international configurations, these valuable cultural complexes may play a dominant role in the constitution of a simultaneously globalized and localized world.

The UNESCO initiative may seem odd in the light of the inherently flexible nature of culture and the contradictory character of some of the criteria and even of the intervention program itself (which is protecting the local by interference of the global). Yet, the community of intervention program itself (which is protecting the local) indicates that there is much work ahead in this area, although admittedly it will be some time before we de-

its early stages, with members of the jury still grappling with detailing the criteria for judging such masterpieces, the issues raised by Nas are timely and open the door for renewed debates on traditional culture in an era of change unlike any other. Whereas previous research has examined the significance of culture as a determining factor in the way communities develop and adopt new ideas, Nas’s article highlights areas that need further discussion in the age of globalization.

Nas raises several important questions regarding the conservation of cultural heritage and goes on to discuss the issue of identity construction, which is becoming a more esoteric subject as the impact of globalization, urbanization, and modernization is being felt in areas outside the economy. Of the various thorny issues that need to be examined in the global-versus-local problematic, the question of identity is probably one of the more difficult to address. While substantial research and theorizing have been done on the issue of identity, practical experience has made me all the more aware of the role that identity plays at the community level in accepting or rejecting development interventions. Although the risk of ethnocentrism—of projecting our categories and understandings onto others—may be of particular relevance in such instances, I believe that issues of local identity should be included more fully in theoretical studies of relations between citizen and state or class and society.

In discussing the work of Castells on the types of identities that have been generated as a result of societal transformations, Nas stresses the notion of the “network society,” which applies to different components of society. The globalization of the network society has engendered strong developments at the grassroots level—various forms of revolt against the new social order and the construction of new identities around primary units, territorial, religious, or ethnic. Nas concludes: “It is the struggle for identities that constitutes the focus of the contemporary societal crisis and of the UNESCO initiative.”

Although the UNESCO initiative offers a new prism through which to consider identity constructs and offers opportunities to explore the relation between the struggle for and the power of identities, as Nas suggests we should not lose sight of the threat of complex interplays of domination and subordination from which the struggle for identity emanates. On the whole, the UNESCO-proclaimed masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage have survived for centuries despite threats of extinction. Many of them have survived the cultural subjugation of colonial states. Yet the threat of globalization—its power and predominance over numerous identities and intrinsic values—makes it imperative that further research be directed towards the ethical issues of globalization and its effect on local cultures.

Resolving the global-versus-local problematic requires us to address the ethical issues behind it, in addition to the many other complex issues involved. Nas’s article indicates that there is much work ahead in this area, although admittedly it will be some time before we de-

Comments

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While UNESCO’s initiative to proclaim masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity is still in

5. One other problem is related to human rights. Some cultural expressions may not be in accordance with these rights, for example, when they involve corporal punishment or severe bodily harm to group members.
velop the perspective to make informed judgments on this type of research. The article sets the stage for bringing together scholars of different backgrounds but similar interests to work on the dilemmas of this debate and its multidimensional impacts.

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UNESCO’s initiative to protect masterpieces of oral and intangible culture deserves praise. Nas explains the rationale for formally proclaiming certain cultural expressions masterpieces. Phenomena as diverse as polyphonic singing in Georgia, royal ancestral rites in Korea, the Oruro Carnival in Bolivia, and other activities have been awarded such recognition. National governments have committed themselves to protecting the phenomena selected, mainly by subsidizing the activities, installing committees or organizations to oversee the exhibitions, and public education. Nas points out that this effort recognizes and promotes local identities in a world of increasing globalization. Here, I think, lies the real value of the UNESCO initiative. All over the world people are looking for their own place, their own niche, their own identity. They apparently have the need to distinguish their group, their town, their nation, from all others. What could be more appropriate and harmless than selecting oral, intangible phenomena as markers?

The other side of the picture is that through this effort a number of redundant or nearly forgotten traditions will be kept alive at all costs. Governments will pay people to dance dances the use of which no one sees any longer, to sing incomprehensible songs that have long since lost their meaning, to perform mystery plays in which no one now believes. Why do this? Why spend a lot of money and work to make a list of such endangered masterpieces? Once traditional activities have lost their function, how can a government guarantee that subsidies will produce their maintenance?

Yet, despite these misgivings, I think it is good that UNESCO is trying to save as much of our cultural heritage as possible, for without the preservation of the colorful weavings of the past the carpet of human culture will lose much of its attraction and become an ever more monotonous grey.

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First, a correction: The new UNESCO program is a proclamation of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity; the World Heritage List is a separate, long-established program. Second, full disclosure: Nas represented the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in assessing candidates for the UNESCO designation; I was a member of the jury.

Nas argues that the initiative is important for calling attention to the preservation of diverse cultural
traditions. Whether the proclamation of the first 19 masterpieces or even subsequent ones will put culture on the world agenda remains to be seen. If that were the goal, one might have expected designation of a much more dramatic list—pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Hajj, Kumbh Mela, Tibetan Buddhism, aboriginal use of Ayers Rock, Basque and Catalan in Spain, Gypsy folkways in Eastern Europe, Amazonian cultural traditions in Brazil, San traditions in Southern Africa, etc.

Nas suggests that the program is important for anthropology given contemporary issues of identity construction, legitimation, and representation. He raises questions begged by the program: What constitutes a masterpiece? How can culture be safeguarded, and should it be? How do you evaluate traditions? The program is bound by formal regulations, definitions, and assumptions, many quite reasonable but some problematic or contradictory. Why should an action plan to preserve an idealized tradition ensure that it never changes? The regulations assume that masterpieces should be highly valued and celebrated, but many forms of well-rooted community-based cultural creativity are masterpieces of destruction. Can they be proclaimed masterpieces?

The awkward term “intangible cultural heritage” is a recent one, growing out of Japan’s living-national-treasures program, established in 1950, and its Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties. Two hundred two “important intangible folk cultural properties,” for example, had been designated by the Japanese government as of April 2000. Intangible cultural heritage is seen as property, or asset or resource, to be protected, appreciated, utilized, and managed. In the 1970s the discussion of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage stimulated questions about intangible heritage. The result was UNESCO’s 1980 Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, which defined terms and strategies for the research, preservation, conservation, and dissemination of intangible cultural heritage. Subsequent surveys, regional meetings, and assessments showed broad interest and a variety of activities but no worldwide pattern for defining, let alone safeguarding, intangible cultural heritage. This led to a new global assessment at a UNESCO-Smithsonian conference in 1999 and a recent publication (Seitel 2001). In 1997 UNESCO announced its new program in the context of the Recommendation, and in 2001 it proclaimed its first masterpieces. By its very language, the program seeks to combine ideas from the worlds of art, anthropology, and cultural administration.

The program has a certain rhetorical value in cultural policy terms. Nas rightly observes that it uses the institutions and media of globalization to assert local cultural identity and legitimacy vis-à-vis globalizing forces. It deserves kudos for advocating the existence and flourishing of varied cultures and asserting the rights of practitioners to enact their culture and benefit from their efforts. Yet to scholars the prospect of defining and identifying cultural expressions to be preserved and promoted is daunting. Should the program privilege the products of human activity—the “masterpieces”—or the producers or, alternatively, the acts of production? It seems that in this case the art world, or perhaps the monument world, has provided the model. Next, who selects? While NGOs may nominate, the candidates are named by member states of UNESCO. Culture defined and selected by national governments may not be the best basis for deliberative and dispassionate consideration. Evaluating action plans to save masterpieces is tricky. The ethnographic literature documents many cases in which well-intentioned efforts to help actually harmed local traditions.

I believe that good can come from the efforts of anthropologists, folklorists, and ethnomusicologists in aiding local traditions. Scholarship and analysis of cultural heritage work, however, has lagged well behind practice. Here may be the kind of intellectual payoff Nas suggests. Cultural heritage work is undertheorized; it lacks a good technical terminology; there is a paucity of systematic data, analytic methods, and evaluative work. Yet cultural heritage is a growth area around the world. Governments, foundations, corporations, and even grassroots groups are linking it to economic development and political assertion. If the UNESCO program can encourage the intellectual development of the field, it will have a positive effect.

Nas is right: the jury was challenged. Diverse colleagues of goodwill engaged in a difficult task about which there were substantial disagreements on terminology, concept, application, and interpretation. We had to grapple with criteria and a deliberative process that are sure to be improved over time. We needed more information and better expert advice, more explicit action plans, and a better feel for how practitioners and community members were involved. We sometimes wrestled with the tension between a cultural relativistic view of human expressions and universalistic accords on human rights in deciding whether to deem a tradition treasured.

Though perhaps a skeptical participant, I was moved when, after our work was done and ratified, video images of the various traditions were presented to the UNESCO assembly by the Secretary-General. The diversity, vitality, personality, and imagination evident in the selections provided a fitting, if not exact, commentary on our cultural life.

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Nas points to a fascinating paradox in UNESCO’s new proclamation of masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity. Its program to protect a “variety of human culture” is itself an integral aspect of the very processes of globalization that UNESCO views as a threat to the “complexity of the cultural inventory and collective memory of peoples.” This leads to the important question, not fully addressed by Nas, how a global organization, operating according to general guidelines,
can recognize and appreciate the complexity and diversity of the cultural expressions that it seeks to protect. By what criteria can one compare widely different cultural expressions, and how does one single out the “masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity” worthy of preservation?

According to the UNESCO guidelines, a key notion in the definition of a masterpiece is its “outstanding value” and need of protection. The value of nominated masterpieces may be determined from the point of view of several different scholarly disciplines, among them anthropology. For anthropologists trained to carry out contextual cultural analysis rather than to judge the relative merits of singular cultural expressions, this kind of evaluative venture should pose quite a challenge. What kinds of cultural expressions are needed to represent a sufficient range of diversity, and what will it take to maintain the world’s cultural diversity? [Is it only the outstanding that merits preservation, or might the less conspicuous also be worthy of protection? Is any kind of cultural diversity “good”? [Is it necessarily “good” to preserve a ritual that celebrates the forced conversion of Jews in Spain or cultural expressions that support the nationalist revival of the new nation-states in the former Soviet Union?] What is meant by “cultural space”? [This notion, perhaps introduced in a sympathetic attempt to broaden the concept of cultural protection, refers to as varying contexts of life as a plaza (Morocco), a brotherhood (the Dominican Republic), a district (Uzbekistan), and a people (the Garifuna). These questions cannot find easy answers within anthropology or, for that matter, the other disciplines mentioned in the guidelines.

And this is where Nas’s paradox becomes relevant, because UNESCO’s program to protect diversity appears to draw a great deal of inspiration from global organizations devoted to the protection of biodiversity. UNESCO’s goal of protecting “outstanding” cultural expressions resembles the environmental organizations’ tendency to focus on “outstanding” species such as pandas rather than the less conspicuous ones. Like the environmental organizations, which seek to conserve the biodiversity of the globe by protecting the biospheres of endangered animals, UNESCO operates with a relatively broad idea of cultural diversity and cultural spaces in need of protection. Finally, as in the case of programs to protect biodiversity, most of the cultural diversity worthy of protection seems to be located in places that are politically and economically peripheral in the global arena. Thus, the World Heritage List includes no masterpieces in North America, one in Western Europe, and one in Japan.

The protection of biodiversity and the safeguarding of cultural diversity are two entirely different matters, however. Whereas the environmental organizations may be able to establish natural-scientific guidelines for the preservation of biodiversity, there are no general scientific principles whereby anthropologists or other scholars in the humanities and social sciences can evaluate the quality of and need for preservation of cultural diversity on a global basis. Questions concerning cultural diversity involve social, economic, and political interests as well as the human rights of individuals and the groups with which they are affiliated. It is suggestive of the politicization of the issue that of the 19 approved masterpieces, 6 are from nations represented on the 18-member jury, 2 of whom are from Morocco, which is represented by a masterpiece that is one of the subjects of Nas’s presentation.

Nas suggests that the desire to protect cultural diversity springs mainly from a deeply felt need to maintain cultural distinction and rooted identities in the face of today’s globalization of the network society. This is much in line with UNESCO’s view of cultural diversity as a weapon against globalization. I rather suspect that attempts to be included on the World Heritage List are part of a wider political struggle in which the assertion of cultural rights has become one of the primary means of gaining the attention of significant others in the global arena.

Whether or not anthropologists agree with UNESCO’s program for the protection of cultural diversity, they certainly will find in it a challenging subject for critical study and analysis.

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UNESCO’s expanded focus on oral and intangible culture seems a counterpoint to the move in museum exhibitions toward installations that are lively and interactive. As live performance moves into the museum, the museum effect spreads into the intangible world. It is thus not surprising that UNESCO’s cultural preservationists have now decided to include “masterpieces of oral and intangible culture” within their mandate. All these structures have to a greater or lesser degree been shaped by human efforts, and, I would argue, all serve as sites of memory, lieux de mémoire, to use the terminology of French historian Pierre Nora. Certainly the monuments and archaeological ruins that UNESCO targeted in the past are sites of memory. Nora’s description of how orators connect buildings and memory seems apt: “The classical art of memory taught orators to remember their speeches by associating each topic to be covered with some part of a real or imagined building in which the oration was to be delivered—the atrium, columns, furniture, and so on. The art of memory was founded on an inventory of memory places, loci memoriae” [Nora 1989:251]. What seems controversial about the new additions to the UNESCO mandate may be the mistaken perception that oral and intangible culture is more fragile and more difficult to shape into preservable form than tangible cultural expressions. But the resilience and flexibility of oral traditions have continued to amaze those who study them.

Nas’s reference to a “timely experiment in modern worldwide culture policy” is particularly interesting. Lo-
cal and foreign private foundations, scholarly institutions, and academic researchers have been intervening in local cultural preservation since Europeans first began to use scholars as administrators in their colonial regimes in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Thus the new element in UNESCO's efforts is its experiment in international—Nas might say global—collaboration. What kind of consensus about art, architecture, and preservation do global juries produce? Almost a third of the projects funded in this first round originate in countries that have representatives on the prestigious jury selected by UNESCO. This stresses the need for a changing group of jurists, since applications from various countries are more likely to be generated as more and more groups of scholars and artists know of the existence of UNESCO's aid. Nas questions the compatibility of the criteria of excellence and endangered status, but how is an international jury, however distinguished, to judge excellence in contexts where many must be uninformed or at least underinformed?

Is there a global standard of excellence? Most likely the different projects reflect how nations wish to see themselves at a certain point in time, and the projects chosen for funding represent a global consensus of what it is appropriate to remember and what some are reluctant to forget. To return to my observation about the expansion of the museum effect, an example of this is the choice of Jama'el-Fna Plaza in Marrakech as a site for preservation. I visited the plaza in the 1970s, before entering academia or reading about “Orientalism,” and there I found Morocco in all its color and splendid variety: snake charmers, storytellers, food vendors, veiled women, drummers and dancers, spice merchants, the religious and the decadent, hippies and tourists, blending in a buzz of activity that went through the day late into the night—every night. Certainly it is an intangible masterpiece—a true lieu de mémoire of the Moroccan past and present—although it's hard not to suspect that French colonialists wished to clean the place up in the years before World War II. But can it be preserved without becoming a Disney version of its former self?

Efforts in the 1980s to preserve what many Javanese and foreign scholars considered to be “classical” shadow theater—an oral tradition stretching back 1,000 years into the Javanese past—all seemed misguided and ineffective until the performers reinvigorated their own tradition by incorporating new musical instruments and comic interludes that formerly would have been unthinkable, rules were broken, television transformed performance formats, and politics co-opted plots. Today Javanese shadow theater exists in a variety of new forms; wildly popular puppeteers have become superstars, and intricate or mystical plots have been overshadowed by innovative puppet movements and infiltrated by human clowns. This is far from “invented tradition.” It is a masterpiece of oral and intangible culture thriving because it chose to transgress rather than preserve its older forms.

I would never argue against increased funding for the arts. Patrons at every level are needed to sponsor art and culture that lifts, shocks, soothes, or terrifies the human spirit. And words such as “masterpiece,” “intangible,” “heritage,” and “endangered” continue to be a call to action. Sites of memory will always be vulnerable to manipulation by local and foreign patrons because patrons are never uninterested in what they choose to fund.

Reply

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The contributions to this forum lead me to consider several points related to sources of inspiration, procedure, content, and explanation.

The manifest and latent sources of inspiration of this new UNESCO initiative merit further research. The long-established World Heritage List for monuments and historic sites must be distinguished from this new List of Oral and Intangible Heritage, but the parallel is too obvious not to consider it a main source of inspiration. Other real or conceivable sources are the Japanese living-national-treasures program, action programs for the protection of biodiversity, and the generally accepted conservation function of museums, as well as the trend towards more lively and interactive presentations in their exhibits. Another was the Moroccan case of Jama'el-Fna Plaza, where the threat to a traditional cultural space functioned as a particular catalyst for the program. The course of the discussions within UNESCO and the member states is an integral part of the origin of the program.

The main concepts and procedures of the program are clearly presented by UNESCO, but their application by the UNESCO supporting unit, the national governments, the representatives of the local cultural groups involved, and the jury leaves ample room for interpretation, leading to uncertainty. No consensus on criteria for the operationalization of concepts such as “cultural space,” “excellence,” “endangered,” and “preservation” has been established. The question is raised whether the product, the act of production, or the producer is the object of the program. Basically, the field of cultural heritage is undertheorized and underresearched. More information, expert advice, and explicit action plans are required for the improvement of the program.

The questions posed about the effects of the program are a strong invitation to empirical social research. What is the impact of UNESCO involvement on the cultural manifestations and social groups concerned? What is the role of the patron state, and how does it influence the outcome of the selection process? Why are some governments more enthusiastic about the program than others? What type of consensus on endangered cultural masterpieces does an international jury reach? Are marginal cultural expressions more likely to be selected than hegemonic mass-cultural phenomena? What is the influence

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of the UNESCO program as a whole? Does it succeed in putting cultural phenomena on the world agenda?

The contributions to this forum are rooted in two approaches—the invention-of-tradition debate and the theory of identity construction in the context of globalization of localization. The invention-of-tradition-debate arguments combine an appreciation of the great diversity of cultural expressions and markers with a concern about fossilization. But oral and intangible culture need not be more fragile than material forms of culture. Stone monuments, even when protected, do not have eternal life either. And protection should go beyond mere preservation. The concept of lieux de mémoire can function as a bridge between this debate and the identity approach, for places of memory also embody the rituals and other cultural expressions that operate as markers of identity. In this period of reconfiguration at the global, national, and local levels in the context of an informational network society, identity formation—as a flexible and situational process—seems of crucial importance. As is pointed out by the commentators, the power differentials in this process should not be neglected. The struggle for identity emanates from the process of modernization with its renewed patterns of domination and subordination. Perhaps the contrast between the “included” and the “excluded” is too simple for this complex global reality. Nevertheless, the ethical aspect of this political struggle, in which cultural markers are used to capture the attention of significant others in the global arena, requires further deliberation. The struggle for the cultural domain is an important complement of those in the economic, political, and military domains, not to mention the domains of crime and security. The UNESCO program under discussion here seems to be one of the materializations of this struggle along with others, for example, in the mass media.

As secretary-general of the International Union of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, I was asked by the International Social Science Council to lend the services of the Union to the UNESCO program. I presented a great many evaluations by regional experts to the jury, and in the process I became convinced of the value of the program. I remained independent but did not become a skeptic; I think that the program will develop its own momentum and dynamics in a globalizing and localizing world. The results of the program interest me. The possibilities for empirical research intrigue me. The reactions of the successful national delegates during the final presentation impressed me. Their delight and pride in facing the international public and the cameras of the various national broadcasting companies were expressions of sincere and profound feelings that deserve further exploration.

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