

Shared heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region: Focusing on UNESCO's multi-national inscription

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Introduction

I recall a documentary film entitled “Whose is this song” (by Adela Peeva, 2003) about a folk song sung by the local communities in the different countries of the Balkans that “has different faces and exists as a love song, a military march meant to scare the enemy off, a Muslim religious song, a revolutionary song, an anthem of the right nationalists, etc.”¹ The impression after watching the film is unforgettable about the shared folk song as an ICH that has been claimed as an own original song in different countries in Europe and with not always the same meanings and functions for local communities. This reveals a good example of shared heritage across borders that can bring people together for mutual respect international efforts on ICH safeguarding as stated in Article 19, “the States Parties recognize that the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is of general interest to humanity, and to that end undertake to cooperate at the bilateral, subregional, regional and international levels.” The hundreds of a such shared songs and other heritage domains such as the traditional festivals, folk rituals, music, craftsmanship, agricultural knowledge, forest protection, and so on have been common among peoples across borders and they shall be safeguarded internationally by the concerned communities. They are deserved of putting together in the multi-national files by concerned State Parties for the UNESCO's possible inscription in the sake of peace, dialogue and being together.

This presentation will overview the UNESCO's multi-national inscription of shared ICH and the challenge of the State Parties for building up these nominations.

¹ <https://www.adelamedia.net/movies/whose-is-this-song.php>

New Trend of the UNESCO's Inscription

Multi-national files have been increasing, especially in 2020's circle with 13 files (out of the total of 16 files from submitting States for evaluation) in comparison to the 5 files in 2019 or 1 file in 2009. So far, there are 55 elements of the multi-national elements corresponding to 87 countries² that reflect on the collaboration of the State Parties in building the files and more importance the joint safeguarding of ICH across borders. The question rises for the reason of this increase of the files. In one hand, this trend meets the Convention 2003's objectives on the general interest to humanity, and collaboration at the bilateral, subregional, regional and international levels in safeguarding ICH. On the other hand, the multinational files have prioritized to be evaluated on the possible inscription and not counted as "at least one file per submitting State" in one circle as in the case of the national file. This leads to France that has three inscribed multinational files and Malaysia from Asia-Pacific region has two inscribed multi-national files in the 2020 circle.³

As the abovementioned shared folk song of the Balkans, ICH as a cultural expression that can be national or multi-national and that a number of States share, even though it can be different in practice and play their own functions among the custodian communities in this and other State. Nevertheless, the States recognize their shared heritage that can bring them together due to their common/shared cultural traits and for the more noble objectives, i.e for the peace and dialogue as the case of the UNESCO's inscribed the element entitled *Traditional Korean Wrestling (Ssirum/Ssireum)* (2018) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and Republic of Korea. Or they can share their common in practices of the folk games such as the *Tugging Ritual and Games of Cambodia, Philippines, Republic of Korea and Viet Nam* (2015). Or People in China and Malaysia share their ceremonies as being reflected in the multi-national file on the *Ong Chung/Wangchuan/Wangkang Ceremony, Rituals and related Practices for Maintaining the Sustainable Connection between Man and the Ocean* of China and Malaysia (2020). And many other elements are inscribed or not yet inscribed that have been practiced among the communities for hundreds of years that

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[https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?multinational=2&type\[\]=00002&display1=inscriptionID&display=stats#tabs](https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?multinational=2&type[]=00002&display1=inscriptionID&display=stats#tabs): 13 files in 2020, 5 files in 2009, 5 files in 2018, 3 files in 2017, 5 files in 2016, 3 files in 2015, 2 files in 2014, 3 files in 2013, 2 files in 2012, 1 file in 2009, and 9 files in 2008.

³ [https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?text=&type\[\]=00002&multinational=2&display1=inscriptionID#tabs](https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?text=&type[]=00002&multinational=2&display1=inscriptionID#tabs)

reflect the cultural landscape and social and historical characteristics of the multinational societies.

The Challenges of the Multi-national Nominations

The national and the multi-national files are treated equally in the same evaluation process. However, the Evaluation Body expects the multi-national file with the close collaboration of the concerned State Parties and communities that work together on the shared element in the nomination process. The files show clearly the definition of the shared element as an ICH across border communities, and their shared safeguarding plan among other aspects. That is to say the multinational files required much more efforts of the joint State Parties for their collaboration. From the initiative for a multi-national file to the UNESCO's inscription, the concerned partners shall work together for years and months. Sometimes, not all the collaborations among States show successful and some others may be interrupted and ended due to the internal politics and many other intervention in the collaborative process. Thus, the Evaluation Body highly appreciates the close collaboration at bilateral, subregional, regional, international levels.

Also, the multinational files have been prioritized to be evaluated as indicated in the paragraph 34 of the Operational Directives of the 2003 UNESCO Convention on ICH⁴. So far, there are not any guidelines from the Secretariat or Intergovernmental Committee about the multi-national files. Bak has noted that more detailed guidelines are necessary in this regard. The detailed guidelines should accommodate the diverse scenarios of multinational ICH nominations (Bak 2015).

Moreover, the other difficulty of the identification of the shared element. Sometimes, the element comes from one origin for years due to the diffusion and sometimes, it shares

⁴ Examination of files by the Committee

34. The Committee shall endeavour to examine to the extent possible at least one file per submitting State, within the limit of this overall ceiling, giving priority to:

- i. files from States having no elements inscribed, best safeguarding practices selected or requests for International Assistance greater than US\$100,000 approved, and nominations to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding;
- ii. multi-national files; and
- iii. files from States with the fewest elements inscribed, best safeguarding practices selected or requests for International Assistance greater than US\$100,000 approved, in comparison with other submitting States during the same cycle.

similarities from a range of across border communities. It is not an easy task to trace the origin, or the history of its development, and it is not the central point of an ICH in the spirit of the Convention 2003 on the living heritage. However, the ICH contains in itself its local meanings of the custodian communities. It is as “a part of the mainstream cultural heritage in one nation/state, while that same ICH belongs to minority groups in another country (Bak 2015)

This leads to other constrain in the identification of the shared element as one among 5 criteria of the evaluation. While the members of the Evaluation Body expect that States Parties shall improve the quality of the files in terms of the description of the element. As the report of the Evaluation Body in 2020, in some nominations, two or more different definitions of the element were provided by the individual States Parties that makes the Body unsure which definition is about the shared element. The members of the Body would evaluate the shared aspects and interconnections in different countries.⁵

For the definition (as the first criteria) and other criteria, among a total of fifty-two files evaluated in 2020, these include sixteen multinational files and among which 13 files were inscribed and three files are referral (or not inscribed). As in the report of the Evaluation Body in 2020, the multinational files should strike a balance in terms of the quantity and quality of information provided by the different States Parties concerned. The files should demonstrate collaboration between States Parties and between communities, in particular in the development of joint safeguarding measures. However, there are files that do not demonstrate the collaboration among State parties and they seem to include separate national files from the concerned States and then they are put together in one multi-national file. Also, when preparing a multinational nomination, it is important to focus on the quality of the process of collaboration and exchange among the communities concerned. The collaborative process in working on the multi-national nomination would encourage the dialogue among concerned multiple parties and local communities. The close collaboration and the joint safeguarding of the shared element serve as key functions of the multinational nomination.

Though evaluating of the multi-national files, a numbers of the challenges have been

⁵ Evaluation Body's Report at the 15th session of the Intergovernmental Committee at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/15com>

raised. The Evaluation Body expects the Secretariat provide the detailed guidelines for the multinational nomination. The guidelines would assist the submitting State Parties to have more qualified nominations and as a result, there would be more shared elements inscribed by UNESCO. And that the safeguarding of multinational ICH “can be an effective way to avoid nationalistic competition among nation/states over ICH’s. Also it can be a way to mitigate the hegemonic and unilateral cultural policies by the mainstream of the nation/states.” (Bak 2015: 11)

Conclusion

As my count, there are 7 multi-national elements from Asian Pacific regions have been inscribed by UNESCO, among which the role of ICHCAP is crucial in encouraging the regional State Parties to work together for the diverse and shared heritage such as the *Tugging Rituals and Games* and the future lacquer ware and some others. So far, China is the leading State Party in the region to have two multinational files with Malaysia on the *Ong Chung Ceremony and rituals (2020)*, and with Mongolia on the *Urtiin Duu, traditional folk long song (2008)*. The Asian-Pacific regional countries share their ethno-landscape, their environment, history, language, and other cultural features. In a such cultural milieu, they have their common practices on the shamanistic rituals, on the bronze drum practices, on the popular Buddhist festivals, the craftsmanship of making lacquer ware, masks, wooden furniture, court music and songs among others. With the efforts of all the States in the region, as my expectation, there are more multinational files in the region that will be completed in the coming years. And we will see our collaboration in safeguarding of ICH for peace and open dialogue among the regional State Parties.

References

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