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**WHEN IT COMES TO HERITAGE,
THE MATERIAL REMAINS OF OUR
PRESENCE IN THE PAST, THE MAX WE
DO IS TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE.
RESPECT FOR WHAT WAS TAKES OVER
FROM ENGAGEMENT WITH WHAT
IS, OR CAN BE. BUT CULTURALLY
SPEAKING, DYNAMISM IS CRUCIAL.
MAYBE THIS IS AN IMPORTANT
LESSON TO LEARN FROM THE WAY
INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE IS
BEING APPROACHED: CHANGE AND
ADAPTABILITY ARE THE TOOLS TO
MOVE FROM PAST TO FUTURE.**

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SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE NL KIEN

interviewed by Lilet Breddels
and Zachary Sweeney-Lynch

Organising the ICH of a nation is no mean feat. The ICH Convention promotes a “bottom-up” approach to heritage, with communities heavily involved in the decision-making process, but the effective management of this requires some oversight. In the Netherlands this role is played by the Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland (KIEN). Albert van der Zeijden and Sophie Elpers offer an institutional perspective on heritage safeguarding in the Netherlands, and the integration of ICH into government policy.

Lilet Breddels: Could you tell us a bit about how KIEN, Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage came to exist, and why it was brought to life?

Albert van der Zeijden: Well we have evolved as an organisation. We began as the Informatiecentrum Volkscultuur (Folk Culture Information Centre), and our work mostly involved popularising traditional culture. Later on we became the Nederlands Centrum voor Volkscultuur (Dutch Centre for Folk Culture), but when the Netherlands prepared to ratify the Unesco Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2012, we included Intangible Heritage in our name to indicate the importance of the Convention to our work. At this time intangible heritage was a new concept, and it was an experiment for us to support a bottom up approach to heritage. Our work aims not just to list cultural practices, but also to engage the practitioners in organising and safeguarding the future of their heritage.

Zachary Sweeney-Lynch: What impact did the Convention have on the landscape of Unesco heritage?

MOST OF THE CULTURAL THINGS HAPPENING IN CITIES ARE NOT ABOUT OLD BUILDINGS, BUT ABOUT THE PEOPLE LIVING THERE

AZ: When you compare it to the World Heritage Convention it's totally different. That Convention is more about the experts - they decide what goes on the list and is worthwhile to safeguard. With this new Convention the perspective has changed enormously. The groups, communities, and individuals making heritage should, at least in theory, be strongly involved in both the safeguarding process, and in deciding what should be on the inventory. It is a different perspective on heritage and how to enforce the heritage making process.

Sophie Elpers: This is where people engaged in tangible heritage can learn from us. Often they are not experienced with participatory methods, and come to us to learn about how it works in our sector – how we stimulate participation, communicate with the bearers of heritage, and involve them in our decision-making processes.

LB: Unesco introduced the Convention for Safeguarding ICH in 2003, but the Netherlands only ratified it in 2012. Why the delay?

AZ: I think there are two main reasons. At first there was some suspicion that listing ICH would mean traditions become frozen, or that the Convention aimed to revitalize things from the past. This is not how we see heritage or culture, so perhaps we didn't immediately understand that this Convention is not about the past but about the future, and about evolving culture. So we first had to get used to this new notion. A second reason is that the Convention aimed to address an imbalance in the representation of countries from the Global South in the Unesco World Heritage list.

We support an approach of diversity, and ratifying the Convention was initially of primary importance for those countries, so for us at first the main reason for ratifying was supporting them. In the end perhaps it was wise to delay, because sometimes countries ratify without knowing what they are ratifying. We felt that before doing so we should think about how we are going to organise and implement the Convention, and what we would do with the inventory.

ZSL: What is the process you go through when recognizing elements of Intangible Cultural Heritage?

AZ: Well, firstly, we don't 'recognize' anything. You might read in the press "it's now recognized by us or by the national government", and that is perhaps the impression the general audience have. But it's not our intention to 'recognize' anything. It's not about us, it's about communities, groups, and individuals making heritage and proposing it to our inventory through an application process. Our colleagues from team Erfgoedzorg (Heritage care) have a look at the application - is it intangible heritage in the sense of the Unesco Convention? Is there a group or community involved? And how they are thinking about the future of this heritage? And so they must present it to us, and then we look at it in a more or less technical way. Of course we face the challenge that we can only reach out to more or less organized communities. This is the reason we now have a secondary network. It's more or less an informal inventory, and it's much easier to make a nomination for the network because you need not be a custodian of the tradition, and a safeguarding plan is not necessary. It's just: "I consider this intangible heritage and I want it to be presented on the network." This way we diversify our listings.

LB: The application process for the inventory engages your organisation with the 'custodians' of a tradition. How do you make sure that custodians are representative of the communities?

SE: Well, is it possible to represent a community? We do background research about who writes this application, and whether there is a group behind them that supports the work.

AZ: Our colleagues look at what their connection is with the intangible heritage. Of course the applicants must think about the future development and safeguarding of the heritage, and this could only be done by people with the opportunity to implement it. So a custodian is not just someone calling himself a custodian, but it's someone organizing the future of the ICH.

LB: You mentioned trying to make the inventory as diverse as possible. So you don't want a Dutch ICH inventory that is just full of cheese, windmills, and clogs?

AZ: Not at all. We have a huge ambition, and it is also the ambition of the Dutch government that this inventory should reflect the diversity of intangible heritage in the Netherlands. It should not be just the usual suspects applying for this list, which of course is the case when you start a thing like this. We want to be as open and inclusive as possible. What matters for us is what is important to communities. One of our research agendas explores the concept of superdiversity, and the different models for organising participation in superdiverse areas. In a city like Rotterdam, with more than 160 ethnicities, the question from Unesco's perspective would be: what is the community here, and what is its intangible heritage? Or are there several communities? Our ambition is to reflect the diversity of that community in our inventory.

LB: So how did you do that in Rotterdam?

AZ: Well, in fact, the process didn't start with us. The Rotterdam Municipality funded a working group to improve the West-Kruiskade district, which had a high level of drug addiction and criminality. At a certain point the working group decided to use the intangible heritage of the area as a way of fostering cohesion, which was how we became involved. The working group followed an entrepreneurial model of development that drew on the West-Kruiskade's ICH, and supported local entrepreneurs including a henna artist and the teacher of a Chinese cooking workshop. The inventory became a tool in establishing the reputation and success of their programs, while itself reflecting the richness of their community. The development plan recognised that most of the cultural things happening in cities are not about old buildings, but about the people living there. Supporting culture and intangible heritage means looking forward and involving people in creating a sustainable future for a community.

ZSL: It seems that intangible heritage can play a role in the wider context of current politics and socio-economic developments. Do you work with the Dutch government on policy issues?

AZ: It's about empowering communities. The inventory lists what communities in the Netherlands find important, and it is a method to empower the bearers to safeguard their ICH. If they see themselves on the list, they are more empowered and are in a stronger position in society.

SE: Another advantage is the whole process of writing an application. Applicants must think about their safeguarding program, but also plan a dynamic future for their heritage.

It should be possible that the tradition changes in a way. Thinking about the future of the heritage is already a part of the safeguarding, and the whole application process raises their awareness of these issues. Sometimes I have a feeling that the process of writing an application is more important than having your name on the inventory.

AZ: The Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage is financed by the government, so is itself part of cultural policy in the Netherlands. Diversity was and is part and parcel of cultural policy, and it was one of the guidelines that the Dutch Inventory should reflect the diversity of Dutch society in general. In terms of heritage policies, we work together with other cultural agencies, such as Netherlands Cultural Heritage Agency (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed). An example of intangible heritage influencing policy is in city development. For many years we had a law (*Omgevingswet*), which was very much oriented on buildings and city landscapes. This law associated 'heritage' with the tangible, but it's now being replaced by another which suggests city and community planning should reckon not just with the monumental and material, but also with intangible heritage. It will take city governments some years to replace the old systems, but it is a very important development to integrate the safeguarding of intangible heritage into cultural and environmental policy. The aim at the end would be to speak about heritage and to know that it is not 'tangible' and 'intangible', but that it is both together.

ZSL: One criticism of the World Heritage Convention is that Unesco status changes the reality of heritage sites. Commercialisation and over-tourism could also change the reality of intangible heritage, making traditions performative rather than natural. How do you deal with this issue?

SE: Planning for a potential increase in tourism is an important part of the application process. We ask applicants to consider the risks of being on the inventory, and how many people they can manage. We would expect them to realize there is a risk they will be overwhelmed by tourists, and to consider their possibilities for handling this. We cannot directly prevent increased tourism, but perhaps we can give them the tools and knowledge, and draw their attention to this challenge. It is also important to remember that tourism and commercialisation can be a very important part of the safeguarding project.

AZ: Tourism and commercialisation can be a threat, but intangible heritage can also profit from it. When practicing a craft, if you cannot sell your products then this craft will be finished. Similarly, tourism might be the saviour of a remote village. It's never a question of trying to stop these processes, but about managing them and giving everyone their fair share. This is even more important if you're talking about tourism in formerly called developing countries. If the heritage bearers will not profit from tourist projects in these regions, then in my view they would be bad projects.

LB: What are the benefits of being on the inventory, or a part of the network, for the bearers of heritage?

WE SEE CULTURE AS DYNAMIC, IT HAS TO CHANGE OTHERWISE IT WILL DIE

LB: Would there be criteria to remove a listed item from the inventory?

SE: Yes, firstly if it is not living culture anymore. We see culture as dynamic, it has to change otherwise it will die. Culture should develop together with society, and adapt to new contexts and new situations. And if the context doesn't allow it then it should be able to disappear. If a tradition is no longer living, it will disappear from our list. There's another reason, and it is political. If something is forbidden by law, then we have decided to remove it. People doing terrible things with animals, for example, might be a living tradition by anthropological standards, but it cannot be on the list. Unesco has regulations around human and animal rights, and so on.

AZ: Also if a group decided they no longer wanted to be part of the inventory then it would of course be possible to get them off. And there are examples of individuals who did not want to be on the inventory in the first place. The organizers of Carnival in Den Bosch, for instance, felt it might be an obstruction to become part of the inventory. They valued the vibrancy of the tradition for their local community, and felt that attracting tourism might damage their tradition.

ZSL: Do you work with other (inter) national intangible heritage organizations?

AZ: Well the great advantage of this Convention is of course that it is worldwide.

At the international level you have state parties, ambassadors, and accredited NGOs (including ourselves) sitting at meetings. The Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage closely works together with these NGOs, in the so-called ICH-NGO Forum. What is most interesting for me is that we share the same challenges in reflecting diversity and encouraging participation. Implementing this ICH Convention involves several approaches and several stakeholders, and this platform enables us to exchange information and knowledge.



The so-called Gabber culture started in the nineties as a working-class subculture but by now has become a worldwide phenomenon. Sofia (Italy), is wearing a bomberjack from the Rotterdam record label Rotterdam Records. Image taken from the documentary photography series *Planet Core* by Boris Postma. www.borispostma.com / instagram: @borisdpostma.

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In 2004 Archis, the Amsterdam based architecture magazine with a pedigree reaching back to 1929, joined forces with OMA's think tank AMO and C-Lab – a think and action tank at the GSAPP of Columbia University – based on the shared ambition to redefine and re-establish architecture's relevance. Volume was created by Archis Editor in Chief at the time, Ole Bouman in collaboration with Rem Koolhaas (AMO) and Mark Wigley (Dean of GSAPP). From 2017 Archis/Volume changed its structure into more theme-based forms of collaboration, expanding the network of partners. Archis/Volume mediates its research in various ways like workshops, exhibitions, debates, its digital platform and Volume Magazine.

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bmd is a Belgium-based office specializing in architectural visualization, founded in 2002 by Peter Hoste and Kyra Frankort. With backgrounds in graphic design and architecture respectively, they enjoy combining their expertise and interests with other disciplines such as art, film, and photography, in a refreshing view on visualization.
www.bmd3d.com

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KIEN is the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage. It aims to promote intangible cultural heritage and to make it accessible, to stimulate and professionalise the sector and encourage people to participate in it.
www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/

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