



**Outline for establishing an institute
that will promote, archive and make available
audiovisual interpretations of cultural forms
declared by UNESCO to be**

**Masterpieces of Humanity's
Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage**

*A project at the interface between
science, art, culture and media*



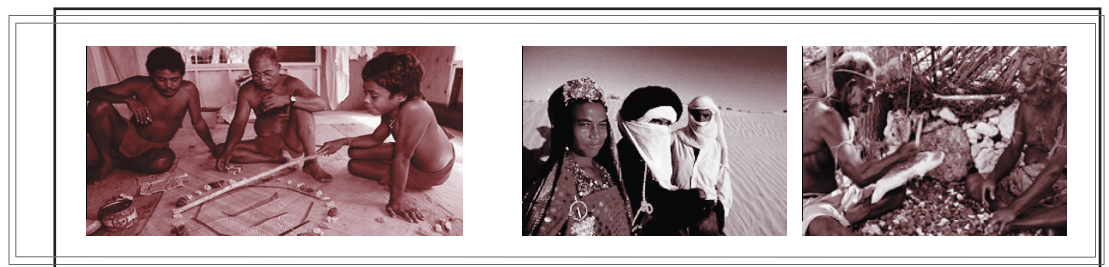
* 1. „Masterpieces of Humanity’s Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage“

Since 1972, UNESCO has been actively campaigning to protect unique buildings and outstanding areas of natural beauty. However, the great diversity of human cultural heritage also includes immaterial forms of cultural expression and “cultural spaces”. Since 2001, UNESCO has been developing its own programme aimed at preventing these from being lost for ever.

The Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage was formulated by the general conference of UNESCO in 1997. Subsequent proclamations issued in 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2009 have produced a list of so far more than 100 outstanding cultural traditions. They include myths, epics and stories that have been handed down in oral form. They also include performing arts such as music, dance, games and outstanding traditional craftsmanship.

However, the cultural forms that UNESCO has declared Intangible Heritage do not exist as such: they need to be mediated to come into being. Naturally, Intangible Heritage is mediated by humans acting as mediums. Audiovisual means, however, enable cultural expressions to transcend space and time.

This outline tries to develop a special approach for picturing Intangible Heritage. The basic ideas presented here are epistemologically founded on contemporary visual anthropology, the academic discipline that deals with the many and various processes of picturing culture. It challenges their diverse epistemological assumptions and has constructed its own framework of questions pertaining to both why and how to mediate culture with audiovisual means. This outline, however, goes a step further by adapting some ideas and applying them to the discourses of “heritage” and “cultural memory” while taking into account new technical means such as the internet. Key concepts for this visionary undertaking are multivocality and multisitedness, empowerment and experiment, cooperation and co-production.



* 2. UNESCO's Requirements

The provisions of UNESCO's "Convention on Safeguarding and Maintaining the Diversity of Forms of Cultural Expression" requires of signatory states that: *

- * they take measures to make available public financial assistance
- * they take measures aimed at helping to develop and promote the free exchange of ideas, forms of cultural expression and cultural activities, goods and services among non-profit organisations, public and private institutions, and artists and cultural workers, and to support both the creative and the commercial sides of their activities
- * they take suitable measures aimed at establishing and maintaining public institutions
- * they provide access to the various forms of cultural expression in their national territory and in other countries of the world
- * they support creativity and strengthen productive resources by establishing programmes that offer education, exhibitions and exchange in the field of the cultural economy
- * they support cooperation between developed and developing countries, especially in the fields of music and film
- * they take measures aimed at increasing media diversity, in particular through the activities of public radio. UNESCO has expressed its regret that the mass media itself threatens the diversity of forms of cultural expression by subjecting them to processes of standardisation



* See UNESCO 2006: Brochure on the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.
See also: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=home> (last visited: March 2009)

* 3. The Aims of the Institute: Integrating Theory and Practice

Intangible culture needs to be mediated to transcend space and time. However, the audiovisual representation of culture in general, and of Intangible Cultural Heritage in particular, is fraught with a variety of controversies over how these various complex processes should be properly conducted. The many participants in these are likely to include performing artists, indigenous filmmakers, visual anthropologists, media artists, and television professionals, all of whom will have different opinions and use different approaches in constructing narratives. To overlook this extremely crucial point by assuming Intangible Heritage can be straightforwardly “documented” will create future difficulties. It will inevitably exclude voices, narrative strategies, and points of view that are already underprivileged.

A first step towards realising the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute’s** aim to promote, archive and make available audiovisual interpretations of cultural forms will be to build an international and interdisciplinary network.

Possible collaborators include the actual performers of intangible heritage as well as artists, filmmakers, visual anthropologists, film producers, media artists, internet designers and programmers and other professionals working with media, as well as representatives from universities, cultural institutions, and television broadcasters.

A key issue of the institute’s mission is to establish a new conceptual framework that will integrate both theory and practice. This puts it very much in line with current calls from governments, research councils, industry and policy-makers for academic research to be directed towards practical ends. Activities such as “knowledge transfer” or “knowledge exchange”, which involve engaging users and demonstrating public relevance, will therefore be a crucial part of the institute’s work.

The **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** will carry out further research into questions around “picturing Intangible Heritage”, and help media producers apply theoretical findings in their practical work. It will also enable materially, politically, culturally, geographically disadvantaged media producers to realize their projects (**empowerment**), provide opportunities for a multitude of different voices with different narrative strategies to express themselves (**multivocality**), and ensure these voices come from a wide variety of different cultural and institutional backgrounds (**multisitedness**).

* 4. The Institute will Consist of a Media and a Research Centre.

4. 1. Media Practice at the Media Centre

The plan is to set up and operate a multi-lingual, multi-vocal **Intangible Heritage Internet Portal**. This will enable users to gain simple, fast and comprehensive access to films, audio data, texts and images, all from a wider variety of sources, which explore different aspects of Intangible Heritage. As well as archiving and distributing material, the portal would also provide interactive communications media aimed at building a community of media practitioners, artists, academics and cultural workers active in the field of Intangible Heritage. The internet platform's multivocality, that is, the variety of different points of view, interpretations and narrative strategies to be found on it, will make clear that the adaptations of Intangible Heritage that it collects are aimed at preserving a reservoir of images for posterity. Accordingly, every cultural form of Intangible Heritage will be approached not as a single, closed master narrative, but as a "lieu de mémoire", as something in principle open and accessible to all, which can always be interpreted in new ways. Registered users of the portal will in principle have the right to post their own productions on line. This will result in the creation of an experimental space for a "community of practice" among media workers, where forms of narrative, representation, and drama could be explored. Likewise, the limits of established ways of presenting texts and audio-visual works will be transcended and developed further, in a way that remains true to the specific qualities of intangible cultural traditions.

Along with setting up and running the **Intangible Heritage Internet Portal**, the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** will both collect existing media works and produce its own, making them publicly available over the internet, on television, and through DVD editions.

Other functions of the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** will include holding workshops to teach both media practice and media theory and history, and to providing residencies for artists and filmmakers. Stimulating theoretical discussion will enable local artists, media and cultural workers to produce audiovisual works that could not be made elsewhere. This will be integral to establishing a multivocal perspective and a multisited institutional form.



* 4. 2. Academic Research at the Research Centre

4.2.1. Visual Anthropology

Visual anthropology is the academic discipline that deals with the many and various processes of picturing culture. It challenges their diverse epistemological assumptions and has constructed its own framework of questions regarding the mediation of culture by audiovisual means. These include:

- * What are appropriate forms of representation for cultural practices?
- * Can oral forms of narration be transferred into audio-visual media? If so, what would these look like?
- * What kind of contribution can audiovisual representations make towards popularising Intangible Heritage?
- * How can the authority of the filmmaker be relativised?

These and other questions constantly reemerge during the production of audiovisual works (and texts) that deal with Intangible Cultural Heritage.



* 4.2.2. The Anthropology of Knowledge

The anthropology of knowledge is likely to find the interdisciplinary dissemination of its work of interest, not only because it will promote a discussion of theory, but also because of the practical consequences it might have, such as better intercultural understanding, or conflict prevention.

The issues raised by the anthropology of knowledge, like those raised by visual anthropology, are directly relevant to the practical work of the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute**. The multivocal and multilingual **Intangible Heritage Internet Portal** will address people from different cultures from all over the world, raising the question of how to make Intangible Cultural Heritage internationally accessible across cultural boundaries. Setting up and expanding the **Intangible Heritage Internet Portal** offers special opportunities for both interdisciplinary and intercultural exchange between Intangible Heritage performers, artists, anthropologists, cultural and cognitive researchers, media artists and producers, internet technicians and web designers. For internet users and consumers the **Intangible Heritage Internet Portal** will become a stimulating and ever growing archive of audiovisual material, as well as texts and discussions about questions pertaining to the visualization of culture in general and Intangible Heritage in particular.

The mediatisation of cultural knowledge and its distribution through audiovisual media or the internet also calls for a wide variety of research. Thus for example, if traditional forms of knowledge are to be transferred into media form, the issue of whether they can in principle be translated and adapted needs to be investigated. Can cultural practices be preserved in media archives at all? Can they, indeed, be reinterpreted and revitalized this way, or does this merely lead their being reduced to pieces of folklore and museum curiosities? Does the internet make possible new forms of communication and interaction that facilitate new ways of disseminating knowledge, and are these capable of supporting the knowledge production of an international community working on Intangible Cultural Heritage? These questions have a wide variety of implications for future research in this field.



* 5. Social Relevance

One of the main aims of the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** is to present the great variety of the world's unique cultural traditions. Its work in bringing these to a wider public must aim at promoting respect and appreciation for this diversity of forms of cultural expression.

An awareness of the uniqueness and particular achievements of the immaterial traditions of different cultures can only be achieved by offering an effective and permanent means of access to them. At present an audiovisual Intangible Heritage database does not exist. Understanding the uniqueness of different forms of cultural heritage is an important precondition to recognising cultural diversity as a value in itself and appreciating its possibilities. It is predominantly the wealthy industrialised nations that are being asked to make available the resources and infrastructure needed to enable this. On the one hand, the necessary material resources are more readily available in these countries. On the other, they can offer a variety of media technologies and infrastructures that can be used for the purpose of raising this kind of awareness, something that is less likely to be the case among cultural groups with a rich Intangible Cultural Heritage, such as those in Africa, Oceania, parts of Asia and South America, or in the Polar regions.

This means that one of the main challenges for the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** will be managing to bring together groups of this kind in an organisation where they will be able to find a platform for representing and articulating their own culture. It is crucial that the Institute begin intensive work with these groups at the very earliest stage. Thus one of its main tasks will be simply to offer a forum for indigenous cultures, and to facilitate dialogues in which each group can express its understanding of its own traditions and future. The public (self-)presentation and appreciation of Intangible Cultural Heritage can and should lead to a sense of empowerment among the participating groups.

Apart from its contributions to teaching and research, the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** will also be visible on the following platforms.

5.1. Internet

The **Intangible Heritage Internet Portal** will offer the academic community a pioneering, multi-vocal cultural archive that will be under constant expansion, providing a comprehensive research tool for scholars working in the field of Intangible Heritage, as well as a space for a “community of practice” of media workers. In so doing, it will use cutting-edge internet technology to enable users to search for material more quickly and easily, enabling them to carry out multimedia cross-referencing, make unexpected discoveries and deepen their background knowledge. By using the latest technology, the portal will offer users a variety of ways in which they can gain access, collaborate and interact, while ensuring it is still usable by those with no profound knowledge of technology.

5.2. Television

The idea of the Intangible Heritage Proclamation in general, and of picturing Intangible Heritage in particular, aims at influencing the cultural memory not only of certain special interest groups but of local groups, nation states, and even of humanity as a whole. Cultural memory does not automatically come into being. It is shaped by the cultural, social, political and economic wills of people and institutions, and by their actions. To have an impact on cultural memory, Intangible Heritage media needs to be seen and valued by large audiences. The creation and dissemination of documentaries on Intangible Heritage via television does reflect the values and experiences of local communities and cultures and is one necessary means of preserving cultural diversity. Thus, the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** would aim to gain access to a wider public by producing and distributing a series of television documentaries. To this end, it would seek to initiate a long-term collaboration with open-minded production companies and broadcasters who are prepared to incorporate the knowledge of anthropologists, indigenous peoples, and indigenous filmmakers. Ideally, local narratives and indigenous knowledge would enrich existing television storytelling strategies. In addition, the institute will aim to produce and distribute a series of expanded DVD editions.

5.3. Intercultural Exchange through personal meetings

In the longer term, it is envisaged that the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute** will support and organise intercultural meetings that promote traditional forms of performance, such as games, theatre and dance productions, and other forms of cultural expression. It is precisely here that the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute's** inclusive way of thinking and working becomes relevant. On the one hand, it has as its starting point a basic concept of media as a medium that focuses on human beings, and keeps this constantly in mind. On the other, directly experiencing performances is an excellent way of understanding the limitations involved in adapting them to audio-visual media. This is partly because it makes clear the processes of transformation and reduction that inevitably accompany it. But it is also because it becomes so evident that competing symbolic systems always come up against each other when cultural activities are conveyed through media. Highlighting specific instances of this, and discussing them in the course of personal meetings, would be wholly consistent with the philosophy of the Institute. It would also constitute an effective and lasting expansion of its institutional remit.

A faint, light gray world map is centered on the page. A red compass rose is positioned over the African continent. The text "Setting up and Financing" is overlaid on the map in a red, serif font.

Setting up and Financing

* Plan for Setting up the Institute

It is envisaged that the Intangible Heritage Media Institute be set up as an institution linked to a university or museum, placing itself in synergy with existing institutional infrastructures, that is, with academic expertise in the relevant subject fields, with existing research resources, and with possible collaborative partner institutions of learning.

In the initial stage it will need start-up funding to enable it to begin construction and acquire endowment capital.

Its aims for this first phase are:

- * to communicate the concept and aims of the **Intangible Heritage Media Institute**
- * to network and win partners across the world
- * to develop plans for funding and acquire external funds
- * to develop pilot research and film projects
- * to draw up plans for the **Intangible Heritage Internet Portal**

The second phase will involve actually setting up the Intangible Heritage Media Internet Portal. This will mean:

- * beginning the technical and organizational implementation of the project
- * forming a community
- * both acquiring and beginning to produce material

Once the operation is up and running, its further financing and development will be carried out through a variety of different channels:

- * acquiring external funds through EU programmes, foundations, sponsors, etc.
- * receiving commissions to produce audiovisual works, and working with broadcasters
- * selling DVD editions and Intangible Heritage media through the Internet Portal

Original idea: Dr. Thorolf Lipp (Bayreuth University, Germany)
Further developed with Professor Gertraud Koch (Zeppelin University, Friedrichshafen)
Contact: www.thorolf-lipp.de

All material is protected under copyright law. All rights are reserved. © 2008

