

“Reluctant Gatekeeper of the National Inventory” – a Case Study of the Formation of the Faroese Inventory of ICH

TÓTA ÁRNADÓTTIR



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2021-0030> © Ústav etnológie a sociálnej antropológie SAV
© 2021, Tóta Árnadóttir. This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons

Tóta Árnadóttir, University of The Faroe Islands, Department of Faroese Language and Literature, V. U. Hammershaimbs gøta 22, FO-100 Tórshavn, Faroe Islands; e-mail: TotaA@setur.fo

As the Faroe Islands ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention in 2018 and immediately began to develop a National Inventory, the Faroese Ministry of Culture appointed “expert” representatives of the National Museum and the University of the Faroese Islands for a small assisting committee tasked with assessing and possibly editing proposals for the inventory. The present article is based on reflections from an insider perspective of the process, as the author is one of the members participating in the preparations. The various “candidates” submitted for the inventory are presented and discussed in relation to the analyses of the parliament debates preceding the ratification and media coverage before and after the Convention was passed in the Faroese Parliament. How and by whom is the inventory formed in theory and in practice? What is the appropriate role of scholars in the process? The article suggests that the participation of academic experts as “gatekeepers” of inventories can be used to lend credibility of specific selections of intangible cultural heritage worthy of safeguarding within a particular national community. This is problematic from an academic point of view, since scholars can easily get tangled up in essentialist and outdated understandings of national culture as they enter a stage operating by different objectives than the academic discourse of critical enquiry.

Key words: Faroe Islands, intangible cultural heritage, inventory, community, politics of representation, role of academic scholars, critical heritage studies, reification of “national culture”

How to cite: Árnadóttir, T. (2021). “Reluctant Gatekeeper of the National Inventory” – a Case Study of the Formation of the Faroese Inventory of ICH. *Slovenský národopis*, 69(4), 501–518, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2478/se-2021-0030>

BACKGROUND – INVENTORYING ICH IN THE FAROE ISLANDS

The Faroe Islands¹ hold associate-membership status in UNESCO since 2009. They ratified the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) in October 2018. Shortly after this, the first efforts to develop an inventory of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in the Faroe Islands were initiated. The drawing up of a Faroese national inventory was a natural step² after the ratification, seen as a requirement before the Faroes could hope to nominate any practice to the international Representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This last point brought a sense of urgency to the matter at the time, as the Ministry of Culture was very keen on having the Faroese boat building practices included in a joint Scandinavian application to list the “Scandinavian clinker boat tradition”. So, an assessment committee was hastily assembled in January 2019, in order to approve traditional Faroese boat building as the very first item on the Faroe Islands national inventory of ICH. I found myself representing the University of the Faroe Islands in this context and the following account is based partly on my experiences participating in the process for almost three years, alongside observations of parliament debates and media coverage before and after the formation of the inventory.

The “urgency” connected to the possibility of “making the big list” is symptomatic of the process in the Faroe Islands so far and reflects the way the Convention is perceived by the majority of those relatively few, who actively engage with it on the Faroe Islands. The ones who lobbied to get the Convention ratified, were primarily the Faroese tourist industry, which felt that getting international attention towards specific Faroese traditions could be part of the branding of the islands as a tourist destination (Helgason, Balle, Reynatúgvu, Christiansen, Hansen & Líknargøtu, 2017). Another group pushing for the Convention was the national association of chain dancers who have expressed high hopes that by the ratification the Faroese government would “be obliged” to commit to the future of the traditional dance. This, they claimed was urgently needed, as they are encountering declining interest and face challenges recruiting new members to their community. (The Faroese chain dance was indeed included in the inventory as the second entry in 2020.)

However, since the first day, the Faroese Ministry of Culture has also encouraged the public to participate in the process by submitting potential entries for an inventory of “living culture in the Faroe Islands” as ICH is being translated on the official web page, designed for the purpose³ and part of the task of the assisting committee has been

- 1 The Faroe Islands are part of the Danish Kingdom, but with self governing status since 1948. The population of appr. 53 000 descends mainly from Norse settler and have their own language, closely related to Norwegian dialects and Icelandic.
- 2 Although official UNESCO guidelines clearly emphasize voluntary nature of how states can organize their inventories and underline the fact that neither the Convention, nor the Operational Directives ever speak of “a national inventory” (Inventories: identifying for safeguarding – intangible heritage – Culture Sector – UNESCO accessed at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/inventorying-intangible-heritage-00080> on 26.11.2021), in the Faroese case, as I will explain later in this article, intentions to ensure future safeguarding of specific practices believed to represent “the specifically Faroese” was the explicit motive of those who argued in favor of ratifying the 2003 Convention, thus the lining up of multiple inventories of ICH based on other criteria than inherent “Faroese-ness” would have been unthinkable.
- 3 <https://www.ummur.fo/fo/arbeidsoki/mentan/mentanar-og-natturuarvur/livandi-mentan/>.

to assess and edit submitted proposals for the Inventory. The committee was formally appointed for just one year, and in 2020 the ministry employed a coordinator to continue the development of the inventory as a part time position at the National Museum (Tjóðsavnið). However, this author has still been taking part in the meetings held in connection with assessment of the inventory (meeting activity was of course hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020). The work with the inventory is of course ongoing, as the process of inventorying is explicitly set out to be forever.

Participating in the process so far has been interesting, but also challenging from an academic point of view. Connecting the intentions expressed in the text of the Convention to the political realities of the Faroe Islands is one thing. Bearing in mind the academic insights of critical heritage studies: that the concept of heritage does not represent clearly defined “cultural objects of high value” but rather “cultural processes of defining value” (Smith, 2006) adds to this challenge. Finding oneself as part of processes in which stakeholders possess varying means of power and access to defining what is “valuable heritage” calls for reflection of one’s own role as a scholar and “expert”. I recognize that many colleagues share the experience and have reflected on this along the way – Bortolotto (Bortolotto, Demgenski, Karampampas, Toji, 2020) addresses the consequences of “bureaucratic creativity” where academic experts within official institutions are taking on the responsibility of “bringing to life particular interpretations of the participatory principle” found at the base of the UNESCO Convention. Whilst I follow the argument that:

...bureaucracies are not homogenous wholes of a mechanistic model that function beyond the social actors who comprise their respective institutions, as some approaches have tended to emphasise. (Bortolotto et al., 2020: 78)

and acknowledge the ongoing creative efforts of fellow scholars engaging in the implantation of the Convention with the best of intentions, my own concerns are not so much how scholars through their efforts can ensure the participation and representation of specific interpretations of ICH, but rather the challenges of being utilized in creative efforts of “communities, individuals or groups” who are perhaps already dominating the discourse on heritage within a society. This is especially relevant in cases where the practices these individuals or groups push to have recognized as ICH are disputed within the wider community, but even in relatively “simple cases” there can be alternating and mutually exclusive views within a specific group of culture carriers, regarding what efforts are needed for the future safeguarding of a specific practice.⁴ The present article represents my own attempt to balance scholarly integrity with the responsibility that comes with taking part in the bureaucratic process of inventorying. I ask how and by whom is the inventory formed in theory and in practice? In what way may the participation from this academic scholar have affected the inventorying process so far? Is the role as “gatekeeper” appropriate and/or necessary and may the experiences and implications from the Faroese case be relevant to other scholars in different settings?

4 This is partly discussed in various writings regarding the subject of my own research: the Faroese Chain Dance, see for instance Andreassen, 1980, 1996; Árnadóttir, 2018; Christensen, 2020.

THE GENERAL CHALLENGE OF DEFINING AND INVENTORYING ICH OF SPECIFIC AREAS

When the Faroese Ministry of Culture invited me to participate in the inventorying process, I had some reluctance regarding the task. On the one hand, it felt like something I was naturally obliged to take part in, firstly since the University has been an active partner in every process regarding UNESCO in the Faroes, including the recommendation of the ratification of the 2003 Convention right before I was employed at the University in 2015. Secondly, I hold the position as an assistant professor of Oral tradition, already in the process of researching the ongoing transmission one of the first items suggested to be inscribed in the inventory, namely the Faroese Chain Dance. As part of my research, I had also been looking into heritage policies and various safeguarding efforts, both locally and internationally, so in that sense I ought to be qualified to give some relevant input to the process.

On the other hand – basing my approach to heritage on the definition by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: “heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past” (1998: 149), I was aware of the inherently problematic aspects of “heritage production” and worried that my participation could come to be understood as some kind of academic endorsement of specific entries to a “certified and official list” of cultural practices worth safeguarding for the future – and that thereby I would be actively participating in promoting a specific authorized heritage discourse (Smith, 2006).⁵

Another pressing concern for me was the potential effects on the listed practices and a sense of responsibility towards “culture carriers” I had met with and interviewed in connection with my research on the chain dance. Whilst some were indifferent, the expectations some of the community leaders seemed to hold to the Convention, completely overlooked or ignored potential “negative side effects” of safeguarding efforts. The general perception among both politicians, bureaucrats and stakeholders in the Faroe Islands seemed to be that the 2003 Convention is a very advanced and well thought out instrument, fairly straight forward to operate and universally applicable according to specific guidelines ensuring efficacy and “good results”.

Within academia there has been skepticism towards the great emphasis of listing and inventorying as the basis of safeguarding efforts on various levels in the UNESCO conventions – this applies to the very popular List of UNESCO World Heritage sites, on which the 2003 Convention was at least partly modelled. Intended as an effort to counter the dominance of monumental and “universal” heritage, the introduction of ICH soon brought its own challenges to the field. Critical voices have become louder as debates on how to map and safeguard ICH in practice have taken place in various settings, but the debate on the “heritage process” has been ongoing for decades. Numerous

5 In line with the quoted critical definition of heritage by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Laurajane Smith rejects the notion of heritage as fixed object of inherent value, asserting that: “Heritage is not a thing, site or place, nor is it ‘found’, rather heritage is the multiple processes of meaning making that occur as material heritage places or intangible heritage events are identified, defined, managed, exhibited and visited.” (Smith, 2012). The dominant discourse in this ongoing process is “the Authorized Heritage Discourse” (Smith, 2006).

scholars have pointed out that the political processes and debate surrounding the “safeguarding of cultural heritage” are frequently based on anachronistic understandings of culture, long rejected as “ideologically infested” and theoretically incoherent within the academic disciplines engaged in various fields of cultural studies (a far from extensive list includes: Adell, Tauschek, Bortolotto, Bendix, 2015; Assmann, 1995; Baron, 2016; Bendix, 1997; Foster, Gilman, *Eds.*, 2015; Hafstein, 2009, 2018; Harrison, 2013; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1988, 2004; Kurin, 2004; Kuutma, 2019; Leimgruber, 2010; Noyes, 2006, 2012; Ronström, Drakos, Engman, *Eds.*, 2013; Smith, 2006; Smith, Agakawa, 2009; Zhang, Smith, 2019).

The focus on “heritage” as a construct with many facets and implications has engaged scholars of cultural studies and continues to develop a critical perspective on safeguarding efforts in various contexts. But despite the widespread academic skepticism towards essentialist understandings of culture, UNESCO ambitiously set out to salvage the “intangible cultural heritage” of mankind, as if it was – if not a relatively straight forward – then at least a doable task. Continuing an emphasis on general and universalistic notions of the shared “heritage of mankind” the 2003 Convention bases the safeguarding process on inventorying and listing it within a state party framework, with all the potentially problematic implications it brings with it.

THE DILEMMA OF SCHOLARS

In her 2006 article “The judgement of Solomon” American folklorist Dorothy Noyes warns scholars against entering outdated discourses hastily, even as we find ourselves under pressure of various kind. She states that although one may assume that it is possible to engage in what she calls “strategic essentialism” in order to deconstruct the terms later, it is “dangerous to resurrect as policy what we have already buried as theory” as strategic essentialism will create legal realities which will stay with us. As Noyes sums it up in her article: “Good policy cannot be made from bad theory” (2006: 44).

Another voice of warning is that of Michael Dylan Foster (Foster, 2020) who addresses the role of those assigned with power in the overseeing committee. He states that “like much of what UNESCO does, the Convention represents a very imperfect distillation of good intentions” and that it is inevitable that it will be bound up in ideological conflicts with real impact on the everyday life of millions of people. Foster adds that “We can only hope that the representatives to the Intergovernmental Committee that oversees it will always keep in mind the ‘communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals’ whose intangible cultural heritage – whose lives and livelihoods – they affect with their decisions” (Foster, 2020: 3).

I find that Foster’s point can be extended to anyone who gets involved in the work in the various committees engaging with the practical implications of the good intentions. Scholars involved in the political processes need to keep the awareness that they hold power through their engagement in the work of UNESCO and that this power could potentially lead to harm, both to their own disciplines, their professional integrity and to the communities they are dealing with in one way or another.

THE ROLE AS “GATEKEEPER” IN PRACTICE

Even though academic participation in safeguarding efforts has been limited in places – either due to lack of invitation or because scholars themselves rejected involvement for various reasons, it is becoming increasingly common to involve scholars in various stages of the processes connected to the “safeguarding of ICH”. There seems to be a widespread notion among the various authorities working with the Convention (political or professional), that the listing involved can and must be done “properly”, and that the participation of “experts” will be helpful in ensuring that it is really the “important heritage” that is going to be protected against oblivion. Still, as with any “heritage”, ideas of what is of importance varies greatly on the various levels of decision making. There seem to be wide gaps of meaning within the various texts and guidelines provided by UNESCO, which is not that surprising, given that these are the result of ongoing negotiation and strife for consensus, often resulting in a very watered out version of initial intentions. Kristin Kuutma describes the process in one of the UNESCO settings like this: “The outcome of our debates was far from any imagined ideal, and presented merely a representation of the lowest common denominator” (Kuutma, 2019: 73). Apart from the fleeting nature of the texts themselves, there is often a wide gap between the so called “spirit of the convention” and the intentions of communities pushing for official recognition and the visions of politicians who decide to implement it. The efforts are often based on narrow understandings of which “heritage” is going to be safeguarded and are intertwined with essentialist ideas of national culture and identity. There seems to be a wide agreement that it is of great importance that “something” intangible has to be safeguarded and that “someone” must decide just what is of vital importance. But the criteria are far from clear, as you would have to look hard in order to find a cultural phenomenon or practice which would not in some way be able to fit into the definition of ICH in the 2003 Convention:

The “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2, paragraph 1) (my emphasis)

The notion that whatever provides people with “a sense of identity and continuity” is also likely to foster “respect for cultural diversity and human creativity” is not explained further or supported by empirical evidence, but I will not attempt to delve into that here. However, the wording of the Convention still recognizes potential conflicts in the continued paragraph:

For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments,

as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development. (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2, paragraph 1.)

As a member of the Faroese assessment committee, I aimed at keeping the above definition in mind, as we set out to assess the limited number of entries for the national inventory. But inevitably the question arose, on just how to balance the perceived importance by “groups and in some case individuals” with big terms like international human rights instruments, mutual respect and “sustainability”. What kind of “sustainable development” should be considered? Cultural sustainability? Social? Environmental? How would we balance our assessment, when the practice in question could be interpreted in various directions? Were we responsible for the final description of the practice in the inventory and how it was perceived by the media and public once it officially entered the inventory? Or was our purpose just to add an aura of credibility to the inventory without interfering?

IS THERE EVEN A NEED FOR ACADEMIC GATEKEEPERS?

Even as scholars are expected to participate in the various levels of safeguarding efforts, there seems to be a widespread notion that academic discourse on culture is unnecessary in a practical setting, and that it is possible and desirable to “keep it simple” in order to get things done. For instance the *UNESCO Guidance note for inventorying intangible cultural heritage* states⁶ that although “Inventories should be more than mere presentations of the names of elements, indexes or simple repertoires” they should not be “scientific treatises either” and that each element should be identified in “an easily accessible way” including “an actual description of essential characteristics” covering a number of issues, one of them being “its present-day function and value for the community(ies) concerned” (from an academic perspective this is hardly a simple question to answer in any meaningful way!). Further on in the guidance note, we are told that in order to ensure the accessibility of the inventory it is important to “avoid the use of specialist jargon as far as possible” and that “under the Convention, inventories are not set up for research purposes”.⁷ Although some may be able to maintain their professional integrity whilst adhering to these guidelines, it is not unlikely that commitment to such ideals can lead to compromising with scholarly standards and this probably explains why some scholars will hesitate to engage in these efforts – it simply does not invite critical engagement, on the contrary scholars will often find themselves as killjoys and antagonist to the processes they are tasked with.

Leimgruber (2010) addresses the role of scholars as capable of offering reflexivity to the UNESCO processes surrounding the 2003 Convention, and laments the fact that even if the text of the Convention itself may strive to encourage reflexivity, nuance and continuous debate, the emphasis on the role of “bearers” sidelines the academic perspective, even setting the two groups up as antagonists in those cases where scholars might question the self-image and dominant narrative of the ones who engage in

6 “Guiding principle 4: Substantial information; 27. Identifying elements of intangible cultural heritage”.

7 “Guiding principle 8: Access to information and inventories; 35. Considerations of language”.

practices that may be considered for safeguarding. Leimgruber states that during debates on the Convention academics sometimes came to be seen as “individuals who wanted to destroy and defame the ancient traditions – as ‘spoilsports,’ if not downright unpatriotic” (Leimgruber, 2010: 18). Still Leimgruber concludes that without the critical engagement and debate, the 2003 Convention, initiated as an effort to support “living culture” will eventually result in decontextualized versions of exotic cultural forms, suitable as tourist attractions in some cases, but with little relevance to the lifeways of actual communities (Leimgruber, 2010: 31). This is another way of seeing scholars affecting the processes surrounding safeguarding in problematic ways, not due to active efforts and abuse of power, but by rejecting the possibility to bring nuance and perspective into complex issues, simplified by parties who might not know better. But Leimgruber’s point on how the academic perspective can be perceived with hostility can also explain the reluctance of scholars to engage. However, the realization that no matter what we do as scholars, we are bound to influence the processes in one way or the other, forces us to consider our role.

THE CASE OF THE FAROESE INVENTORY

Political process – cultural heritage and “Faroese identity”

In the Faroe Islands, the general understanding of “intangible cultural heritage” still seems very similar to what Walter Leimgruber (2010) describes as the case in Switzerland more than ten years ago, namely a widespread notion that what has to be safeguarded is what used to be called “folk culture” an ideal set of “traditional practices” now threatened by modernity in various ways. This notion was very visible already during the political efforts in the Faroe Islands to ratify the 2003 Convention. During the two mandatory parliament debates, it was interesting to observe how representatives would discuss the concept of cultural heritage, often referring to various dictionaries, whilst randomly listing their personal favorites among notable examples of cultural practices which they feel could be worthy contributions to “world heritage”. Most of the time the representatives seemed somewhat puzzled about what they were trying to achieve with the ratification. Many had a hard time distinguishing between “cultural heritage”, “natural heritage sites” and “intangible cultural heritage”. A former prime minister was doing a convincing pep talk in favor of two remarkable “rocking rocks” – “Rinkusteinar”, about which as he said that: “they have been rocking by the shore of the village Oyndafjørður for I don’t know how many centuries now!”, vaguely implicating that this fact was of international importance and that the 2003 Convention would somehow be relevant to ensure that the rocks would rock on and hopefully receive the attention they deserved. Arguments about the importance of “ancient origin” and “authenticity” flew back and forth during the parliament session. However, the discussion quickly and repeatedly shifted to questions about what heritage *really* matters and is of *true* value to the Faroese people at the end of the day. Very soon the debate began to illustrate the deep cultural divide in the Faroese society when it comes to the clashes between so-called “traditional Christian values” and modern liberal approaches to human rights, especially those of the LGBT community.

The backstory is, that just six months before the proposal to ratify the 2003 Convention, the government had finally managed to change the Faroese marriage laws after years of agonizing debates, so that same sex marriages were allowed in the Faroe Islands like in the neighboring countries. During the debate on the Convention, representatives of the conservative opposition who had been very much against this change of law, took the floor one after the other and accused those in favor of the ratification of blatant “hypocrisy”. How would the liberal representatives have the audacity to talk about “safeguarding intangible cultural heritage” as they had already destroyed “the most important Faroese intangible cultural heritage of all”: traditional marriage?

The representatives of the left-wing ruling parties seemed to be caught off guard by the intertwining of these subjects, which they claimed, “were totally unrelated”. They expressed genuine surprise that anyone would even consider opposing the 2003 Convention as if was about “the things we all agree about and want to keep”. Addressing the accusations of hypocrisy, they explained that the Convention is only intended to safeguard “what is specific to the Faroe Islands” – thus not any aspect of Christianity or traditional marriage, neither of which can be claimed to be Faroese inventions, after all. They also talked about “international responsibility” and being in “good company” within UNESCO. However, the conservatives scorned this idea and questioned why we should care the least about “what Paris thinks of the Faroe Islands”.

One representative of the right wing Fólkaflokkurin (“The people’s party”) Jacob Vestergaard had an interesting observation on the point of the Convention only being about protecting what is “specifically Faroese”. He said:

What UNESCO does or what UNESCO doesn't do, I actually don't care at all... It is completely up to them, let them do whatever they want! As I have tried to say, we in the Faroes should try to safeguard the Christian intangible cultural heritage, and that is quite important to me... and what made me speak up now, was the comment by Annita á Friðriksmørk, who said that the Christian intangible cultural heritage was something different from other intangible cultural heritage, because there are so many others in the world who are Christian, apart from the Faroese. I want to point out that all our intangible cultural heritage can be linked to the cultural heritage of our neighboring countries, it all derives from the same places! Just like Christianity has a common origin but has changed in different places – also the Christianity of the Faroe Islands. So, you cannot isolate the Christian intangible cultural heritage and say that it is something completely different, that is what I wanted to say.

No matter what one’s opinion is on issues of religious heritage as ICH compared to other practices, the point Vestergaard makes, illustrates a gap between the way UNESCO works with the concept of ICH and how these things play out in the real world where traditions are not always unproblematic and worth safeguarding by all standard. It is obvious that among the representatives who made the political decision to safeguard the ICH of the Faroe Islands, there is no common understanding of what they were setting out to safeguard or for what purpose. Some would say that this is lucky, as the process of safeguarding ICH should not just be a top down movement, and I agree that unified parliament setting out in stone what Faroese ICH is, would be even more scary,

but that is not my point – the problem is that from a democratic point of view this is problematic when people attempt to commit to something, which they do not fully understand. Considering the intention of the Convention, it is evident that it will lead to considerable “bumps on the road” if you are lucky, and blatant misuse, if you are unlucky.

Vestergaard points out that the concept “national culture” is a floating and interconnected phenomenon – not fundamentally different from any other cultural phenomenon – his argument was not to criticize the concept of national culture – something which he has been a strong proponent of in other settings – but rather to argue for the inclusion of Christian heritage as “Faroese heritage”. However, he also undermines the argument of viewing any heritage as specifically “Faroese”, detached from other cultural heritage. It is interesting to observe that this critical view of presenting “national culture” comes from a conservative politician, not as you might expect from one of the more liberal politicians who one might expect to be used to ideas of culture as dynamic constructs. There was not one representative who questioned the need to protect the “especially Faroese culture” by the means of the 2003 Convention, it was the main motive.

The only skeptical remark came from another conservative politician, Jákup Mikkelsen, as he shared his opinion that the Convention is not going to safeguard “anything of importance for real”. He was also talking about Christian heritage, stating that he finds it very unlikely: “that UNESCO or anyone else is going to save the Christian ICH. It is up to ourselves to ensure that the Christian ICH is passed on to the future generation.” Whilst the previous conservative speaker argued that there was no real difference between Christian ICH and “other Faroese ICH” and ridiculed the idea of distinguishing between them, Mikkelsen actually supports the 2003 Convention and the attempts to safeguard all the “especially Faroese stuff”. But when it comes to what is of most importance to him, he will not trust the Convention, any official policies or international institutions to take care of its future.

I see this as another indication that the UNESCO ICH framework is not as universally relevant as it likes to present itself on paper and inside rhetoric – it is clearly not the only way people around the world engage with intangible cultural heritage, and most likely not the most important way. In the Faroese setting at least, it is clear that to many people this so-called ICH, supposed to be of vital importance to their identity and sense of belonging, is nothing but a minor detail and that what truly matters to people is not something easily safeguarded or shared with an international community under a formal framework. One is almost tempted to say that it is truly intangible, definitely impossible to capture in the snapshot style of the inventories and lists at least. For some it may be religious practices and values, for others human rights or nationalist agendas but in practice it is hard from an academic perspective to separate individual understandings of cultural practices worth safeguarding, from potential problematic uses and understandings of these practices, as I will discuss further in the examples from the Faroese inventory. At the end of the day, the Convention was passed unanimously in the Faroese parliament, despite the lukewarm expectations, general disagreement and confusion about what it was going to safeguard.

Working with the actual “Faroese inventory”

Unclear intentions of those who passed the ratification along with the described visible divide of the Faroese public on how to define terms like “tradition”, “Faroeness” and tensions about “need for change” vs “fear of change” – these were the backdrop of the work of the small assessment committee, I became a member of. We were two scholars, representing the national Museum and the University, together with a third member from the Ministry of Culture serving as the coordinator and secretary. Even though the first two entries already on the table – traditional boatbuilding and Faroese Chain Dance – are in many ways representative of stereotypical ideas of what is “special Faroese culture”, part of the defined task of the committee was to ensure that the inventory did not represent stereotypical ideas of heritage and that attention would be paid to overlooked aspects of intangible cultural heritage. This was something I personally found very important and something which could justify my presence in the forum. We also had to ensure that the inventory was drawn according to the guidelines and intentions of the Convention – part of this is to ensure that there are no negative effects involved on the practices listed, another good reason to involve scholars in my opinion. However, there has been very little discussion about this aspect of safeguarding efforts in connection with the Convention so far. At our first meeting we discussed the role of the members of the committee, as both me and the other appointed member were wondering just how to interpret the various criteria and questioned what the implications for the respective “listed items” were going to be, as this question had come up several times among those “culture bearers” who were invited to take part in preparing the entries. It was clear that there were few resources available, other than the hope of getting a ministry employee dedicated to working with the Convention.⁸ An old boatbuilder who sat for more than an hour at one of the meetings intended to prepare the entry on boatbuilding, asked politely if perhaps there would be any money put aside for actual boatbuilding – maybe just one or two boats per year? He sighed heavily, when he heard about the modest ambition to employ one part time coordinator for the entire Convention. Some chain dancers imagined that there would be international financial support for activities deemed important by UNESCO in one way or the other and were surprised to learn that this is not the case – even if they did not really think money were going to make a big difference in their case, they were more interested in fool proof solutions for safeguarding and were frustrated to learn that these do not exist. The possibility that the listed practices might be more attractive as part of a Faroese tourist industry have been mentioned by both politicians and tour operators, but there is rarely any discussion about how this might affect the practices themselves and contribute to their “sustainable future”, let alone any potential negative impact. For many it is hard to understand how the Convention will make any difference and this has contributed to the challenge of getting the public to engage and send in proposals for the inventory. There has been little interest of taking part so far. Although the secretary had already been in national media encouraging people to send in proposals, on our first meeting the committee had only two suggestions to assess – neither of which we

⁸ A coordinator was eventually employed at the National Museum, mainly charged with the formal work connected with the Convention, reporting etc. but also assisting with proposals for the inventory.

found suitable, but they each serve to illustrate the wide variety of how people try to utilize the Convention for their purposes.

Rejected proposals

The two rejected proposals were rejected for different reasons. The first was a suggestion to enlist a revitalization of a historic way of growing barley. In this case we did not think that it fitted the criteria of “living heritage” relevant to any particular “community or individual” even if the rationale behind the proposal was understandable as a museum activity. The other rejected proposal was rather curious and points directly back to the parliament debate. The proposal placed itself within the category of “knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe” and included vocabulary on “representation and cultural spaces”. The “item” they wanted to safeguard was simply that “The Faroese are not afraid of death”. The elaborated argument was that “as the majority of the Faroese are Christian, they feel certain that they will go to heaven and as such do not fear death”. The proposal leaned neatly into eleventh hour narratives of impending danger for valuable cultural practices, claiming that this valuable piece of ICH under great threat as Muslims were taking over Europe! (The fact that Islam also involves promises of a good afterlife, was apparently of no comfort.) The assessment committee was somewhat baffled but struggled to find a polite way to answer according to the guidelines. We ended up replying that an “unfounded statement” could hardly be considered as ICH. The secretary wanted to contact those responsible of the proposal to make them rephrase it so that it could perhaps be more about “funeral practices in the Faroes” – Well, why not? We have not heard back from them so far. And we have not had other suggestions either, other than the next item up for the inventory, which is also quite interesting. The minimal interest from the public has eventually led to a “top down” approach and “nudging” from the ministry. Last year they decided to employ a scholar of anthropology, based on the National Museum, tasked with reaching out to relevant communities to help with proposals for the inventory. The assessment committee is still expected to “assess” suggestions but does not take part in the selection of candidates for the inventory. The first effort made this way is the Faroese pilot whale hunt, which was publicly declared the third entry on the inventory even before it had been assessed by the committee.

Whale hunting as cultural heritage?

For many years, the Faroe Islands have been harshly criticized by foreigners, for their traditional killing of pilot whales for food. This practice has been going on for centuries, pods of whales discovered by the shores are chased and forced to strand on the beach where they are killed by people waiting for them with knives. It looks a mess, but the Faroese argue that chicken and pigs bleed too, even if you don't see the blood in public. However, this type of hunt is upsetting many foreigners who hold the whales dear for various reasons. There have been boycotts of fishing exports and of tourism and some years ago, in 2014 we experienced a fullblown occupation by the organization Sea Shepherd. Resentful English-speaking youth were roaming the Islands wearing black uniforms with skulls and Neptune forks. They even flew in Pamela Anderson to argue with local whale killers.



Fig. 1: Examples from the 2014 Sea Shepherd campaign “Grindstop”. Source: Tóta Árnadóttir

Paradoxically this mayhem led to the biggest boost of local interest in the whale killing, as the young generation was provoked by outsiders telling them how to go about their resources. Young people flocked to the courses on how to kill whales safely and participating in this practice became a marker of identification a traditional Faroese identity, mainly among men, but young girls also took these courses and participated in the killings. Pilot whale killing became a unifying practice of symbolic importance to Faroese identity in a way unseen before, and even those who did not participate actively would defend the practice in most cases – an overwhelming majority of the Faroese has been supportive toward the continuation of the practice, even if there is pressure from the outside (Bogadóttir, Olsen, 2017).

However, over the last years there has also been increasing criticism within the Faroese community, as people begin to question the ongoing hunt. People appreciate the whales for other reasons than food, some see opportunities to offer whale watching tourism and the public is made aware that the whales are so polluted that they are not even suitable as stable part of a human diet any longer. So, despite the added symbolic value due to the conflict with foreign animal rights activists, there is indeed “threats of change” in the air. This may be the reason why official representatives of the whale killers have been pushing to have the whale killing recognized as ICH of the Faroe Islands. As mentioned, they receive assistance from the person employed to draw up the inventory and have already announced in national media that this will be the third item on the Faroese Inventory of ICH. The media representation following this news, underlines the notion that being listed in the inventory is generally perceived as a certification that something is indeed important heritage. This screen shot from one of the news portals reads: “Pilot whaling is intangible cultural heritage, deserving of recognition”.

All this has happened without any consultation of the assessment committee. COVID-19 may have played into this, but once again we were hastily assembled in order to help edit the actual description of this precious “whale killing heritage” –

– Grindadráp er siðaarvur hefur uppiborið viðurkenning

Arbeitt verður nú við at fáa grindadráp og grind á skránnu "Livandi Mentan" við endamálinum at verja siðaarv okkara. Hetta er partur av arbeidnum at implementera UNESCO-sáttmálan í Føroyum



Fig 2: In the news article they explain that “work has begun to include pilot whale killing on the Faroes inventory of ICH with the purpose of protecting our ICH. This is part of the efforts to implement the UNESCO-Convention in the Faroe Islands.” Source: in.fo

disapproving it for the inventory was not even up for debate – “we have already been in the radio!”. To me this was clear sign that the role as academic gatekeeper is merely intended to bring some extra credit in legitimizing a problematic process, that politicians, ministry, and museum seem to find very straight forward and simple. My own objections to the entry were based on various reasons, but my main concern is that I find it problematic that the inventory seems to be going into a very stereotypical direction out of tune with the intention of the Convention and there are clearly attempts to use the framework to defeat those who feel that there may be a need for change in this particular tradition. By deciding to safeguard whale killing against future changes, we, as gatekeepers, can come to define anyone in favor of changes as “outsiders” or “foreign” in the already polarized debate surrounding the whale killings. By recognizing something as Faroese ICH, those who oppose it can be dismissed as “against the Faroese ICH” and part of the ongoing pressure by the outside world. This is already the case when it comes to the general debate on the future of whaling in the Faroe Islands – as recent as Sept. 13, 2021 the current minister of fishery (the same Jacob Vestergaard whom I have quoted earlier in this article), accused the Faroese representative in the Danish Parliament, Sjørður Skaale of “siding with Sea Shepherd” and being dangerous to the Faroese community, since he had publicly criticized an

unusually large and brutal killing of more than 1400 small dolphins⁹ on Sept. 12. Vestergaard repeatedly insisted that “there is a national unity around the right of the Faroese to utilize their resources” – even when he was presented with recent polls that show that 2/3 of the Faroese population oppose the killing of smaller dolphins, Vestergaard still claimed to speak on behalf of the Faroese people and accused Skaale of damaging behavior towards his people. It is worth noting that some of the most critical voices against the latest killing came from the organization of whale killers themselves – the same organization which has been pushing for the traditional whale killing included in the Faroese inventory – their reason for opposing the killing of dolphins is that it has not been a tradition and that it does not deserve safeguarding in the same way as the pilot whale killing does – they fear that the practice will have a damaging effect on the traditional whale killing. These representatives have also been accused of being traitors and of “siding with Sea Shepherd”.

CONCLUSION

As “heritage” is a process, all about defining what parts of your past are valuable: “assessing heritage” is by definition to “create heritage”. In relation to the creation of an official inventory it becomes relevant to reflect on how and by whom is the inventory formed. In the Faroese case, the process has so far been a “top-down” listing of a few selected entries, which seemed to “fit nicely in”. The lack of a wider or more varied participation in the inventorying has not been due to lack of invitation or effort from “the top” but it seems clear that “ordinary people” find it hard to see the relevance of the Convention or to engage with it actively.

Is the role as “gatekeeper” appropriate and/or necessary? The mere existence of a professional “assessment committee” with the role of gatekeeping, can contribute to an ongoing legitimizing of potentially problematic and stereotypical ideas of “national culture” favoring some practices and communities over others. Since the focus of the work with the 2003 Convention on the Faroe Islands from the outset has been on the possibility of including something “Faroese” on the international Representative List, the two entries on the inventory so far – boat building and chain dancing – have been very predictable, and if the third one will be about the whale killing it is equally predictable. In this respect the gatekeepers of assessment committee cannot claim to have avoided a stereotypical representation, and one can fear that the limited selection will create precedence so that over time the inventory will look very much like your average tourist brochure. Those members of the community who do engage and push for specific entries, represent specific views of what “ought to” be safeguarded as part of “Faroese identity” for the eternal future. In the absence of other clear criteria, it becomes necessary to relate suggested candidates to the universal descriptions listed in the Convention, whilst using ones “bureaucratic creativity” – not always in favor of

⁹ This is reported to be the largest number of whales killed in one day in the Faroes and it created a lot of controversy within the community. Many Faroese oppose the killing of dolphins, even if they agree with the killing of pilot whales.

those pushing for (more) recognition, but on the contrary to act on behalf of those not included in the “traditional” notions of “Faroese-ness”.

There is no definitive answer on what the appropriate way to participate in the process is, or whether it would be a more responsible stance, to just pull away from the role. Abandoning the process and leaving it to others less critical of inventorying will not prevent it from taking place, but at least one will have removed one’s tiny bit of authority from the official “seal of approval”.

Would the process around the Faroese inventory have been any different, had there been no representative for the University or no academic perspectives within the committee? I am not sure. Some of the debates we have had within the committee have been fruitful and there is an increased awareness of the importance of how entries for the inventory are formulated. The process has only just begun and perhaps it is better to try to contribute – even if the contribution comes in the form of critical comments and annoying questions along the way.

Are there any “lessons to take away” from the Faroese case? I am sure that some of the issues will be recognized by colleagues elsewhere too. It would perhaps be helpful with even more debate on professional guidelines and on how to engage in work with the 2003 Convention without compromising the academic field we are parts of. I am aware that there can be no final answers on how to best face up to the challenge, and that the dilemma has been framed as an unnecessarily antagonistic divide between “critical heritage scholars” and “public folklorists” as discussed by Robert Baron in his article from 2016. Baron suggests that both sides of the divide could learn from each other in order to get the most out of the Convention, benefitting both “communities” and scholarly fields (Baron, 2016). Baron comes to the, to me, somewhat surprising conclusion: that the main reason for the lack of general use of the insights and experiences built up over many decades of public folklore experience in the US within the safeguarding efforts of the UNESCO organization is due to the failure of the US to commit to the Convention. To me it is more likely the other way round: the grass root approach and bottom up approach of public folklore may as well be the reason why the folklorists tradition Baron refers to, perhaps has an alternative approach to “safeguarding cultural heritage” to offer. Baron himself states that “Paradoxically, while critics of neoliberalism may view the US as its epicentre, expectations of cultural tourism and related corporate involvement associated with public folklore are relatively limited.” (Baron, 2016: 602). Baron goes on to say that “in other countries, the designation of cultural practices and expressions as ICH is eagerly sought for economic benefits that would hopefully accompany international prestige and recognition” and that local authorities will often pitch UNESCO as a potential solution to regional economic challenges.

The reality of “problematic motives” of those engaging in the 2003 Convention are sometimes glossed over, when the Convention is put into practice, at least the Faroese case can serve as an example of this. In my opinion the vital need for ongoing critical reflection is not fully acknowledged by the UNESCO organization/operational guidelines which rely on both “community engagement” and “expert opinions” without addressing potential challenges of these concepts openly – probably out of fear of reduced impact/respect of the Convention. This reluctance places extra responsibility

on scholars to keep standards and oppose simplistic presentations of national culture – even though they may risk being sidelined and missing professional opportunities. Rather than focusing on what scholars in different roles may learn from “each other” implicating that the conflict and discord is a problem, I think that any scholar involved with the UNESCO ought to focus even more on the necessity for critical voices on the sidelines of any cultural process.

Acknowledgments:

I am grateful for the very stimulating SIEF Summer School 2020: “Heritage, Tradition, Identity – A Case Study of the Palio di Siena” which was flawlessly organized by Fabio Mugnaini (University of Siena) – even as it had to be moved to an online format. I would like to thank everyone lecturing, attending and contributing to the lively debates, but I am especially grateful to Carley Williams (University of Aberdeen) and Fabio Mugnaini who later agreed to co-convene the panel Heri08: „ICH on the ground: the fine art of rules and measures“, at the SIEF 2021 conference, where this paper was first presented. Thanks to everyone else who presented there and not least to Michael Dylan Foster for being an inspiring discussant – despite crazy time zone logistics. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers for thought provoking and enlightening comments and suggested readings, and the editors of Slovenský národopis/Slovak Ethnology for the invitation to participate in this issue and not least, for a lot of patience.

REFERENCES

- Adell, N., Tauschek, M., Bortolotto, C., Bendix, R. (2015). *Between Imagined Communities and Communities of Practice: Participation, Territory and the Making of Heritage*. Göttingen Studies in Cultural Property, Vol. 8. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.
- Andreassen, E. (1980). Folkekulturen i nasjonalromantisk og nasjonalistisk tolkning. In: L. Honko (Ed.), *Folklore och Nationsbyggande i Norden* (pp. 65–73). Nordiska institutet for folkdiktning.
- Andreassen, E. (1996). *Føroyskur dansur – ein stutt lýsing*. Forlagið tungulist.
- Árnadóttir, T. (2018). II: 43 Chain dancing. *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, 716–726.
- Assmann, J. (1995). Collective Memory. *New German Critique*, 65, 125–133.
- Baron, R. (2016). Public folklore dialogism and critical heritage studies. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 22(8), 588–606.
- Bendix, R. F. (1997). Questioning the canon. *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (pp. 155–187). The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Bogadóttir, R., Olsen, E. S. (2017). Making degrowth locally meaningful: The case of the Faroese grindadrap. *Journal of Political Ecology*, 24(1), 504–518.
- Bortolotto, C., Demgenski, P., Karampampas, P., Toji, S. (2020). Proving participation: vocational bureaucrats and bureaucratic creativity in the implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. *Social Anthropology*, 28(1), 66–82.
- Christensen, A. (2020). “Kvæði í føroyskari samtid” *Exploring Ballads as Popular Culture and Heritage*. PhD thesis, University of Leeds.
- Foster, M. D., Gilman, L. (Eds.) (2015). *UNESCO on the Ground*. Indiana University Press.
- Foster, M. D. (2020) *Student Feature – UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention*. Accessible at <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/01/07/student-feature-unescos-intangible-cultural-heritage-convention/> (Retrieved December 20, 2021).
- Hafstein, V. T. (2009). Intangible Heritage as a list – From masterpieces to representation. In: L. Smith, N. Akagawa (Eds.), *Intangible Heritage* (pp. 93–111). London: Routledge.

- Hafstein, V. T. (2018). *Making Intangible Heritage*. Indiana University Press.
- Harrison, R. (2013). *Heritage Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Helgason, J. P., Balle, G., Reynatúgvu, H. á, Christiansen, E., Hansen, M. G., & Líknargötu, H. á. (2017). *Ferðavinna í Føroyum ein ábyrgdarfull og burðardýgg leið*. Tórshavn: Uttanríkis og vinnumálaráðið.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1988). Mistaken Dichotomies. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 101(400 (Apr-Jun., 1988), 140–155.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (1998). *Destination Culture*. University of California Press.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (2004). Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production. *Museum International*, 56(1–2), 52–64.
- Kurin, R. (2004). Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in the 2003 Unesco Convention: a critical appraisal. *Museum International*, 56(1–2), 66–77.
- Kuutma, K. (2019). Inside the UNESCO apparatus. In: N. Akagawa, L. Smith (Ed.), *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage* (1th ed.) (pp. 68–83). London: Routledge.
- Leimgruber, W. (2010). Switzerland and the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Culture and Cultural Diversity. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 47(1–2), 161–196.
- Noyes, D. (2006). The Judgment of Solomon: Global Protections for Tradition and the Problem of Community Ownership. *Cultural Analyses*, 5, 27–56.
- Noyes, D. (2012). The social base of folklore. In: R. F. Bendix, G. Hasan-Rokem (Eds.), *A Companion to Folklore* (pp. 13–39). Blackwell Publishing.
- Ronström, O., Drakos, G., Engman, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Folkloristikens aktuella utmaningar*. Visby: Gotland University Press.
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Smith, L. (2012). Discourses of heritage: implications for archaeological community practice. *Nuevo Mundo Nuevos[Online]*. Accessible at <https://journals.openedition.org/nuovomundo/64148?lang=pt> (Accessed December 20, 2021).
- Smith, L., Akagawa, N. (2009). Introduction. In: L. Smith, N. Akagawa (Eds.), *Intangible Heritage* (pp. 1–9). London: Routledge.
- Zhang, R., Smith, L. (2019). Bonding and dissonance: Rethinking the Interrelations Among Stakeholders in Heritage Tourism. *Tourism Management*, 74, 212–223.
- UNESCO *Guidance Note on Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage* – intangible heritage – Culture Sector – UNESCO. Accessible at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/guidance-note-on-inventorying-00966> (Retrieved February 17, 2021).
- UNESCO (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Accessible at: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention> (Retrieved February 17, 2021).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

TÓTA ÁRNADÓTTIR (ORCID: 0000-0003-4324-0621) – is employed as assistant professor in oral tradition at the University of the Faroe Islands. She holds an MA degree in Faroese language and literature and is currently completing her doctorate studies in folkloristics as a joint degree between the University of the Faroe Islands and University of Iceland. Her research focuses on transmission of tradition, specifically in regards to the Faroese Chain Dance, and part of her work concerns the effect of inventorying on so-called „living heritage“.