Polyphony vs. Monograph: The Problem of Participation in a French ICH Dossier

Nicolas Adell
Polyphony vs. Monograph: The Problem of Participation in a French ICH Dossier

Nicolas Adell
University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès (Le Mirail)

1 Introduction

It is no longer a novelty to point out that the ICH Convention is marked by contradictions. It purports to promote cultural diversity, but does so by emphasizing unified heritage; it celebrates and registers ancient traditions, but requires such traditions to be in accordance with modern values.

Here lies the danger and the fallacy of the nice concept of “living heritage”: There is a temptation to require ICH elements to change in a single direction. UNESCO admits that heritage is something living and constantly changing, but it cannot imagine that an element declines. Existence of a list of elements “in need of urgent safeguarding” is the best evidence that, in culture, nothing should disappear. UNESCO’s concern for decline contradicts, maybe paradoxically, the idea of “living heritage”. For UNESCO, change somehow means progress (though this word is forbidden in UNESCO’s rhetoric). In the ICH Convention, heritage is “one in source, one in experience” as Lewis H. Morgan (1877: vi) would say – “it provides [communities and groups] with the sense of identity and continuity”. Identity and continuity are two of the foremost values of modern society, and the Convention

---

1 Among numerous works, see the recent essays of Anaïs Leblon (2012) and Marilena Alivizatou (2012). A first synthesis of the main contradictions in ICH was undertaken by Toshiyuki Kono (2009).

adds a further component, evoking that heritage is ‘one in progress’ (toward modern values and ethics). Some readers will recognize Lewis H. Morgan’s famous sentence drawn from the preface to his ‘Ancient Society’: “The history of the human race is one in source, one in experience, one in progress” (Morgan 1877: vi). The coat of cultural relativism worn by the Convention is too short to cover the shameful body of its evolutionism.

Such contradictions are clearly caused by the moral intentions of the Convention, which are made explicit therein. New members in some communities have to provide something as a certificate of good morality before being accepted (e.g., you have to be married, you have to be protestant, etc.). UNESCO asks, with a similar aim, for something like a “certificate of good heritagity”. The 2003 Convention has established the criteria for such an issuance. This essay aims to show that, moreover, I think UNESCO creates a phantasm: A heritage of humanity without humans, but with individuals who “participate”.

In the implementation of a dossier for an ICH application, these tensions and contradictions assume another form, which is the opposition between polyphony and monograph. Implementing a dossier – in France at least, but, I am convinced, in other countries as well – involves leaving behind a polyphonic reality so as to produce a “monographic novel”. In my experience, this is the defining feature of an ICH dossier.

Thus, what does the term “participating” mean for the ICH Convention, or more exactly for the ICH Convention as read by French institutions? It means making available (and sometimes simply visible), translating experiences, “unparticularizing” peculiarities, and “unthickening” thick situations. One understands why anthropologists feel at home in the ICH world.

2 A Case of an ICH Dossier: The Tour de France Journeymen

I want to try to explain how this process works in a specific case: the dossier of the Tour de France journeymen (compagnonnage), registered on the Representative List of ICH in 2010. I should point out that I was one of the characters as well as one of the writers in this “monographic novel”. Thus, this article may look like a confession, complete with a register of sins and regrets; and, no doubt, it is in a way. However, it is first and foremost an exercise in the reflexivity that all anthropologists need to engage in as part of their fieldwork. Such reflexivity or such a confession – I am not sure that it is possible to draw a distinction – is the best way to gain an overview of the processes and situations in which we are involved.

Before I begin, I have to mention some background information about compagnonnage. Compagnonnage is a kind of craftsmen’s network that has its roots in the trade brotherhoods of 13th-century Europe. It has existed since at least the 15th

---

3 For the history of compagnonnage and its relations to heritage prior to ICH registration, see Adell 2012.
Polyphony vs. Monograph: The Problem of Participation in a French ICH Dossier

Polyphony vs. Monograph: The Problem of Participation in a French ICH Dossier

century, but its actual forms and principles only appeared at the end of the 18th century in France. Nowadays, one also finds compagnonnage movements in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, and Switzerland. However, nowhere is it as important (in terms of the number of individuals, care for apprenticeship, and relations with the state) as it is in France.4

Broadly speaking, French compagnonnage involves almost 40,000 people, a quarter of whom constitute a core of permanent active members. The remainder (e.g. stagiaires, apprentis, postulants, aspirants - names vary according to the trade and the length of apprenticeship) are people who have benefited during their youth from the transmission of knowledge from qualified craftspeople, namely, the compagnons. Together, they comprise the compagnonnage society, which is divided into several groups. Among them, there are three main communities, each of whom has its own structure and sensibilities: the Association Ouvrière des Compagnons du Devoir (AOCD), the Fédération Compagnonnique des Métiers du Bâtiment (FCMB) and the Union Compagnonnique des Devoirs Unis (UC). Each of these groups is highly structured and organized around a network of lodges, located mostly in metropolitan France, but also in Switzerland and Belgium.

AOCD represents 27 trades and has more than 20,000 members. This is the most highly structured group and the privileged interlocutor of the public authorities. FCMB has approximately 15,000 members, who are divided into a dozen corporations. Unlike the highly centralized AOCD, the FCMB’s organization is federal. Over time, this structure has become more complex, especially for the topic that we are interested in here, namely, the decision-making process. Finally, UC has about 5,000 members and brings together over 130 trades. Most of these trades are represented by one or two compagnons and belong to the institutional category Métiers d’Art (fine arts). Thus, it is quite obvious that each of these groups has its own interpretation of what an application for inclusion on the ICH Representative List has to be and to involve. I have not mentioned splinter groups of journeymen, some of which sometimes have as few as ten or twenty members. These smaller groups were not involved in the application process, as some of the main organizations contested their legitimacy to hold the title of compagnons. As we shall see, this was one of the crucial issues in this nomination from the point of view of the communities.

In spite of these differences, compagnonnage groups share certain key values and principles that form the core of the application’s dossier. Indeed, the compagnonnage is “a unique way of conveying knowledge and skills”5 linked to the trades that work with stone, wood, metal, leather, textiles, and food. Its originality lies in its experimentation with and implementation of extremely varied methods and processes of

---

4 For details, see Adell 2008.

knowledge transmission: national and international educational travel (the *Tour de France* period), initiation rituals, school-based teaching, customary learning, and technical apprenticeship. The value ascribed to the transmission of knowledge forms the cornerstone of the movement’s identity. The first “duty” of a compagnon is to “re-transmit”. Members are also connected by a powerful “chain of knowledge”, which is reinforced by ritualistic practices (initiation rites) and a system of social organization based on the family model and revolving around an important and central figure known as the “Mother”.

3 Part One: Searching for Polyphony

What about the dossier for the ICH Representative List, and, above all, what about participation? It is very interesting to see how the compagnons (or someone else, as we will see) completed item 4 of their dossier, entitled “Participation of communities, groups and individuals in the nomination process”. This item starts as follows:

Compagnons took a lively interest in intangible cultural heritage from an early date: a spontaneous application was even instituted by the Association Ouvrière des compagnons du Devoir as soon as France had ratified the Convention in 2006. This forms part of the debates that have been ongoing for several years on the concept of heritage, to which compagnon magazines have given voice. This framework has been continued and focused by holding working meetings run by the compagnons themselves, with the participation, on a consultative basis, of representatives of external bodies such as the University of Toulouse – Le Mirail (a meeting between the three compagnon groups and Nicolas Adell held in Toulouse in 2008, on January the 17 [sic]) and the Mission Ethnologie of the Ministry of Culture (working meetings in 2008, on April 1 and on June 11). Each of these steps has allowed the representatives of compagnon groups to complete the application file accurately, thanks firstly to regular exchanges among compagnon groups, and then between compagnon groups and academic consultants.7

This passage invites several questions. Firstly, who was writing here? That is the anthropologist, namely me. However, there were, in fact, two authors for this paragraph: myself in the first part, the representatives of the Ministry of Culture in the second. This reveals different conceptions of what participation means and implies.

---

6 The complete title held by the members is compagnons du Devoir (literally, “journeymen of Duty”).
For me, the best way to demonstrate the “participation” of the compagnons was to underline their “spontaneity”, that is, their desire to be recognized as ICH without the intervention of any intermediaries, as expert as they were. For the Ministry of Culture (and its interpretation of UNESCO’s interests), per contra, it was necessary to highlight the mediations, the contact points (by specifying places and dates). Thus, from the Ministry’s point of view, “participation” actually means taking part in a top-down process. It is interesting to note that the spontaneous application, sent to the Ministry of Culture in 2007, had received no response.

Thus, what happened in the “meetings” mentioned at the beginning of item 4? Did we write the dossier? Did we have some discussions about the items, or about the ways of safeguarding a living heritage such as compagnonnage? Not at all. I now realize that there were three contrasting perspectives concerning these meetings.

Firstly, the Ministry’s point of view: Meetings were “acts of participation”, proof of consent and arguments for item 4 in the ICH dossier.

Secondly, the compagnons’ point of view: Meetings were somehow opportunities to deal with their identity, with their commonalities, despite differences. Moreover, these meetings were for compagnons something simultaneously new and familiar. Indeed, the three main compagnons groups used to meet once a year, but it is impossible to know what went on during these sessions with any great certainty since such meetings are private. No renards (i.e. “foxes”, the name given by the compagnons to people who are not compagnons but are close to them, such as young apprentices, craftsmen, … and anthropologists!) are permitted to attend. However, I doubt that the meetings deal with identity, collective culture or anything else in these fields. The leader of one of the main compagnon groups told me something very suggestive after our first meeting about the ICH application: “You’ve blown our cover!” (September 2008). For this occasion, no secrets were revealed; no initiation rites were described. The compagnons just told us about what compagnonnage is. I suspect that this was the first time that they had talked about compagnonnage in such an explicit fashion and in front of each other. Probably, “what compagnonnage is” belongs to “culture’ with quotation marks” (Carneiro da Cunha 2010), culture for the other, although meetings ‘between’ the compagnon groups deal with “culture without quotation marks”, culture for the self, in which talking about “what compagnonnage is” is not necessary.

Thirdly, my point of view, that is to say, the writer’s point of view: My only concern was what I would take from such meetings to complete a concrete dossier that should reflect some cohesion and unity in order to present a “community”. Something did not work with these meetings. Something was missing because there was a misunderstanding. All of us, including UNESCO (as represented by the ICH Convention), were aware of a polyphony, but not of the same polyphony. I contend that UNESCO, in order to satisfy its mandate of promoting cultural diversity, looked for external polyphony, that is, polyphony between ICH elements and not within the elements themselves. Its objective is really (and somehow naïvely) the production of cultural harmony under the rubric of heritage.
The Ministry of Culture sought a superficial polyphony, polyphony that gives the appearance of reality. Indeed, for the Ministry, it was important to show that the element had simply “popped up” from the field. The field – as everybody, including Ministry staff, is well aware – is never flat. Thus, there is a need for a kind of internal polyphony, but it must be very limited. It is not a real polyphony, but rather shades: cultural sharps and flats. Consequently, the real differences between the compagnons groups are minimized. The Ministry staff were convinced of the rightness of their approach because they had read a book written by a scholar named Nicolas Adell, who has industriously demonstrated the interest (and the necessity) of seeing the compagnonnage as a unity.

The compagnons understood very quickly that their internal differences, often so important that they lead to splits, must be watered down in order to be written on the same stave. This stave had to be created. Once upon a time a “monographic novel” was written for heritage reasons.

4 Part Two: Writing a Monographic Novel

In this section, I continue my examination of item 4, “Participation of communities”, to highlight this process of creation. We now arrive at the very moment when we (I should say “I”) put on the veneer of the polyphony required:

Remarkably, the participation of compagnons has not been limited to the involvement of those compagnons who have a role to play by virtue of their institutional position (Presidents, First Councillors). Thanks to the production of a questionnaire on the links between the concept of cultural heritage and compagnonnage, and its distribution to all members of compagnons groups in the framework of the large national meetings that take place every year (Assizes, Congress, etc.), it has been possible to inform the whole compagnons community of the intention to achieve nomination as intangible cultural heritage. A large number of compagnons (almost 600 for the AOCD, 250 for the FCMB, 150 for the UC) have thus been able, through written responses (several examples of which have been compiled in a combined volume at the request of the Secretariat in the ‘Supplementary Information’ section), to propose that, in their view, one of the particular courses of compagnonnage constitutes the specific character and identity of their community.8

Explanations are necessary here. I only had about forty of the 1,000 responses cited in my own hands, which were those specially selected for the Secretariat of UNESCO. Furthermore, the forty (supposedly different) responses were in fact

8 Intergovernmental Committee for The Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, 5th session (Nairobi, Kenya, November 2010), Nomination File no. 00441: 12.
almost identical. I was so disappointed that I became angry: “Where is my polyphony?” I said to myself. I asked the compagnons whether there were any other responses. Two groups told me that there were not. The third (which I knew better than the other two), meanwhile, had not even completed the questionnaire, and explained through its leader’s voice: “By accident, all of the two hundred and fifty responses were destroyed” (June 2009). It became quite obvious: I was not the one who wrote the monographic novel. The compagnons were creating for me what I was creating for UNESCO: a monographic novel presented as reality. Thus, without doubt because I was feeling that polyphonic reality was beginning to disappear, I needed to describe some concrete aspects of compagnonnage. At this time, I wanted to claim sincerely: “This is not a novel.” I now realize that I had simply applied another veneer, a veneer of reality, by using a crude trick: a piece of storytelling, a fact taken out of its context. Here is the end of item 4:

Beyond the diverse range of the suggestions and opinions, transmission of knowledge and solidarity (fraternity, mutual support, respect) between the generations have been developed with remarkable consistency in accordance with the modalities and unique terms (initiation, ‘Work’, songs, meals), concepts that form the heart of compagnons culture. For example, a compagnon cook writes: ‘The specific nature of the organization is based on a daring ideal: to pass on traditional knowledge and expertise without betraying them when adapting to current and future technical developments. It could even be seen as avant-garde.”

And I have concluded, cringingly: “What better evidence is there of a living tradition?”

5 Conclusion: Heritage with “Moraline”

The passage above reveals a final complication in the polyphony-monograph dilemma. Internal polyphony, toned down even by the compagnons themselves, can be underlined and cited by UNESCO as evidence of sacrifice for a higher cause, specifically a moral cause (I am convinced that moral intentions are the main aims of the ICH project; see Adell 2011). However, the moral principles I am talking about are not “moraline-free” (Nietzsche 1974: 259) and may be quite problematic with regard to heritage, as the following example (from the compagnonnage nomination)

---


10 This is a neologism suggested by Friedrich Nietzsche as a component of Christian morality (Nietzsche 1974: 259) and used also in French everyday speech, connoting an imaginary medicine given, for instance, to soldiers to fortify their conviction (cf. “moraline” in the French Wikimedia http://fr.wiktionary.org/wiki/moraline <accessed 16 March 2015>).
makes apparent: During the pre-application review by the Secretariat of the ICH Convention, the person in charge of the compagnonnage’s dossier in the Secretariat wished to draw the attention of the dossier’s writers to

the definition of intangible cultural heritage in the Convention which states that only the intangible cultural heritage will be taken into consideration which is in accordance with the international system relating to human rights. In this sense, I [namely Cecile Duvelle, in charge of the Secretariat] invite you to make clear that compagnonnage is in accordance with the various legal measures that prohibit discrimination in employment and training, including the Convention concerning Discrimination in respect of Employment and Occupation, adopted by the General Conference of the International Labour Organisation in 1958 (Convention 111). From my understanding, among the three networks of compagnonnage, there is only one that welcomes girls and this since 2000. Therefore, it seems to me important to demonstrate that compagnonnage is in accordance with the measures and the principles relating to human rights. (Letter of 30 November, 2009)

The Ministry of Culture, the compagnons and I were surprised that traditional elements, having a historical depth, were read to be in line with current legal prescriptions. Such requirements would be extremely problematic for several western and, in particular, non-western traditions. We were even more surprised because, by writing the dossier in a “monographic spirit” with compagnons, we had deliberately understated the differences between the compagnon groups on the subject of women. UNESCO’s interest in internal polyphony is here quite peculiar. It does not permit one to see the differences or to stress accord and discord, but it allows one to choose the best voice, that is to say, the voice in accordance with moraline major, or, in the Secretariat’s words, “in accordance with the measures and the principles relating to human rights”.

What did we do? We gave UNESCO what it wanted. We explained that even though only one group admitted girls to the compagnonnage course, the other groups had been discussing this issue for several years. This was apparently sufficient for the Secretariat to feel that “human rights” were being respected. The issue of employment discrimination remains a contentious topic among compagnons.

A final question to conclude: Who is really benefiting from the crime? Not only the compagnons: They were waiting for more interest (from the government, society, etc.) and, at the very least (and more concretely), for the right to use UNESCO’s logo on their documents and their houses. They had been asking for this since their registration on the ICH Representative List in 2010. Thus, in the intervening three years, the compagnons’ feelings about ICH had vacillated between pride and disappointment. Finally, in autumn 2013, the creation of the Association of French ICH Elements granted each element the right to use the ICH Convention logo as part of their own emblems. Since then, compagnons of the main organizations have used it on all their documents.
Figure 1: Certificate of registration on ICH Representative List for France. It was awarded, for ICH Convention’s Secretariat, by the Commission Française pour le Patrimoine Culturel Immatériel (i.e. ICH French Committee).

Figure 2: Emblem of the French ICH elements. Paragraph on the right indicates element’s name.
Despite these recent developments, it strikes me that the true winner here was the anthropologist, along with national institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and the Centre Français du Patrimoine Culturel Immatériel (the French ICH Center). The anthropologist attained a new visibility for the Ministry of Culture (an important achievement, since the Ministry may fund research programs, namely Métiers en patrimoine), and, above all, he got a real and sincere acknowledgment from the compagnon groups, despite having always had a difficult relationship with them.

However, there is a price to pay: Participating in an ICH application is like entering a “terra del rimorso” (De Martino 1961) – deep remorse remains. There are only two possibilities to live with remorse, as Ernesto de Martino has shown:

Firstly, you can participate in rituals to control the remorse (e.g. meetings, celebrations for the registration). Secondly, you can leave the field for another; you can escape. This course of action may be undertaken in a positive sense, referred to as “thematic mobility” in research institutions. How many conversions to “Heritage Studies” are a result of such remorse? Probably a fairly large number. This, in my opinion, is one of the characteristics of this scientific field requiring public discussion.
References


