

THE EMERGENCE OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE POLICY IN NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

BY DR. GERALD POCIUS

The nineteenth in a series of articles developed from regular public forums sponsored by the Leslie Harris Centre of Regional Policy and Development. Memorial Presents features speakers from Memorial University who address issues of public concern in the province.

Within Newfoundland and Labrador, recent policy initiatives have incorporated a rather new field of heritage work, what is referred to as intangible cultural heritage (or ICH). This phrase itself is a relatively recent invention, coming from UNESCO's international work on world heritage. Public institutions and community groups alike in our province have begun to devise new strategies focusing on ICH.

Over the past eight years, my own work in Newfoundland and Labrador has concentrated on making the concept of ICH widely known, and having ICH initiatives play a greater role in the province's public sector heritage work. This has been a gradual process, however, and ICH has become part of heritage policy, I believe, because our province is at a crucial turning point in its cultural evolution, and several key heritage planners have recognized the urgency of that situation. I want to briefly describe how this policy emerged, to such an extent that our province today is now a leader in ICH initiatives within Canada. For the past 30 years, I had always hoped that our provincial government would recognize the importance of traditional culture in its work on heritage (as many state jurisdictions in the United States have). But only in this recent push have we been successful, moving beyond the limitations of earlier terms like folklore, and, instead, having UNESCO's new terminologies and ideas to draw from.

The world of heritage in North America - certainly Newfoundland - has for many years been focused on objects, such as old buildings or furniture. Canada has largely followed the path of heritage as things. In the 1970s, the heritage models from central Canada, the United States, Great Britain (among others) became what we in Newfoundland and Labrador

believed was the only option, models that saw heritage as static things in need of preservation. Over the years we were colonized by a heritage mentality that dominates rich industrial/post industrial states.

Our thinking in Newfoundland and Labrador about heritage has relied on models based not on what we knew and how we did things, but increasingly on what we could own. People with sufficient income could buy, collect, restore - and then show off. Those who could not afford - or who were not interested in - historic buildings were considered unappreciative of their heritage, even though they continued to tell their stories, sing their songs, mummer, cut wood, and tend their gardens. Institutional frameworks equated heritage with things; the national building preservation organization Heritage Canada served as a model all across the country for agencies with "heritage" in their title and a mandate to deal with historic structures and sites.

This tangible heritage mentality changed dramatically as UNESCO became involved with recognizing the ways people live their culture. What UNESCO called "folklore and traditional culture" in the 1990s, by 2000 had been relabeled as ICH. Led by third world countries and traditional peoples everywhere, UNESCO put in place a new international heritage convention to deal with living cultures, coming into force in 2003. UNESCO's

Convention lists the types of ICH that are important: oral traditions and expressions, performing arts (such as traditional music, dance and theater), social practices, rituals, and festive events. However, more broadly, the Convention also defines ICH as “the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.” From my perspective, then, this is the central core of intangible cultural heritage: the knowledge and skills of ordinary Newfoundlanders and Labradorians that create what we see and hear, making us who we are.

This definition of ICH moves us beyond lists, beyond items, beyond the static restoration of old-looking fossilized pasts, to the way we do things in Newfoundland and Labrador that make us different. Our ICH is who we are, not who we think tourists or other outsiders want to see us as. Our heritage is not to be filed away in an archive or museum, listed in a book, fossilized onto a CD or a film clip, but living today. This is where the attention to ICH moves us into very different worlds when it comes to what our tasks should be. UNESCO uses the term safeguarding - rather than preserving - in its work on promoting ICH. For UNESCO, living traditions continue to evolve over time, and our work is to encourage this ongoing evolution, rather than create static cultural items that are merely performed on stage or in a recorded medium.

In this context, then, I became more involved with policies of Government. In January 2002, I was asked to represent Canada at an international meeting of UNESCO held in Rio de Janeiro, where we worked on a draft of the ICH convention. Some 20 or so experts from around the world dealt with a number of key conceptual issues found in the emerging convention text. At the same time, I was appointed to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, primarily to advise on ICH issues. I was excited about this new world of living heritage, and how important it potentially was to Newfoundland and Labrador culture. A month or so after I returned from Rio, I was asked to give a public presentation in our Department of Folklore on the UNESCO Convention, attended by students, faculty, and those working for NGOs and government agencies. Jerry Dick was at my presentation as Director of the Association of Heritage Industries. I had worked with him on various committees, primarily because of my work teaching material culture and built heritage. He later asked me to give a keynote speech on ICH at the Association for Heritage Industries annual meeting that fall, a meeting with the theme of new directions

in heritage work.

At the time that I was speaking about this recent UNESCO work, the province was working on the creation of a new cultural plan that covered all areas of the arts and heritage communities. Between April 2003 and March 2006, a team worked on a document that would outline the province’s future heritage initiatives. One of the researchers working on contract for the province was Anita Best - a graduate of the Department of Folklore at Memorial, and a key advocate of including traditional culture as part of the overall plan. I had spoken with Anita soon after my return from Rio, and she had asked me to provide her with the materials I brought back about UNESCO’s ICH work and the emerging convention. Anita spoke with government officials as she worked on the developing policy, explained what ICH was, and what UNESCO was doing. She recalled that ICH was initially an unwieldy concept, a politically unmarketable term, but it was quickly adopted once explained. She would use examples of singers or storytellers she knew, illustrating what ICH was all about. Bureaucrats and politicians quickly got it, and support for ICH policy came from the highest levels.

Part of this ongoing work of developing a new cultural plan for the province involved the Association of Heritage Industries. Jerry Dick as head was asked to submit a brief on priorities of the heritage sector. Completed and submitted in April 2003, the sixteen-page document had as one of its 15 goals: “To make Newfoundland and Labrador a national leader in the recognition and support for ICH which includes traditional knowledge, skills, languages and the tradition-bearers who perpetuate them.” Then followed a series of objectives in which this goal could be achieved.

The final Cultural Blueprint, *Creative Newfoundland and Labrador*, was released in March 2006; it included ten strategic directions for arts and heritage. Direction seven was “Safeguarding and Sustaining our Intangible Cultural Heritage” (“Living Heritage”). Premier Danny Williams launched the Blueprint at a public news conference in St. John’s, and used the term ICH several times during his remarks. Because of the efforts of Best, her lobbying for ICH to other government officials, and the brief presented by Jerry Dick for AHI, as well as his support, ICH was now officially part of what the government hoped to do in the future. The outline was there. The specifics had to be worked out next.

The first step in creating a detailed ICH plan was for the province - along with Memorial University - to fund a major meeting in June 2006 on the theme of ICH, sponsored by the Association of Heritage

Industries, under the direction of Jerry Dick. More than 135 participants from across Newfoundland and Labrador came to hear a series of national and international ICH experts describe policies and programs in other places. Daily focus groups arrived at a broad range of recommendations; the first major step was to create a strategic plan to focus our efforts.

Not long before this Living Heritage forum occurred, Jerry Dick left AHI and was hired as Director of Heritage for the province. ICH now had a strong advocate within our Provincial Government. In a recent discussion, Jerry remarked that I had brought ICH back from Rio, and he soon became one of my “missionaries” - as he put it - spreading the gospel first to the Association of Heritage Industries, then to Government.


Anita Best was again hired by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador in October 2006 to write the Strategic Plan for the province, building on the forum’s recommendations. An Advisory Committee met to review drafts, and was guided by the UNESCO Convention, even occasionally borrowing actual phrasing. By April 1 2007 the Strategic Plan had been written, largely following the UNESCO categories of Documentation and Preservation; Recognition and Celebration; Transmission and Dissemination—and adding Development of Cultural Enterprises.

The next step, then, was to put the strategic plan into action. This involved deciding on the mechanism by which the plan would be implemented, and then moving onto the management of initiatives. After a year of negotiation with various heritage NGOs, the decision was finally made to hire an ICH Coordinator, who would work within the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (that had, until then, been devoted only to built heritage). The Coordinator would take direction from a committee of ICH stakeholders and experts. Dale Jarvis was hired in April 2008, as the province’s first Intangible Cultural Heritage Development officer, the first, in fact, of any province in Canada.

There is no doubt that over the years, the local heritage community has embraced ICH as a concept because it felt a sense of urgency in a time of extreme change. With the collapse of the cod fishery, Government and NGOs all realized that rural communities no longer would be places tied to the resources of water and land, populated by families related by kinship, often there for generations. Rather, outports were becoming gentrified summer enclaves, filled with outsiders who came for a month or two, to engage briefly in what they saw as some authentic culture. The fishing had stopped, locals were leaving, and ironically the tourism industry that was going to be the salvation of rural Newfoundland was now

bringing in people with money to buy up communities, especially highly coveted “waterfront property.” Policies and programs needed to be put in place to encourage the living traditions of the province to continue. In this time of cultural uncertainty, ICH focused on the ongoing traditions central to provincial identity.

Since Dale Jarvis began his work in 2008 - with the challenge of limited resources - we have accomplished much, following our Strategic Plan and guided by UNESCO policies. We have created a website (<http://www.mun.ca/ich>) devoted to our ICH activities, and are continually adding new material. We have started an inventory of provincial traditions, with all materials housed in Memorial University’s Digital Archive Initiative, accessible throughout the province (and the world) through our website. With support from the province and Memorial University, we offer assistance for community groups to deposit examples of their ICH online through this inventory initiative. Our ICH Provincial Advisory Group has three specialized committees that are working on a number of initiatives. The Training Committee has sponsored a series of workshops across the province for heritage workers to learn the skills required to document ICH. Our Inventory Committee continues to work with local organizations to develop ways to foster a “grassroots” (i.e., bottom-up) inventory of the province, shaped by the priorities of each community. Our Celebrations Committee is working on a province-wide system to spotlight ordinary tradition-bearers and their knowledge. Besides the work of these committees, we are pursuing specific projects. We have, for example, sponsored the province’s first annual folklife festival (this year on mummies), with plans being made for a new festival theme for next year.

In these past two years, then, since we began to implement our ICH Strategic Plan, we have seen great progress. We continue to learn from other countries, as we endeavour to put our ICH policy into practice. With limited means, we continue to engage in activities that encourage the sustainability of the province’s living traditions. Other parts of the country look to us for direction. With this work, we are truly a leader in Canada in implementing the noble goals of UNESCO’s ICH work. 

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