

Challenges in the community conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Newfoundland and Labrador

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Efforts to preserve Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) within a community context face many challenges. There is a need to collect, document and archive cultural information, but this must be balanced by the ability of those tradition bearers, groups and communities to share, use, re-shape, and transmit such information.

Much of this traditional knowledge and local folklore continues to be shared within communities at a very informal level, passed on by word of mouth, and by example. It carries with it a great deal of practical information, as well as more abstract concepts of history, heritage and identity.

Yet while ICH remains a vigorous and integral part of the life of communities, ICH is greatly affected by the economic decline of rural settlements throughout Newfoundland and Labrador. The resulting movement of young people, either to urban areas or out of the province, means that cultural traditions are not transmitted from generation to generation in the same way or to the extent to which they have been passed down in the past. While there are many hurdles and challenges that face us as public folklorists, policy makers, and cultural animateurs, a selection of three key issues are highlighted below.

(1) Public awareness and training

In the fall of 2008, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) completed a provincial needs assessment, to measure the level of awareness of ICH issues at the community level, and to address key areas where assistance was needed.

Many of the respondents to the survey (primarily community museums, historic sites and local heritage organizations) felt that they had a basic understanding of what ICH was. This level of understand is most likely due to the organization of a province-wide ICH Forum held in St. John's, the capital city of the province, in 2006. This forum brought together a large number of community representatives, government officials, academics and ICH practitioners.

Almost three-quarters of those surveyed in 2008 stated their organization or community was currently undertaking an ICH project of some kind. More than half of the respondents stated they would be undertaking an ICH project within the year, stating that the project would most

likely involved documenting or celebrating local traditional knowledge, skills, cultural practices, or tradition-bearers. In terms of needed resources, almost all respondents expressed an interest in ICH training in standards and practices for recording and documenting their community's ICH. An enthusiastic 94% said they and/or their organization would be interested in receiving additional information about safeguarding ICH.

One of HFNL's first steps was to develop an introductory "What is ICH?" booklet, to help community members better understand what is meant by intangible cultural heritage. As the province's ICH program has grown, HFNL has developed a variety of training programs and community-based workshops. These were created not only to introduce the concept of ICH to community members, but also to provide practical training in cultural documentation, technical workshops on audio recording, interviewing techniques, oral history, and folklife festival planning. HFNL continues to develop programs for training of ethnographic field workers, project leaders and planners, and to develop ways of providing practical technical support and advice to local heritage and community organizations engaged in ICH initiatives.

(2) Creation of an ICH inventory process

Identifying and documenting ICH is an important part of maintaining tradition. Information in the form of photographs, audio or video interviews, recorded oral histories, performances and craft demonstrations can all form part of an ICH collection, and there has been ongoing collection of this material in Newfoundland and Labrador for decades, though much of it is stored in disparate locations in local collections.

During the ICH Forum held in June of 2006, participants identified as one of the major issues the need to identify, document and arrange for the preservation of collected ICH information. With the establishment of its ICH office in 2008, HFNL began to organize an ongoing province-wide ICH inventory, by establishing a central digital archive database and website.

Ideally, it should be decided at the community level which traditions local people feel are important to document. Sometimes these traditions could be threatened; sometimes particular elders or tradition-bearers could be highlighted. Other communities might choose to record ongoing and important traditions of everyday life.

This community-based approach is balanced by the recognition that there are certain themes or traditions under threat which are of regional and provincial interest. With an advisory board made of representatives from various provincial heritage organizations, HFNL annually identifies select ICH themes at risk, and sets priority areas for action, but always remains open to suggestions of local projects or themes from communities.

Organizing a digital inventory requires large, secure online storage space and technical support. Luckily, HFNL has been able to partner with the Digital Archives Initiative (DAI) at the Queen Elizabeth II Library at Memorial University (collections.mun.ca). This is a long-term initiative to digitize holdings at the university, and the DAI has proven to be a useful tool for the on-going digitization of ICH documentation. HFNL and the Department of Folklore at Memorial University have created a website portal devoted to ICH activities (www.mun.ca/ich), and are continually adding new material.

The DAI provides the storage for collected ICH materials, with the website portal presenting an entry point to the material, which is organized both geographically and thematically. With all the

digital materials housed in Memorial University's Digital Archive Initiative, the ICH inventory is accessible throughout the province and the world. The amount of digital storage space available allows us to house full length folklore and oral history interviews, instead of short clips. This makes the material valuable to both community members and to academic researchers.

It is important to note that the ICH inventory for Newfoundland and Labrador is perhaps best seen as a process rather than a final product. It is in a constant state of evolution, reflective of the organic nature in which information is collected by and from communities. HFNL, along with its university and community partners, is constantly tweaking and adapting the way the inventory works, to ensure that it is able to meet changing needs, requirements and opportunities.

(3) Recording standards and ethics

Public training in ethnographic fieldwork and ICH collection, combined with the creation of an ICH inventory, has required that HFNL and its partners identify, disseminate and implement best practices related to collection, digital recording standards, and ethics.

Collection of ethnographic materials for the ICH Inventory component of the Digital Archives Initiative has required the development of guidelines for metadata content, compiled in cooperation with the Queen Elizabeth II Library. These guidelines follow recognized best practices for the description of digital resources on the Web, and include an ethnographic thesaurus of keywords, based on a similar resource created by the US Library of Congress, and modified to better reflect the ICH of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Every individual media item (video, still image, and audio) that is placed on the ICH inventory has an associated metadata file, with fields completed as needed for each item in the collection. While it is not necessary to complete every field in all cases, metadata record should contain at least a Descriptive Title, Keywords (based on the ethnographic thesaurus), Description, Date, Collector, and Collection. Other metadata fields include, but are not limited to: Person as Topic, Informant, Biographical Data, Location Depicted/Discussed, Recording Location, Recording Format, Language, Access Restrictions, transcripts of interviews, and GPS coordinates.

It is also critical that ICH research follows proper documentation procedures that respect issues around copyright. It must also recognize best practices which take into account the intellectual, legal and moral implications of holding and providing access to personal information. Proper authorization must be acquired for the sharing of information gathered through field work, and all items placed on the ICH inventory must have the clear consent of the collector and the informant.

HFNL has developed guidelines and sample consent forms for both new ethnographic fieldwork and collection, as well consent forms for community archives wishing to place existing collections on ICH inventory. All these forms are available under Resources on the ICH web portal (www.mun.ca/ich).

In addition to meeting standards of practice for metadata, all collected information must meet the technical standards established by the Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative. Detailed standards have been developed for both visual media (prints, manuscripts, text, paintings, maps, newspapers, drawings and books) and for digital audio, with standards for video in development. These standards have also been made available to the public through the ICH web portal (www.mun.ca/ich).

Conclusion

These three issues are not distinct, but rather, they overlap and impact one another. The mandate to collect information and the desire to share it online necessitate strong standards and guidelines. The implementation of standards and guidelines impact how community collectors are trained, and ensure that material is presented back to the public in professional and accessible formats. All of these things together strengthen the understanding of the value of ICH at the grass-roots level.

As we work to translate strategy and policy into practice, Newfoundland and Labrador's ICH program continues to change and adapt. We learn from other countries and jurisdictions, and from our own experiences in the field. We continue to develop initiatives that will celebrate, record, disseminate and promote our living heritage and help to build bridges between diverse cultural groups within and outside of Newfoundland and Labrador.

- Dale Gilbert Jarvis, February 2012

About the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador's ICH Office

HFNL was established in 1984 to promote, preserve and protect the built heritage of the province. In 2008, HFNL was chosen to be the agency that would implement the province's ICH Strategy. As such, its mission is to safeguard and sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs.

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