ICH and Public Folklore in Maryland, USA

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What is Public Folklore?

- Folklore studies emerged in late 19th century
  - Generally, it was the study of the culture and practices of the lower, more rural classes in the West.
  - In the US, Folklore Studies is still a field with less negative connotations (‘folklore’ is a problematic term in many places around the world)
- Theoretical commonalities between the study of folklore and the ICH discourse
  - The precursor term for ‘intangible cultural heritage’ was folklore (before ~ 2002).
  - Both are concerned with living traditions / living heritage (as opposed to living history / re-enactments, dead traditions)

Public Folklore

Can be thought of as ‘applied folklore studies’
One is not just studying a musical tradition from the Appalachian Mts., but seeking ways in which that tradition can be sustained/safeguarded for the future.
What does a public folklorist do?

- Basis of all public folklore: conduct **fieldwork**
  - Collect oral testimonies / audio-video recordings about the history, personal memories, knowledge, skills and expression of certain living traditions.
  - Understand the parameters / the shape (in terms of people) of the livelihood of living traditions
    - Who is practicing/expressing this living tradition?
    - Where is it mainly being practiced? Are there any particular sites / cultural landscapes that are integral to its expression?
    - How does this living tradition help to define community identity?
  - With a view to identifying new living traditions and the cultural communities who own them.

The work of public folklorists

Fieldwork serves to inform:

1. Grants administration (if you work for a state government agency that has a budget for giving out funding to communities and orgs)
   - Who gets the grants? How do you publicize them?
     Where are the gaps in your program (underserved regions? Underserved communities?)?

2. Public Programmes
‘Public programming’

- Festivals ("folklife festival")!
- Documentary films
- Radio programs
- Museum exhibits / Educational programs
- Panel discussions

One is promoting living traditions to a larger, more general audience (the public). Transmitting knowledge/information/skills/meanings about living heritage to the public to promote awareness and interest. (Similar to proposals in previous FS.)

The State of Maryland
Who are we? Maryland Traditions

• State government agency: folklife (ICH) program of the Maryland State Arts Council
• History: ‘State Folklorist’ since early 1970s (documenting living cultural heritage → archives)

2 soft shell crabs on a bun from a road-side restaurant along the Chesapeake. (The occupational culture of crabbing is still a vibrant part of regional life.)
Since 2001, **Maryland Traditions** is building a network of regional/local folklorists, scholars, communities and other arts/heritage professionals spread across the state, working together to document, celebrate, and sustain traditional arts and culture. Common goal: transmitting knowledge, skills, values, meanings and significance (*Grants, Public programming, documentation, research and awards*)
Transmitting the knowledge, skills, meanings and significances of living traditions

- Fieldwork documents → State Archives
- Grants:
  - Apprenticeship Grant ($2000)
    - To support the time / travel costs spent by a Master to teach her/his apprentice
  - Project grants (up to $5000)
    - Go to non-profits (universities and places of worship included) for folklife research and public programming projects.
• **Awards**
  - (ALTA – Achievement in Living Traditions and Arts)
    • Person who has demonstrating outstanding stewardship of a living tradition
    • Place that is integral to the expression of a certain living tradition(s)
    • Tradition that is exemplary of the rich cultural heritage of the state (and beyond).

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**Patterson Bowling Center and Duckpin Lanes**

• Oldest duckpin bowling alley in world
• Duckpin bowling is older than ‘regular’ bowling (shorter pins, smaller ball with no holes for fingers)
• Patterson has been a site of working class recreational culture in Baltimore since early 1900s
• It’s still going strong despite the diminishment of this sport/tradition elsewhere
1. Experts’ Lectures

Outside the UNESCO-ICH Framework

- Maryland Traditions does not use the guidelines of UNESCO’s 2003 Convention, or earlier documents/instruments
- The US has yet to ratify the 2003 Convention, so there is little national government ‘intervention’ (besides arts/humanities funding) for safeguarding living traditions
- State folklife programs have been working since 1960s/1970s throughout the US (before the ‘ICH’ concept, as known today, was developed)

Outside the UNESCO-ICH Framework

- We work with a very small budget, so we have more autonomy with how we use it
- We do not utilize any listing mechanisms! (We do not spend our time inventoring the ICH present in MD.)
- We can work directly with cultural communities, groups and individuals (no middle person/org)
- We are out in the ‘field’ and engaging with communities in situ (in the places and spaces where living heritage is practiced and expressed)
- Together with communities, we can discuss the problems / benefits / issues that safeguarding living heritage presents...
- So, there isn’t just ‘one way’ for safeguarding ICH
Inherent to our work is that we *change* the living traditions we recognize (i.e., changing the relationships between people and their cultural expressions)

Are communities, groups and individuals passive?

Do they want the recognition for reasons of their own?

Is the changing of their traditions OK with them?

Can they still be in control?
Singing and Praying Bands of Maryland

- One of the oldest African-American musical traditions in the US
- Includes both West African ring shout traditions and more Christian gospel elements
- Unique to Delmarva (Delaware, Maryland and Virginia) region (a.k.a Chesapeake region)
- Grew out of African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) denomination (originally independent black churches in Philly, Balto and DC areas)
- 40-50 members today coming from all different churches (vs. 1940: hundreds of church groups, each with 15-20 members)

**VIDEO** http://vimeo.com/43111479

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What is it about?

- Getting “on one accord” [with the Lord and each other]
- ‘Sense of connectedness’
- Fellowship of churches, of these black communities and with God
- Reciprocity and generosity
- Hope...
1. Experts’ Lectures

Background Info on the ‘intervention’

• **2007**: Through an independent researcher, the Maryland Traditions folklorist (Cliff) was introduced to the S and P Bands community.
  – Church visits
  – Recordings and photo documentations

• **2011**: The Singing and Praying Bands received our Achievement in Living Traditions and Arts (ALTA) Award.
  – **Performed their living tradition at ceremony; one of first ‘performances’ outside of church context**
Current/Ongoing Changes...

- Contextual – the living traditions is shifting from a church-only context to that of the performance stage
  - Religious values → entertainment values
- It’s gaining a significant amount of attention (“gigs”, WYPR and Washington Post article, etc.)

Community Agency

- Community meetings on these new developments
- Decisions are made democratically (voting system)
- Opinions are voiced freely
Community Agency

- There is a weighing of pros and cons – losing ‘authenticity’ and gaining more audiences
  - There is constant awareness/discussion
- Important: The chance to reach new audiences and increase membership (this is evangelical tradition; it’s a ministry seeking to spread the word)
- The notion that they can “leave” the performance stage whenever they want and go ‘back to the church’.
- They must remain “grounded” and remember that this is about Jesus/salvation/hope = their focus.

“We will always have the tradition. It will always be a Christian group from the black community...we will always hold onto that. I think we must move slow...it’s not going to be Showtime at the Apollo.”

“We’re always going to have the old [members]...there’s always going to be the old ones to guide us and let us know what we are doing wrong...”
“We can always go back home”

“You know, we are inviting you to be a part of us. To help us. To expand on our ministry, but not so much change the dialect or the dial tone...”

“HOME” IS WHERE THE AUTHENTIC IS LOCATED?

Authenticity?

• The tradition is becoming less ‘authentic’
  – Less practice these days (example of internal changes)
  – The context is changing
  – More attention from ‘outsiders’

“It was authentic up until recent years” (Rev. Colbert)

• Many dismiss the notion of ‘authenticity’, but it can be something that exists – that even has its own definition – within cultural communities themselves.
• Perhaps, it is an idea that can be molded, left behind and then returned to at a later date?

...the ‘authentic’ as a place
What I learned in the Field School...

That showing respect and developing greater cultural sensitivity is never-ending; the only way anything can ever be safeguarded is through building trust, no matter where in the world...