



Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Research & Policy Agenda

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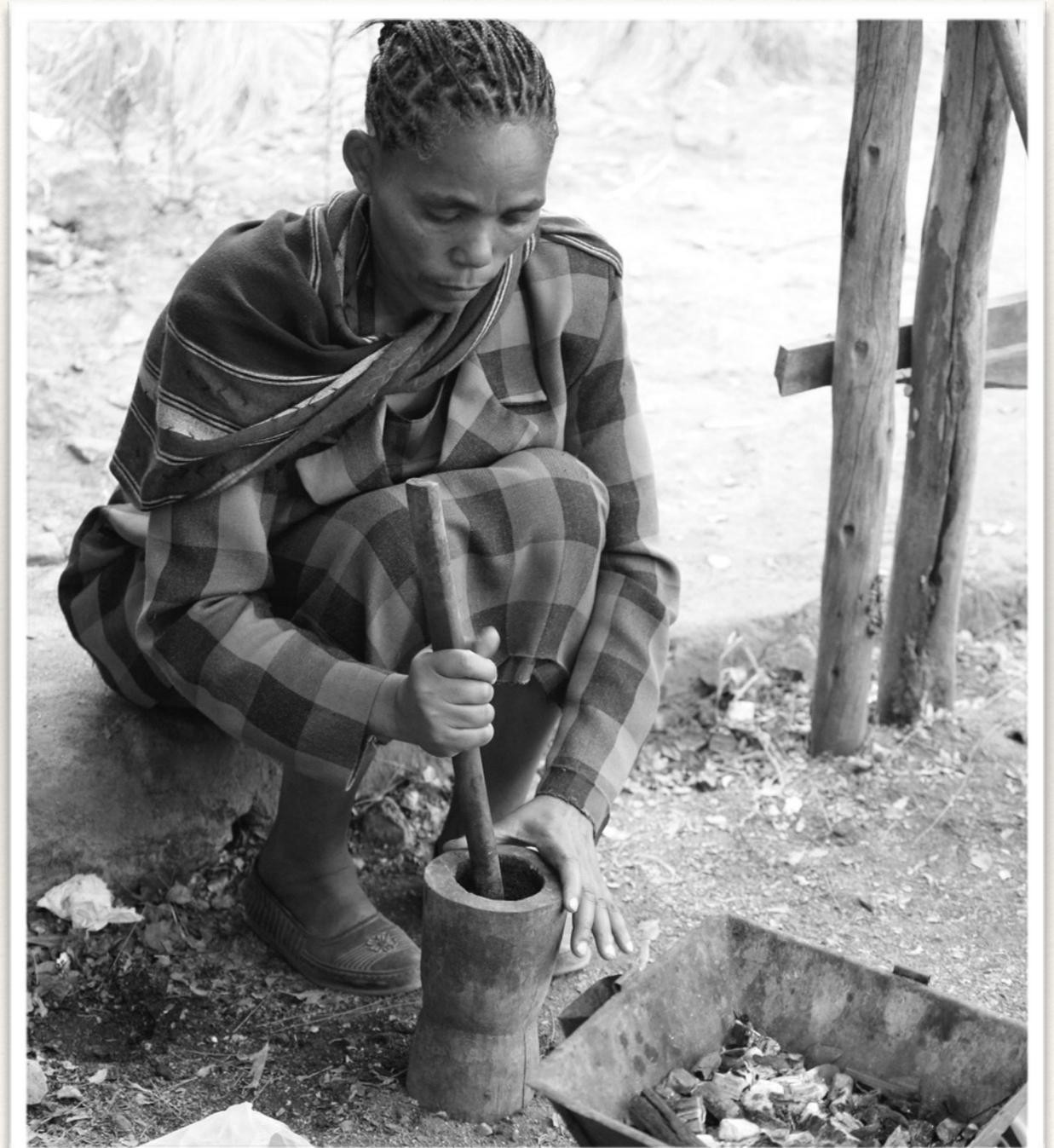
What is intangible cultural heritage?

“...the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, in 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 Convention For the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage

What is intangible cultural heritage?

- ❖ ICH manifests in:
 - ❖ oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
 - ❖ performing arts;
 - ❖ social practices, rituals and festive events;
 - ❖ knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
 - ❖ traditional craftsmanship.



Official Recognition of ICH

- ❖ *Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies* (UNESCO, 1982)
 - ❖ “The cultural heritage of a people includes the works of its artists, architects, musicians, writers and scientists and also the work of anonymous artists, expressions of the people's spirituality, and the body of values which give meaning to life. It includes both tangible and intangible works through which the creativity of that people finds expression: languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, archives and libraries.”

Official Recognition of ICH

- ❖ *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore* (UNESCO, 1989)
 - ❖ “Folklore (or traditional and popular culture) is the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity; its standards and values are transmitted orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts.”
 - ❖ “Folklore, as a form of cultural expression , must be safeguarded by and for the group (familial, occupational, national, regional, religious, ethnic, etc.) whose identity it expresses.”

Official Recognition of ICH

- ❖ *The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003), a convention to:
 - ❖ safeguard intangible cultural heritage;
 - ❖ ensure respect for the ICH of the communities, groups and individuals concerned;
 - ❖ raise awareness of the importance of ICH;
 - ❖ provide for international cooperation and assistance.

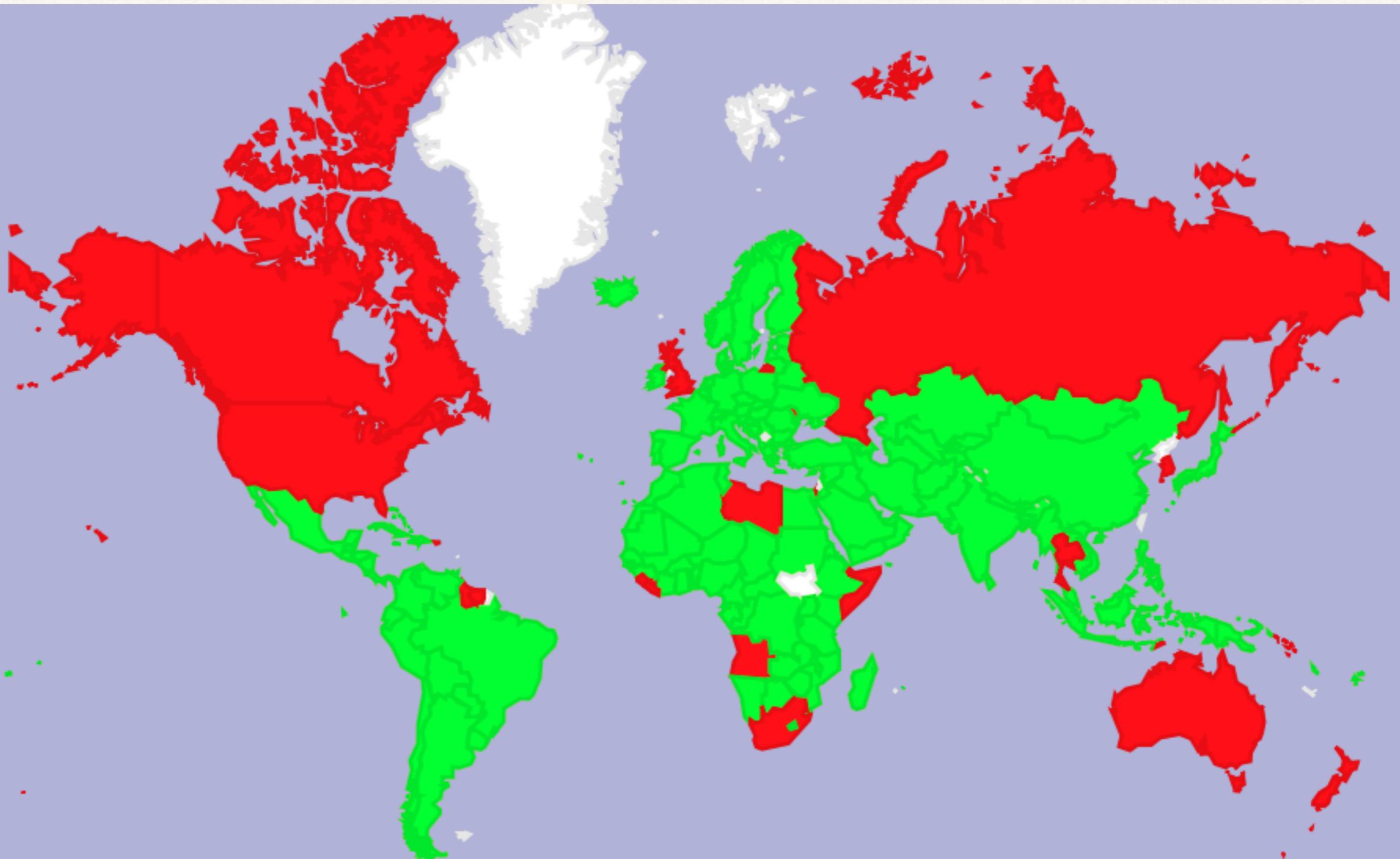
Official Recognition of ICH

- ❖ *The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003) also established three registries:
 - ❖ Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity
 - ❖ List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding
 - ❖ Register of Best Safeguarding Practices

Flies in the Ointment

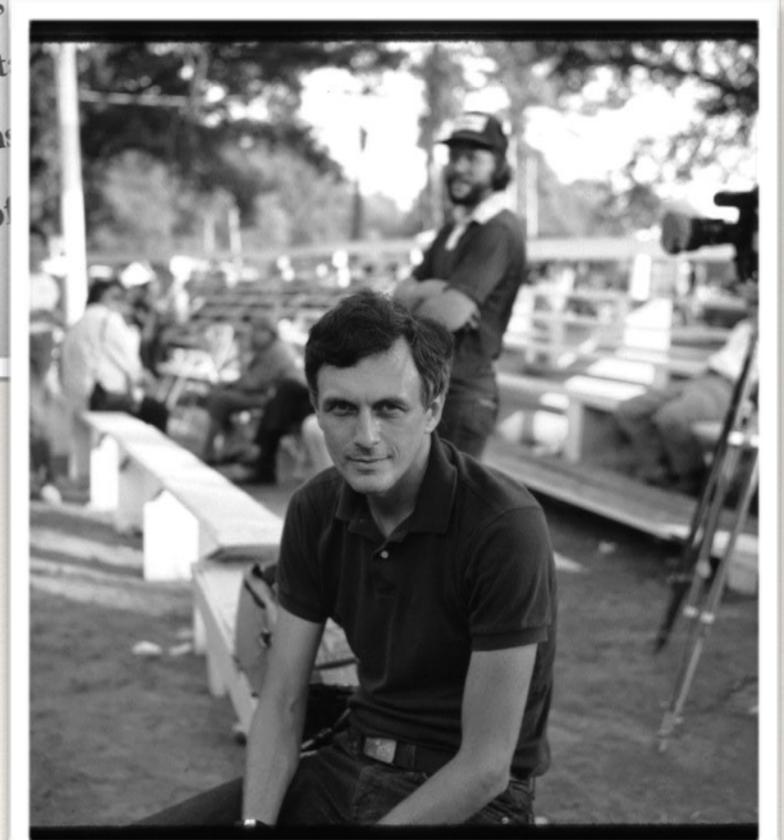
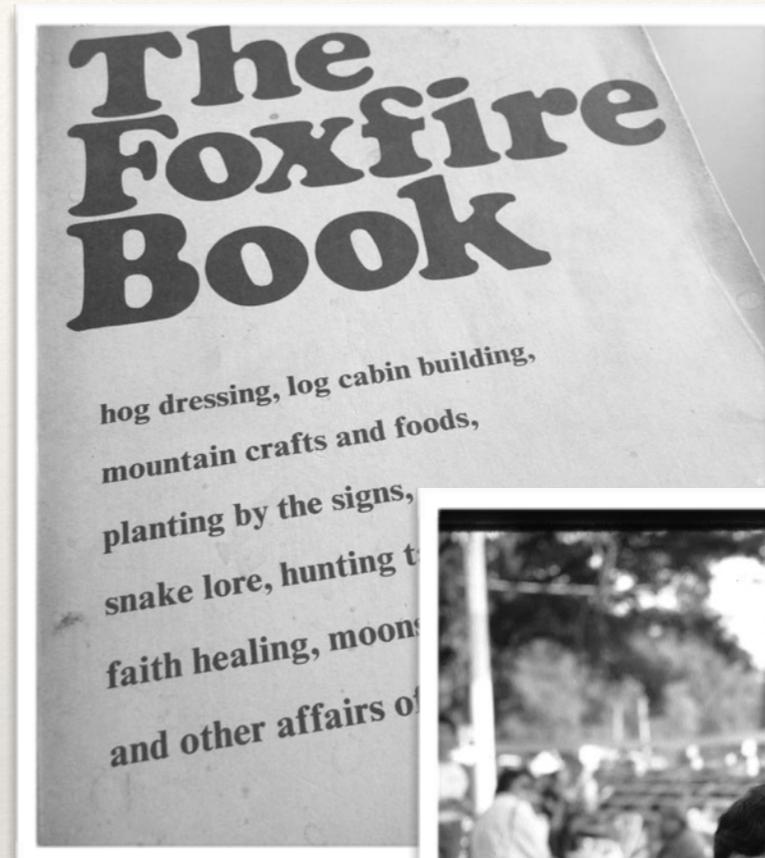
- ❖ Does it only count as cultural heritage if its old? What about contemporary pop music? American football? Karaoke?
- ❖ Drawing lines between tangible and intangible can be a very artificial, and perhaps dangerous, exercise.
- ❖ The Convention says for ICH to be recognized, it must be consistent with human rights, and compatible with requirements for mutual respect among communities and sustainable development.
- ❖ The Convention requires state parties to generate inventories of intangible heritage, and for governments to work with communities with heritage. The first may distract from existing preservation work; the second may be very problematic politically.

Flies in the Ointment



Flies in the Ointment

- ❖ Official recognition of ICH grew out of unofficial efforts to document and preserve it, including a number of efforts in N. America:
 - ❖ Archive of the American Folk Song / American Folklife Center and the American Folklife Preservation Act of 1976
 - ❖ The Foxfire Books
 - ❖ Rough Rock Demonstration School
 - ❖ National Council of Negro Women's *The Historical Cookbook of the American Negro*

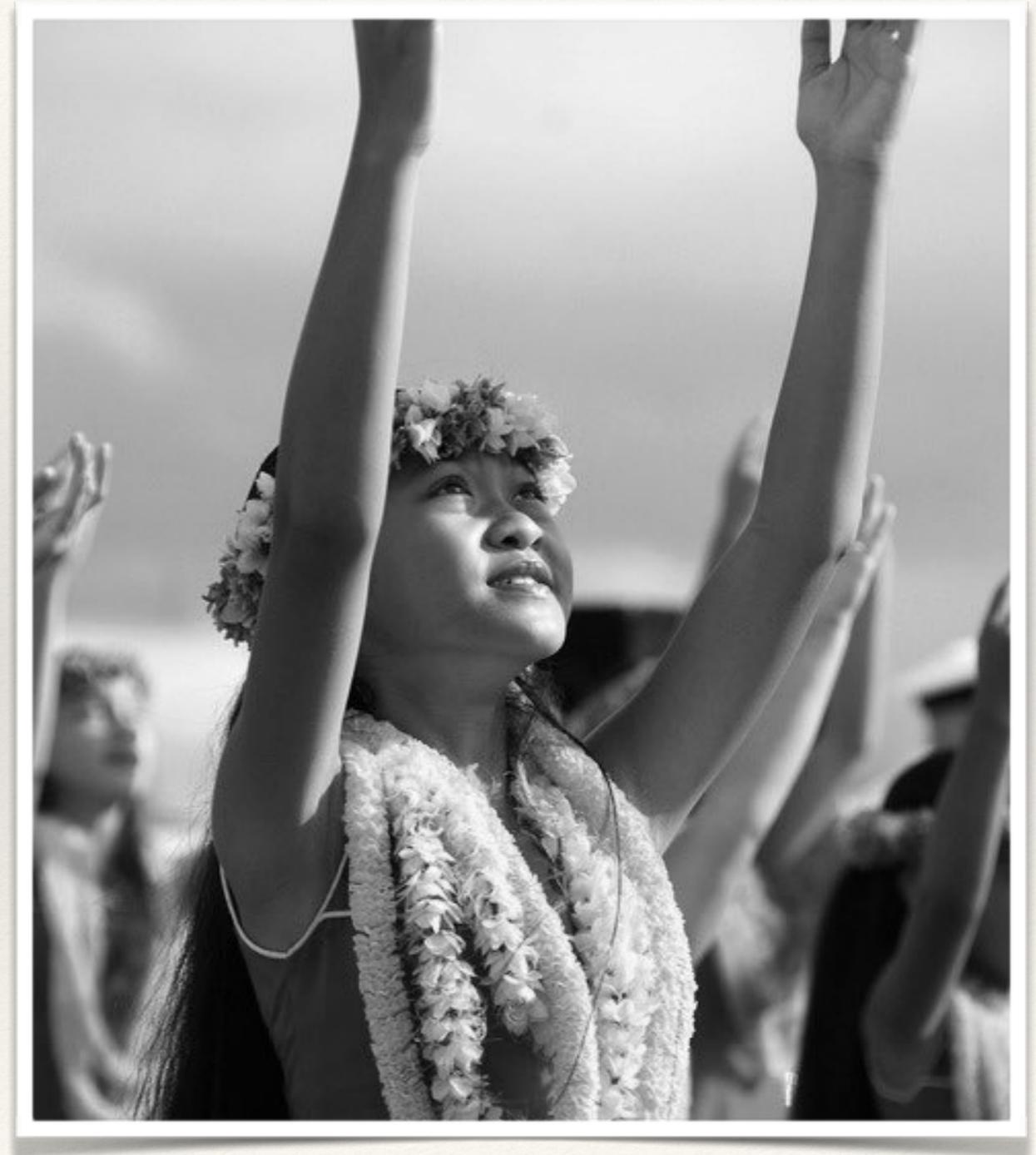


Flies in the Ointment

- ❖ No overarching recognition or support for preserving intangible cultural heritage has meant:
 - ❖ Lack of coordination between communities confronting similar problems (e.g., loss of Native American languages)
 - ❖ Lack of coordination between different types of cultural heritage institutions (libraries, archive, museums) in assisting in preservation of intangible heritage
 - ❖ Lack of funding for efforts to investigate how to improve support for preserving intangible heritage
 - ❖ Lack of funding to support direct efforts to preserve intangible heritage

PICH Project

- ❖ Project Goals:
 - ❖ Establish a research agenda in LIS around preservation of ICH
 - ❖ Build a community of interest to support both research and preservation activity on ICH



PICH Project: Workshop

- ❖ Attendees included scholars and practitioners from the following domains and institutions:
 - ❖ Performing Arts (Columbia University, U. Maryland, NYPL, NYU)
 - ❖ Cuisine (NYU, CUNY, Western Michigan Univ., SIU, Northumbria University)
 - ❖ Paper Conservation (Philadelphia Museum of Art, NDCC, Morgan Library, NYU/IFA, Winterthur Museum)

PICH Project: Workshop

- ❖ Discussion topics:
 - ❖ Definition of terms and problems for preservation of performing arts, cuisine and paper conservation as craft
 - ❖ Identification of skills & training needed within these domains of ICH
 - ❖ Clarifying the relationships between the tangible and the intangible within these domains
 - ❖ Discuss strengths and weaknesses of cultural heritage institutions' current approaches to preserving ICH
 - ❖ **Define a research agenda for LIS with respect to ICH**

PICH Project: Workshop

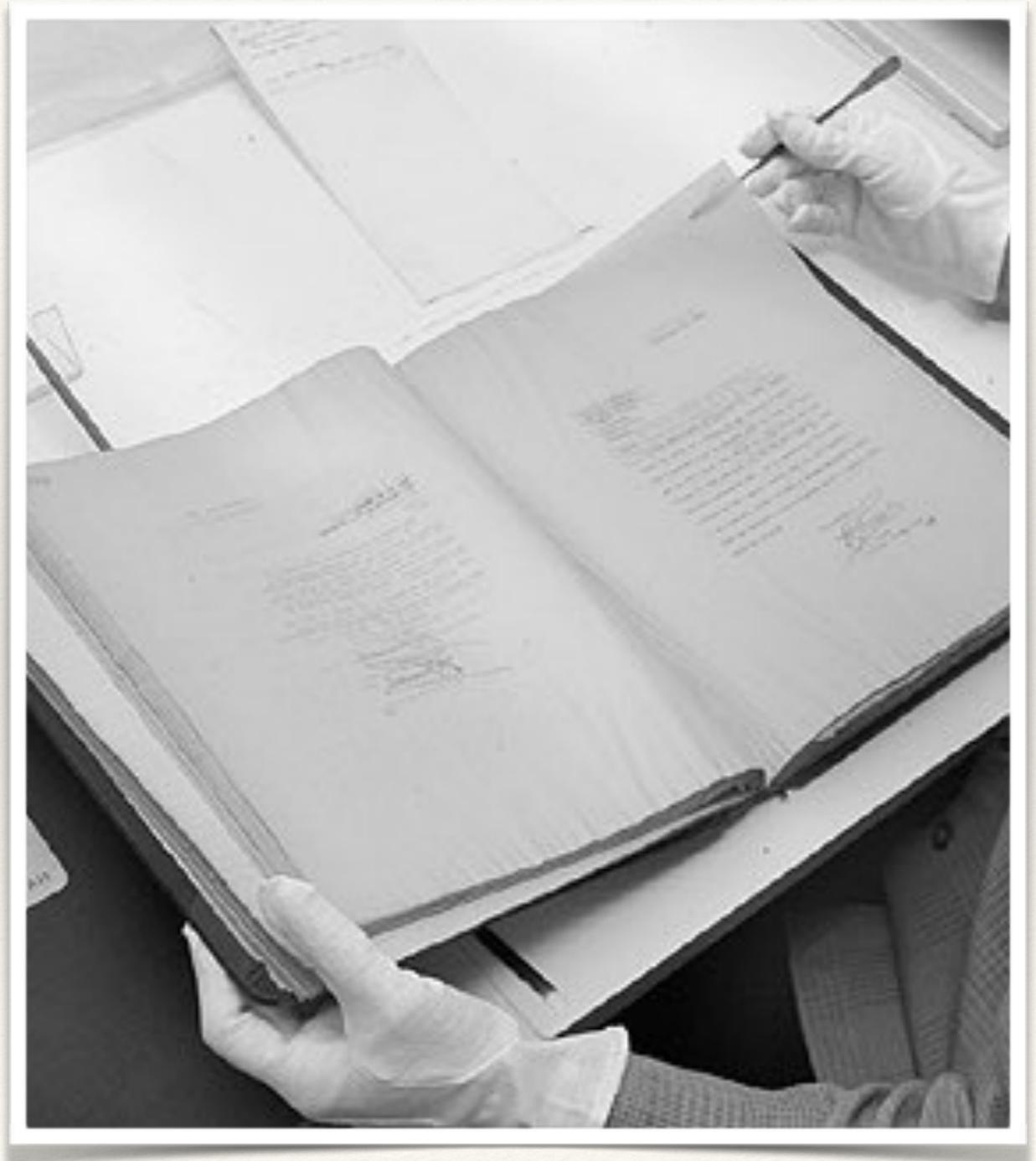
- ❖ Some Findings:
 - ❖ Authenticity is a difficult concept to apply to intangible heritage; there is no 'original' in performing arts.
 - ❖ Community as defined by whom, exactly?
 - ❖ Documentation of the thing is not the thing.
 - ❖ "Everything is a problem.... Just because it's impossible doesn't mean you shouldn't do it." — Diana Taylor

PICH Project: Workshop

- ❖ Who is going to decide what should be preserved?
- ❖ Preservation of ICH often follows a ‘show-and-tell’ model in the real world; you don’t learn how to dance or how to desilk a page by reading about it.
- ❖ Tangible objects have meaning; intangible practices use meaningful objects. The two are intertwined in complicated ways.
- ❖ Cultural heritage institutions are driven by the agenda of those who fund and support them, which means all interactions with a community trying to preserve its heritage are potentially fraught.

PICH Project: Some Agendas

- ❖ Theory, Research *and* Practice
- ❖ What is ethical practice for LIS practitioners within this realm?
- ❖ Practices some times disappear for a reason; when should cultural heritage institutions intervene?
- ❖ How do forces of capital and intellectual property regimes currently affect preservation of ICH?



PICH Project: Some Agendas

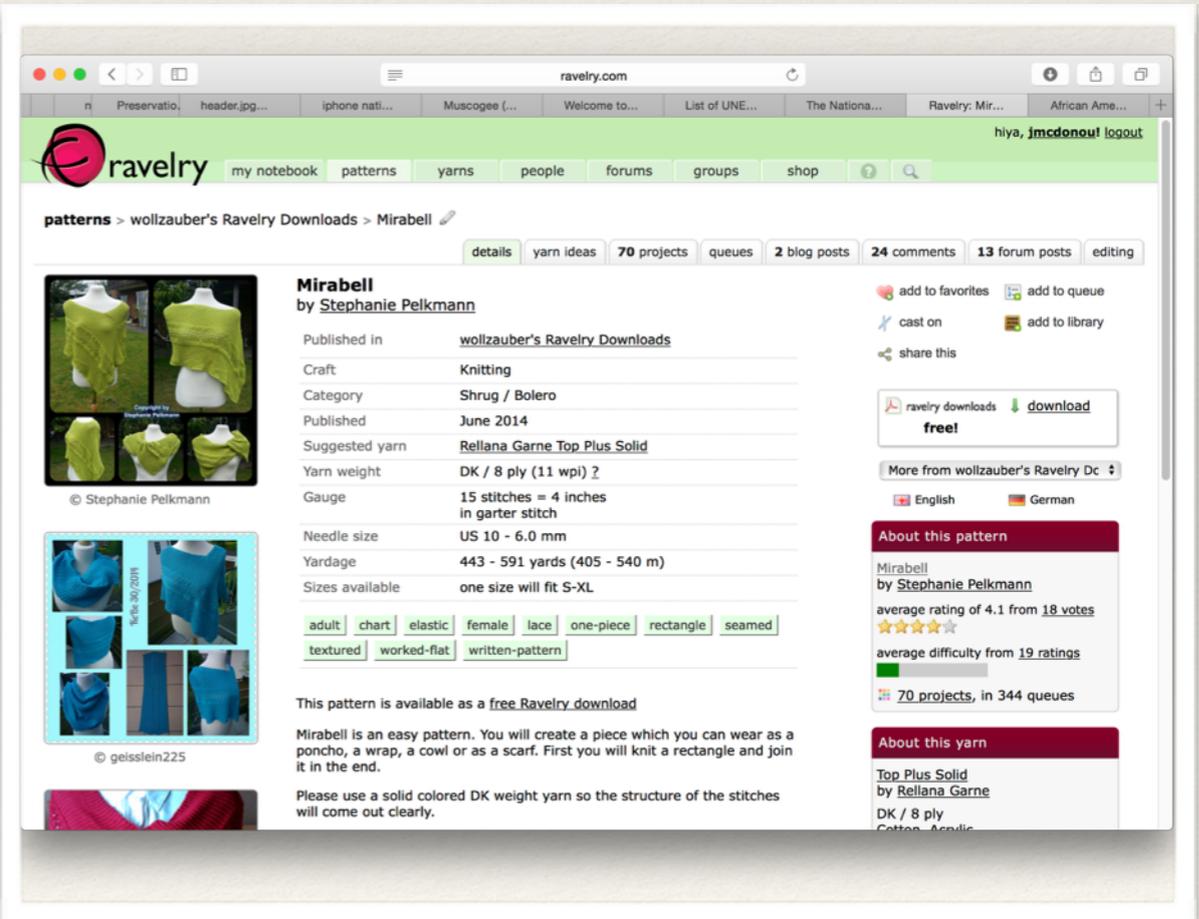
- ❖ What traditions exist within N. America that might be preserved?
- ❖ What tangible collections do libraries and archives hold that might support communities intangible practice?
- ❖ How do communities currently sustain ICH themselves? How do they employ the tangible in support of the intangible?
- ❖ Lorcan Dempsey urged libraries to “be in the flow” of users’ work. What does that mean in the context of ICH?

PICH Project: Some Agendas

- ❖ How does intangible heritage change over time? How does it change when translated into new contexts?
- ❖ What information technology tools might assist communities in preserving their ICH? How can libraries and archives contribute to development and maintenance of those tools?
- ❖ How can libraries, archives, and museums contribute to the creation and maintenance of learning / practice spaces for ICH?
- ❖ How do we enhance relationships *between* libraries, archives and museums (and their collections) to better support preservation of ICH, including creating context for dispersed collections, common vocabularies and ontologies, etc.?

PICH Project: Some Agendas

- ❖ Funding for Symposia / conferences around intangible cultural heritage and libraries / archives / museums
- ❖ Funding for collection inventories focused on uncovering materials of potential use in preserving ICH
- ❖ Consider potential contribution to preservation of ICH when prioritizing funding decisions around digitization of LAM resources
- ❖ Improved outreach to communities with ICH in need of immediate care / preservation support



Thank you!

Questions?
Comments?
Agendas of your own?

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