Dr. Thorolf Lipp
Sickingenstrasse 4
10553 Berlin

Oceania's Intangible Cultural Heritage – Reflections on desirable Actions

The digitization of knowledge is underway. Wordlwide as well as in the Pacific will an ever increasing amount of people have access to growing data. The vision of an easily accesible "cultural memory of the world" is very near. But cultural memory does not automatically come into being. It is shaped by the (social, political, economical etc.) will of people and institutions. The UNESCO Intangible Heritage convention is an example for the attempt to influence cultural memory. The Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage was created by UNESCO's general conference in 1997. Subsequently the proclamations of 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2009 resulted in a list of 120 outstanding cultural traditions. Only two of those, however, are situated in Oceania: sand drawing in Vanuatu and the lakalaka dance in Tonga. [1]

Archiving and digitizing Intangible Cultural Heritage is an intricate task because these cultural expressions do not exist *as such.* Rather they need to be mediated to come into being. Naturally, Intangible Heritage is mediated by humans acting as mediums. It is with the aid of audiovisual means, however, that cultural expressions are enabled to transcend space and time and become part of the worlds cultural memory. Visual Anthropology is the academic discipline that deals with the many and various processes of picturing culture. It challenges their diverse epistemological assumptions and has constructed its own framework of questions pertaining to "why to" and "how to" mediate culture with audiovisual means.

On the UNESCO website both Oceanic traditions are presented with a short text, some photographs and a short Grierson-type documentary video of a few minutes length. Given that both are most complex cultural performances, this digital representation of "living culture" is in no way satisfactory and needs to be rethought and modified. In this paper I would like to elaborate further on my existing reflections of picturing Intangible Heritage. I stress that there is a need to move away from the classical discourse on ethnographic film and its ever present idea of representing culture as a master narrative. Instead we need to take into account todays and tomorrows internet technology as the most powerful tool for disseminating and archiving cultural expressions. Key ideas for desirable future actions are multivocality and multisitedness, empowerement and experiment, cooperation and co-production.

---

[1] For this section see UNESCO 2006: Brochure on the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. See also: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00011 (last visited: December 2009)