

Tangible Programs to Safeguard Philippine Intangible Heritage

Maricris Jan Tobias (*National Commission for Culture and Arts, Philippines*)

In 1992, the Philippines passed Republic Act 7355, which established the *Manlilikha ng Bayan* programme to recognise national living treasures in the field of traditional and folk arts.

The challenge faced by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) in implementing this law is that intangible cultural heritage “is always undergoing transformation,” and as a result, it is “in danger of disappearing if not nurtured or has become incompatible” with current social demands. In addition, much Philippine intangible heritage remains undocumented. Philippine ethnic groups are numerous and dispersed across the country, residing in hard-to-access areas. The practitioners of traditional and folk arts are aging rapidly, but there is diminished interest among the young to learn these skills and take up these traditions. Other challenges include the absence of a formal system to transmit these skills, inadequate marketing and entrepreneurial support or employment opportunities, and the diminution in the importance of social activities that once nurtured occasions for practicing cultural traditions.

Thus, the NCCA, as the national policymaking and grant-giving body for culture and arts, has to identify, develop, and implement strategies that would not only address the issue of cultural transmission, but also infuse value into culture, so that the practice of traditional culture and arts and the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage become meaningful and compatible with current social practices. In addition to the *Manlilikha ng Bayan*, the NCCA has two flagship programmes for preserving intangible heritage: a national cultural mapping plan and Schools for Living Traditions, which were established in key ethno-linguistic regions. Both programmes had to deal with administrative challenges in implementing a wide scope of activities across a broad territory with very limited budget.

In 2001, however, an opportunity came to implement an intensive and detailed programme for safeguarding a specific expression of Philippine intangible cultural heritage in a particular territory. That was the year the *hudhud* narrative chants, traditionally performed by the Ifugao community, was proclaimed as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. An integral part of the community that built the Philippine rice terraces, the *hudhud* chants are “practised during rice harvest and weeding time, to honour the dead, and at funeral wakes. Thought to have originated before the seventh century;” a

“Based on previous experience, the NCCA knew that the most effective strategies would be those that have strong support from the local communities and local institutions.”

complete recitation of the more than two hundred chants of the *hudhud* may last several days.

The UNESCO proclamation required the Philippines to take measures to safeguard the *hudhud* through a programme for its inventory, promotion, study, management, and transmission. The proclamation came with a programme-implementation grant, and the NCCA led the coordination of what became the Three-Year Action Plan for Safeguarding and Transmission of the *Hudhud* Chants of the Ifugao (*Hudhud* Safeguarding Program). The programme was managed by the NCCA Intangible Project Secretariat and the Ifugao Intangible Heritage Executive Committee (IIHEC).

Based on previous experience, the NCCA knew that the most effective strategies would be those that have strong support from the local communities and local institutions. Thus, while the *Hudhud* Safeguarding Program initially had only enough funding for three years, through careful management and by tapping local and private support, the NCCA was able to conduct programmes from May 2003 to April 2008. As a result, the *hudhud* oral tradition has undergone a national and local cultural revival, with funding initiatives now shouldered by the local government, local communities, and private donors. While the NCCA had been at the helm of designing a national strategy for safeguarding this oral tradition, it was the local government

officials, school principals and teachers, *hudhud* practitioners, and other members of the community themselves who worked to ensure the successful implementation of the programmes.

The *Hudhud* Safeguarding Program has succeeded in (a) reinvigorating the annual *hudhud* festival held every November; (b) institutionalising a *hudhud* chanting contest; (c) institutionalising a recognition program for outstanding lead chanters whose work has encouraged increased participation; (d) publishing two children’s books based on stories from the *hudhud* narrative, a multimedia packet for all municipal public libraries and teaching guides, and a directory of *hudhud* practitioners; and (e) establishing *Hudhud* Schools for Living Traditions. The *hudhud* has also been integrated in the formal education curriculum in local primary schools. In addition, the *hudhud* has been declared a National Cultural Treasure.

After the expiration of the *Hudhud* Safeguarding Program, the Province of Ifugao organised the Ifugao Provincial Council for Cultural Heritage. This has allowed NCCA to officially withdraw from the program in order for the local community to take the lead in implementation and ensure the continuity of the projects already in place. The strategies identified by the NCCA and its partners for the *Hudhud* Safeguarding Program have served as a template to revive and revitalise other intangible cultural properties.



A public school teacher with her *hudhud* chanting students in a school for living tradition in Ifugao province © NCCA