

# Cultural Mapping: Intangible Values and Engaging with Communities with some reference to Asia

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## Abstract

*The worldwide interest in everyday culture, ways of living and doing things which underpin our sense of place is palpable. We have come to appreciate that there is an abundant culture out there with a rich array of meaning and significance. Nowhere is this more abundant than in Asia where outstanding examples of the continuous living/nourishing tradition of history are part of an intricate and beautiful tapestry of everyday life: the ordinarily sacred (Sexson 1992). This interest is reflected increasingly in our thinking on cultural heritage management. As with any concept or idea tools are needed to help us interpret, document, and present our cultural diversities. Cultural mapping has developed in response to this need. This paper reviews what is meant by 'culture' and cultural mapping to understand the notion of local distinctiveness and how mapping can be a tool to help local communities have their voice heard through their involvement in the mapping process.*

**Key words:** *Culture, local distinctiveness, cultural landscape, ordinarily sacred, cultural diversity.*

## Background

The places where we live are marked by distinctive characteristics. These are tangible, as in the physical patterns and components of our surrounds, and intangible as in the symbolic meanings and values we attach to places, and also to objects and to traditional ways of expression as in language, art, song, dance and so on. In this way physical spaces, sites and objects become places in the wider cultural landscape setting. They offer a past, are part of the present and suggest future continuity. It is these places with their identity and meaning which give rise to local distinctiveness and sense of place of indigenous and local communities.

Thirty years ago Meinig (1979) suggested in the Preface to the set of essays, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes*, that studies and research into valuing ordinary landscapes were part of a continuing lively and expanding realm of interest. This interest, both academic and professional, continues to the extent that valuing ordinary places has contemporary significance internationally. It is central to the attachment to, and celebration of, our history and sense of place (Taylor 1994). Notably, it is part of the developing appreciation world-wide of the way in which everyday people, ordinary communities and minority groups value what have nicely been called **ordinarily sacred places** by Linda Sexson (1992). They are part of a reassessment of an abundant cultural life which has been taking place over the past twenty years or so. Central to this is an interest in the pursuits, concerns and places that give meaning and significance to everyday life and which recognise our cultural diversity.

Coincidental with growth of interest in the ordinary has been that momentous social advance of the second half of the twentieth century focussing on concern for the world's cultural heritage and the mobilising of global initiatives to protect it. Initially heritage was seen to reside predominantly and physically in great monuments and sites – and predominantly monuments and sites of the Classical World – as great works of art. During

the 1990s a challenge emerged to the 1960s and 1970s concept of heritage focussing on great monuments and archaeological locations, famous architectural ensembles, or historic sites with connections to the rich and famous. Here was the birth of a different value system with attention focused on such issues as cultural landscapes, living history and heritage, intangible values, and community involvement.

### **Intangible values**

Critical to changes in attitude is the concept of *intangible cultural heritage* (ICH), recognising that value does not reside solely in tangible/physical expressions of culture. This is particularly applicable in Asia, where, in my view, some of the most outstanding examples of the world's living history and heritage reside (Taylor 2012). In the past communities have evolved traditional management systems and values related to their places. There is a need to recognise these and encourage their continuity so that heritage resources can be sustained as change takes place and impacts such as mass domestic and international tourism gather pace. ICH 'comprises the living expressions and traditions that communities, groups and individuals ... receive from their ancestors and pass on to their descendants. Constantly recreated and providing its bearers with a sense of identity and continuity, this heritage is particularly vulnerable.' (UNESCO 2007a).

*Identity* is a key word, crucial to a sense of place where the tangible (physical features and functions) and intangible (meaning or symbols) coalesce (Relph 1976) illustrated in Figure 1.

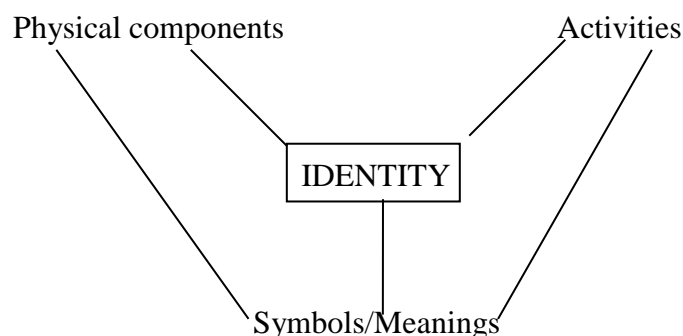


Figure 1 Place identity and its components adapted from Relph (1976)

The increasing understanding of the significance of ICH has in no small way been underscored by the rising interest in anthropologically based study of culture and the concept that places with their tangible and intangible connections – cultural landscapes – and people are not part of a static text, but are part of a dynamic ‘process by which ... identities are formed’. A coherent part of these changes in attitude is the understanding that people’s heritage consists of ‘various, complex and interdependent [cultural] expressions, revealed through social customs as well as physical heritage.’ (Bouchenaki 2007). Critical to this dimension is appreciating that associated intangible values are an inseparable part of the remarkable diversity of our cultural expressions and their meanings. The quest for meaning in the global plurality of cultural expressions has underpinned a deepening appreciation of the significance of social customs and systems of beliefs, including myths, thereby giving us a better appreciation of people’s identity, creativity and diversity (*ibid.*).

ICH needs to be seen within a broad framework of ideas and practices that give shape and significance to tangible heritage. This is in line with the *UNESCO Istanbul Declaration of 2002* (UNESCO 2002) which states, *inter alia*, that:

- The multiple expressions of intangible cultural heritage constitute some of the fundamental sources of the **cultural identity** of the peoples and communities as well as a wealth common to the whole of humanity. Deeply rooted in local history and natural environment and embodied, among others, by a great variety of languages that translate as many world visions, they are an essential factor in the preservation of cultural diversity, in line with the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001).
- The intangible cultural heritage constitutes a set of **living and constantly recreated** practices, knowledge and representations enabling individuals and communities, at all levels, to express their world conception through systems of values and ethical standards. Intangible cultural heritage creates among communities a sense of belonging and continuity, and is therefore considered as one of the mainsprings of **creativity** and cultural creation. From this point of view, an all-encompassing approach to cultural heritage should prevail, taking into account the **dynamic link** between the tangible and intangible heritage and their close interaction.
- The safeguarding and transmission of the intangible heritage is essentially based on the will and effective intervention of the actors involved in this heritage. In order to ensure the sustainability of this process, governments have a duty to take measures facilitating the **democratic participation of all stakeholders**.
- The extreme **vulnerability** of the intangible cultural heritage, which is threatened by disappearance or marginalisation, as a result *inter alia* of conflicts, intolerance, excessive merchandising, uncontrolled urbanisation or rural decay, requires that governments take resolute action respecting the context in which the intangible cultural heritage is expressed and disseminated.

How to safeguard tangible heritage – archaeological, historic cities, cultural landscapes, works of art – is clearly defined and understandable. In contrast ICH, which consists of processes and practices, is fragile by its very nature and much more vulnerable. Its safeguarding requires collection, documentation and archiving of data and records, and protection and support of its bearers (Bouchenaki *op. cit.*). It is critical, therefore, that indigenous and local community interests are upheld, supported and respected, and critical to this is the need to appreciate the wider meaning of the word ‘culture’.

### **What is culture?**

Central to the ideology of interest in the ordinary is the construct of ‘**culture**’ itself. Raymond Williams in *Keywords* proposes three useful associations for the term: process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; a particular way of life relating to people, a period in history or humanity in general in material and spiritual senses; artistic activity. Donald Horne (1986) suggests that culture is ‘the repertoire of collective habits of thinking and acting that give particular meanings to existence.’ In the 2002 *ASEAN Declaration on Cultural Heritage* “‘Culture’ means the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, intellectual, emotional and material features that characterise a society or social group. It includes the arts and letters as well as human modes of life, value systems, creativity, knowledge systems, traditions and beliefs.’

Within the definitions is a commonality of intent: that of understanding private memories of places and collective memory as a shared view of the world around us. The concept is inclusive. It involves our traditions, values and ideas and the sense of identity which flow from these for the places we know and how we interpret them. These are the places which give meaning and causality to life, continuity and community connection. They are part of a shared heritage and fundamental to the notion of *cultural sustainability*. Cultural sustainability is to do with connecting people with their environment and heritage – their cultural landscape – and to be part of looking after it, conserving, planning and developing it sustainably in ways that add social and economic value for the community. This is the essence of cultural mapping. Through research involving diversity of communities, cultural resources are identified and recorded. These include the physical components and intangible aspects relating to memory, meaning and values.

### **Mapping (recording) culture**

We see therefore that culture is not limited to what is collectively referred to as the arts, including such things as painting sculpture, music, dance, language, traditions, whether these be in the realm of so-called high art/high aesthetics or the equally important vernacular arts. Whilst including the arts, ‘culture’ is an holistic idea of the way we do things collectively at local, regional or national society levels. It is ourselves on display, expressed simply but eloquently by the Australian author David Malouf (1983) with the words ‘It is ourselves we are making out there.’ The extraordinary cultural diversity around the world presents us with a rich heritage to be cherished and valued. Much of this fuels the mass tourist industry in the form of cultural tourism where we travel to see and experience other cultural forms and ways of doing things.

A 1994 monograph *Mapping Culture* proposes that ‘Cultural mapping involves a community identifying and documenting local cultural resources. Through this research cultural elements are recorded – the tangibles like galleries, craft industries, distinctive landmarks, local events and industries, as well as the intangibles like memories, personal histories, attitudes and values’ ... ‘Cultural mapping is a way of defining what culture means to the community, identifying the elements of culture that add value (both social and economic), recording, preserving or building on these elements in new and creative ways. *Each cultural mapping project will be as individual as the community it reflects* (my italics).

UNESCO Bangkok web site defines that *cultural mapping* has been recognized by UNESCO as a crucial tool and technique in preserving the world's intangible and tangible cultural assets. Essentially, the idea of "mapping culture" arises from a social, economic, or cultural need at the local or national level. Although it is not an end in itself, cultural mapping serves as a tool and methodology to answer this need.

Relevant to UNESCO is the mobilization of existing tools and instruments as a fundamental step in its general objective of safeguarding cultural diversity. Cultural mapping, as one such instrument, embraces a wide range of techniques and activities that range from community-based participatory approach in identifying and documenting local cultural resources and activities to the use of innovative and sophisticated information tools like GIS. At any rate, collected data on the cultural assets can be represented through a variety of formats like geographic maps, graphs, databases, and others. From this, a comprehensive view of a country's cultural

resources is acquired. Consequently, the documented data serve as a prerequisite to develop a sensitive national strategy and programme taking into account the cultural heritage and respecting the cultural diversity of a country.

I suspect that there are practical problems for some professionals with the terms ‘map’ or ‘mapping’ in the process of Cultural Mapping given they have clear cartographic association for many people. We perhaps may explain the process of mapping as recording data which can be done in a number of ways including geographically (spatially through maps/plans), by film, videos, CD rom, brochures (as in heritage trails and tracks), tourism strategies, artworks, plays and songs, textiles, urban improvement and/or environmental planning. So a cultural map is a way of helping people find ways of expressing themselves and their sense of place and belonging.

Within the field of Cultural Heritage Management the majority of studies and projects we undertake where local communities participate will essentially form a version of a cultural map, that is we are mapping culture. To recognise a fundamental goal of cultural mapping, however, studies and projects should help ‘communities recognise, celebrate and support cultural diversity for economic, social and regional development.’ (Commonwealth Department of Communication and The Arts, *op cit.*) In places like Asia for example this has special relevance particularly because of the way traditional rural and urban communities are in close contact with their cultural roots and places. There is an inextricable link between people and their places and the idea of living history. In turn this also has relevance to cultural tourism management and planning and the conduct of cultural tourism where visitors, national and international, go to places because of their cultural history and sense of the stream of time. The validity of the significance of acknowledging local and indigenous traditions and knowledge systems is recognised by ICOMOS in its Charter on Cultural Tourism (2002) particularly in one of its objectives:

To facilitate and encourage the tourism industry to promote and manage tourism in ways that respect and enhance the heritage and living cultures of host communities.

### **Community involvement and empowerment**

UNESCO has also proposed that ‘[C]ultural mapping involves the representation of landscapes in two or three dimension from the perspective of indigenous and local peoples. It is potentially an important tool for UNESCO in its efforts to help Member States and civil society create platforms for intercultural dialogue and increase awareness of cultural diversity as a resource for peace building, good governance, fighting poverty, adaptation to climate change and maintaining sustainable management and use of natural resources.’ (UNESCO 2007b)

In addition to finding ways in which local communities may be involved in the interpretation and presentation of places – their places – we should, through cultural mapping techniques, be encouraging communities in activities that include producing histories, videos, CD roms, and artworks; heritage trails and routes brochures; ideas for historic urban area protection; involving school children in mapping stories of how they understand their sense of place; linking monuments and archaeological remains to their cultural landscape and traditional ways of life which help put the monuments and remains into a cultural context. In this connection cultural mapping and cultural maps are an indispensable tool for informing government agencies involved in such

processes as environmental planning and tourism of the pre-requisite of ensuring participation of local communities in the land-use planning process.

All too often local people are kept divorced from the presentation and visitor experience of places whether they are the ordinary everyday places or national icons. It is fine to have a system of licensed tourist guides/operators, but what about local people and their engagement with tourists? Can it extend from selling trinkets, artefacts or T shirts at stalls? (artefacts etc., in fact, which all too often are not even made locally). This separation, for example, is evident at many World Heritage sites. Angkor is an interesting example (Taylor & Altenburg, 2006), although it is stressed that it is by no means unique or atypical.

### *Angkor*

Most domestic and international tourists' impressions of Angkor are highly likely to pivot on selected architectural and archaeological forms, the immediate physical space around them and the tourist drive. It represents presentation of heritage as separate dots on a map isolated from their cultural and intellectual setting: their cultural landscape. The following is the brief description on the UNESCO World Heritage List web site:

Angkor is one of the most important archaeological sites in South-East Asia. Stretching over some 400 sq. km, including forested area, Angkor Archaeological Park contains the magnificent remains of the different capitals of the Khmer Empire, from the 9th to the 15th century. These include the famous Temple of Angkor Wat and, at Angkor Thom, the Bayon Temple with its countless sculptural decorations. UNESCO has set up a wide-ranging programme to safeguard this symbolic site and its surroundings.

Tim Winter reflects that 'one of the defining features of World Heritage Listing was Angkor's spatial, legal and political isolation from its immediate surroundings ... This often results in the visitor only travelling to Cambodia to see the World Heritage Site of Angkor, rather than visiting the country itself [and] typically make little connection between Angkor and Cambodia.' (Winter 2004).

This is not to deny the importance of structural preservation within an architectural and archaeological imperative. But it does conceive of Angkor as material heritage of the ancient past, something to be marvelled at, but divorced from the vibrant idea of living history and heritage. It is a commodification of heritage which privileges things rather than people where perhaps 'restoration is the commerce of illusion.'<sup>2</sup> The illusion is that behind and surrounding the monuments is a living landscape where people continue a way of life that has links with the people who created Angkor a thousand years ago and prior to that to Pre-Angkorian period settlement. Within this view of Angkor is the enduring survival of intangible values and authenticity of *traditions and techniques; location and setting; spirit and feeling* as set out in the Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS )1994.

Richard Engelhardt's description (1995) of Angkor aptly catches the breathtaking extent of what Angkor really is about:

Commanding a strategic location on the uppermost tip of Cambodia's great Tonle Sap lake, the ruins of the Angkor Empire expand north, east and west from the shores of the lake up to the sacred Kulen mountain plateau. This entire 5,000 square

kilometre site, once the location of one of the world's largest metropolitan areas, is a relic cultural landscape – an environment which was intensively engineered by human activity over time to suit the Empire's changing temporal needs.

Here we see how the landscape is a window into the past that continues into the present: a series of layers through time bearing testimony, if we but spend time to read it, to how the cultural landscape has been shaped, why it has been shaped the way it is and who was involved.

How do the local residents who live and work within the Angkor landscape see and value the landscapes in which they live? What would they like visitors to understand and learn about their place? Cambodian domestic tourists are visiting Angkor in ever increasing numbers. What are their views on how this deeply symbolic icon of Cambodian national and cultural identity should be presented to them and to the rest of the global community? These are critical questions that interpretation and presentation of Angkor need to address.

The scope at Angkor for a number of cultural mapping inputs involving locals on site is palpable. Whilst at many places local traditions and historic places are disappearing or crumbling at unprecedented rates, a remarkable opportunity exists at Angkor to involve locals mapping resources that are meaningful to them. They are the key holders of intangible knowledge and tangible assets capable of determining types of cultural mapping exercises that are relevant and helping produce them. In this way the invisible may become visible providing real insights into cultural diversity, history, identity and knowledge.(UNESCO Bangkok, *op. cit*). Here is the very essence of cultural sustainability. From this approach could come economic benefit and enhancement of a sense of pride in traditional knowledge systems. In a visit to Angkor in February 2006 a stop at a local community producing palm sugar was instructive: it showed for me the potential for engaging visitors in traditional activities that are connected with the story of Angkor in its wider sense of the interaction between people and place over many centuries. Here is a golden opportunity for a video or cd rom for visitors to buy.

### **Cultural and biological diversity and cultural mapping**

The 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity acknowledges the fundamental role of the protection of human rights of indigenous people, including respecting traditional knowledge and its contribution, for example, to environmental protection and management of natural resources and the synergy possible between modern science and local knowledge. Parallel with this is the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity that acknowledges that cultural systems, practices that favour natural resource management, and value and knowledge systems of indigenous and local peoples can be role models for helping shift dangerous patterns in modern over-consumption of natural resources (UNESCO 2007b, *op cit*. p.9).

There has bloomed, therefore, an increasing appreciation of the inextricable links between culture and nature and indigenous knowledge systems and formed, for example, a cornerstone of UNESCO's landmark decision in 1992 to recognise three cultural landscape categories for World Heritage purposes. This initiative 'enhanced the recognition of outstanding linkages between nature and culture, people and places, and between the intangible and tangible. It also provided a new focus on key areas of biological and cultural diversity, including sustainable use. At the same time

innovations were introduced with the acceptance of traditional custodianship and customary land tenure in World Heritage protection.’ (Rössler, 2006). It has enhanced understanding of the importance of indigenous knowledge systems and was, for example, a major theme of a UNESCO/IUCN 2005 international symposium *Conserving Cultural and Biological Diversity: The role of sacred natural sites and cultural landscapes* (see Rössler, 2006).

UNESCO avers that cultural mapping is ‘an ideal tool for elucidating information about landscapes, sites, and territories from the perspective of local and indigenous peoples’, stressing the need to combine participatory mapping techniques with cultural mapping (UNESCO 2007b, *op. cit.*, p.15). In this regard it is difficult to see how cultural mapping can be seen to be successful without involving local community participation as in the NGO English role model ‘Common Ground.’ Developed in the early 1970s Common Ground helps people – local communities – to find ways of getting under the surface of places that they value. It is in essence an evolving celebration of sense of place with a focus on local distinctiveness.

In relation to indigenous people and local communities a significant advantage of cultural mapping is that it may be used to bring to the attention of dominant decision makers (state, influential social groups, private sector) the voice of subordinated or marginalised groups which otherwise is usually not heard, or more to the point, not listened to. Within this process of intercultural dialogue it is vital that indigenous knowledge is not merely collected and documented, but is respected and revitalised through mapping techniques.

## **Two case studies**

The need for intercultural dialogue and for initiation of a cultural mapping exercise with indigenous participation is seen in a (2006) review by Lhakpa N Sherpa of The Mountain Institute, Nepal, on the topic of *beyuls* ‘Sacred hidden valleys and ecosystem conservation in the Himalayas.’ (Lhakpa Sherpa 2006).

The popular notion of *Shangri-la* is believed to have been inspired by the concept of *beyuls* which are isolated, tranquil Himalayan valleys suitable for spiritual retreat. According to Himalayan tradition, Padmasambhava brought Buddhism to the Himalayas and set aside many Himalayan valleys as future sanctuaries and hid them to be discovered by people in times of conflict, famine, disease, destruction and threats to spiritual freedom. In addition to their status as sacred valleys, *beyuls* are endowed with abundant natural resources including pure water, diverse ecosystems, and fertile soils. Growing external influences have compromised indigenous, time-tested wisdom and respect for the land. In response, many *beyuls* have been designated as parks and protected areas to conserve biological diversity and human cultures (The Mountain Institute).

Lhakpa proposes the biggest challenge is that the power of the *beyuls* is waning and as an intangible concept is vulnerable under influences of globalisation, tourism, domination, assimilation, education. He also affirms that the incorporation of *beyul* into modern protected areas (ie national parks) without adequate recognition of their importance is another problem. The ancient *beyul* tradition and the modern protection both aim at biodiversity conservation and improved human livelihoods, but he tellingly remarks that their implementation tools differ. National park protection depends on powerful national legislation and global scientific justifications. But

whilst traditional residents have accepted protecting wild flora and fauna because it is in line with their own belief systems, the managers, policy makers and scientists have been slow in recognising the values of time-honoured traditions in biodiversity conservation. Similarly he suggests modern infrastructure ignores sensitivity to the sacred nature of the land and is in danger of overwhelming traditional concepts and also points to the need for modern education to integrate into its system local culture.

Lhakpa suggests that *beyul* and other sacred natural sites can be an asset for ecosystem conservation and lead to conservation of significant intangible cultural values. He proposes a series of actions involving strengthening involvement of local people with greater recognition of indigenous knowledge; physical surveys; collection of oral and written evidence; documentation and publication of material; dissemination of information to local schools and communities to rekindle the spirit and pride in *beyul*. In essence what is suggested is a cultural mapping exercise. A current project “Building Livelihoods Along Beyul Trails” supported by The Ford Foundation is addressing these points with the following activities:

- Researching and documenting information on culture, spirituality and the environment to generate learning materials and share information through workshops and publications.
- Developing interpretive facilities at Sagamartha National Park Gate for dissemination to visiting tourists.
- Developing a documentary film to educate outsiders and improve the self-esteem of local people in relation to their important cultural values and belief systems.
- Organizing regular cultural awareness programs for visitors and local communities.
- Conserving the endangered Sherpa language by compiling dictionaries and illustrated publications as learning materials as well as training indigenous instructors to teach scripts and language in schools.
- Developing tourism home-stay programs and cultural tourism activities in isolated and traditional villages to improve the livelihoods of economically marginalized communities.
- Establishing a multi-purpose mountain centre in collaboration with local and international partners to provide a permanent capacity building facility for local people in areas of cultural tourism, mountaineering, safety, sustainable farming and other enterprise opportunities.
- Providing sub-grants to monasteries to develop income generating opportunities, and to restore traditional homes for tourism accommodation.

One recent and beautifully illustrative example of a charming cultural map involving indigenous knowledge through the eyes of children is a 2008 Diary which includes words and pictures by Moken children (Sea Gypsies from the Surin Islands) telling the legend of the traditional relationship with the sea. The children’s words are written in Thai with an English translation and illustrated with colourful, enchanting images. The diary is called *Tale Diary 2008: Morgan folk tale*.

The Surin Islands off the west coast of Thailand were settled by a group of Moken maritime hunter gatherers in the recent past after a history of several decades of frequenting to the area (UNESCO Bangkok 2001). Because of their intact marine and forest resources the islands were declared a national park in 1981 and village settlements restricted and Moken denied the right to continue unrestricted traditional

resource harvesting. Like other indigenous minorities, Moken are not recognised as Thai citizens, so cannot own land. They have no written language, but have a rich oral tradition and associated way of life and crafts.

In 1997 the Surin Islands Project was initiated and a report issued in 2001 (*ibid.*) It developed approaches and options for integrating traditional knowledge with heritage management and tourism development. One outcome of the Project has been the preparation and production of Moken Primers (educational materials). The Primer is a collection of short texts about Moken lifestyle, legends and crafts, the intention of which is to enable Moken children and adults learn through their own language written in Thai script with Thai translation and through their own cultural context.<sup>3</sup>

The 2008 diary is an innovative approach to cultural mapping. Essentially the diary tells the story, through children's eyes, of how the Moken live with the sea and why they escaped the ravages of the 2004 tsunami. As they are keenly aware of the sea, the Moken in some areas knew the tsunami that struck on December 26, 2004 was coming, and managed to preserve many lives. The beautifully written and graphic images from the diary as told and drawn by the children represent global intercultural dialogue at its best.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Anon. Comment made by a performer in a Dublin Fringe Festival presentation, September 2003.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.csiwisepractices.org/>? *Improving communication and preserving cultural heritage/Surin Islands-Thailand*.