

Heritage is not a museum piece

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Abstract: This article reflects about the registration of different traditional puppet theatre manifestations as intangible cultural heritage. It discusses how important it is to preserve traditional puppetry but also presents doubts about how the registration affects this art form that is constantly changing.

Keywords: Cultural heritage. Puppet theatre. Traditional puppet theatre.

As we enter the year 2016, I look back at the vast ever growing art of puppet theatre around the world. For anyone to be able to speak about this art form in a generic way is impossible or pretentious, as we can only touch the surface of what we assume to see in brief performances of an art form at festivals and other platforms, out of context and devoid of its cultural and social background, specifically traditional puppet theatre.

Puppetry and more so Shadow puppetry, possibly predates many other forms of art. It is alive today, due to its ever changing vitality. Some of us have researched individual aspects of puppetry and interpreted the reality through our own perspectives. However at the end of the day one cannot, as we all know, separate the object from its social and human context.

Just the term Puppet is a misnomer in our present day scenario, besides the few techniques at hand, artists around the world have created many more facets and incorporated other performing arts to the

same; be it masks, actors, dance, figures worn by actors, new media, and a vast creative personal visual poetry. In fact the other performing arts have also incorporated puppetry into their performances enhancing the power of storytelling and narrative.

When I discuss the very essence of the art form that we categorize as traditional, as compared to what many of us urban puppeteers do, the words tradition and modern break down and come together as contemporary. Both the traditional artist and the modern puppeteer live in the present and are confronted by mostly the same politics, visual imagery, materials at hand and an eager sense of pride and continuity in what he or she is producing.

Be it the performative text which has gradually changed and adapted in keeping with the times, however upholding within it parameters of social, religious, artistic and family customs to the very tangible figure, the performing object we call puppet.

At times I question, as to what is tangible and what is intangible? Why is it that we who may be so called nontraditional artists, term the traditional puppet as an intangible art form, is it due to a scholarly academic perception or otherwise?

Speaking to any traditional puppet artist it is quite clear that what is being practiced is a community/family, social tradition, even though many times written down, it still is evolving and passing on to present generations.

Of course the argument that many of these traditions are threatened due to newer and far more obtrusive mono cultures spread worldwide is true. Will the artists progeny continue with their skills? Will they adapt to new conditions? Newer forms and still be called traditional? Will they withstand the pressures of daily economic life and the shrinking performance spaces, are all to be looked into before stamping them as lost or struggling to survive forms.

No Puppet tradition as ever been static it has come about simply from a need, a need to create, to communicate, to control to be accepted as society's documenters and genealogists, and will continue to do so if not hindered in any way.

There are numerous examples of traditions that have imbibed to stay alive which have incorporated situations and texts to keep with the times. All our puppet traditions be they epics, religious stories, ballads

have with the help of local characters in their performance, conveyed local humor and biting comments against tyranny and oppression, connecting the past to the present which the onlookers are familiar with and which is only possible through the language and text used not only the visual element.

This aspect today has been taken over mostly by the modern puppeteers, who may have a stronger voice and capacity in society, but nothing can change the hold that the traditional puppet form, in whatever condition it exists, has a grasp over its local audiences. And this is due to the society it grows and evolves in, the language it uses and the images and colors which pertain very much to the regional influences it holds.

Why then do we term all this as being intangible... in comparison to what? A fear of change or of losing some of its values and elements or it being taken up by other non-community artists which will add their own perceptions to the form..?

In this article I shall often quote from Cherif Khaznadars writings and observations from his book “Warning The Intangible Heritage in Danger”. The title and the book are a double edged sword; pro as in the title, but sub text as in danger to what has or is being termed so... He quotes Michel Leiris:

All the modes of acting and thinking, all to some extent traditional, specific to more or less complex and more or less extended human group- this culture which is transmitted from generation to generation, transforming at a rhythm which can be fast or which can be on the contrary rather slow so that the changes are imperceptible to us; this culture is not something rigid, but rather a changing entity. Because of the traditional elements that it includes, it's linked to the past, but it also has its future, as its constantly expanding due to new contributions, or conversely, losing some of its elements which fall into disuse, even though, over the course of successive generations, it is taken up at all times by newcomers, giving to each of them a base for starting towards goals of an individual or collective nature that they assign themselves personally

This as Cherif Khaznadar says and one agrees with him, “*that the primary characteristics of culture is that it is not fixed but constantly shifting-changing and hence how can we grasp something that is constantly changing without the risk of freezing it,*” as also centuries old cultures which may or may not fit into our modern concept of human rights and sustainability

I can say this with firsthand experience not only in the realm of puppetry but in my work in UNIMA, where often we constantly try to push or to confirm agendas seen by the modern north countries perspectives, to the working of centuries old traditions of other communities, eg the preparations of the congress in Chengdu, or for that matter the creation of national centers and representatives in countries who do not work in the ways we understand or want them to... this is a bitter pill to swallow but we must come to terms with it, and in the bargain find a democratic bridge which helps to make our work progress, and in so at times giving up unfortunately what we see as best practices.

This of course is a personal view and I’m being confronted by it often in our ever expanding organization and in my day to day work in puppetry.

Think about the very fact that UNIMA has stayed alive for more than 85 years now as one of the oldest international theatre organizations in the world, the fact that it has strived to change, adapt, improve on given situations, I would say the same holds for a given tradition.

Recently the government of Brazil recognized the art of Mamulengo as a national treasure and intangible art heritage. This is a commendable step by any one government to recognize their own art form as such giving it national precedence and a wider platform and acceptance, even before it possibly got the UNESCO stamp for the same. Other traditions such as Bunraku of Japan, Karagoz of Turkey, Pupi of Italy, Wayang of Indonesia, Sbek Thom Shadow Theatre of Cambodia amongst others are waiting in line for their confirmation.

Have been accredited by UNESCO and this has caused universal focus to them, however much needs to be done at the base in each country, accepting the form as intangible heritage is a pride for most of us specially coming from the body of UNESCO, however it is the value that the form holds for its own people in its own region that needs to be acknowledged by its local and central govt’ authorities, and in doing

so give it support which is much needed, not just monetary support but logistics, platforms to present their work, ease of property rights to help the future generation to continue with their art form, giving them an exposure to enhance their own living traditions, through workshops and training programs using new means and materials.

This I would consider one big step, in not just preserving, which again is a double edged word, as to preserve often gets into conserving and museums... Rather to open possibilities to carry on.

We need to recognize not just the performing objects but with them the persons who make them come alive and create this heritage be it modern or traditional or classical.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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