INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DISASTER: REFLECTIONS ON THE IRCI PROJECT 2016–2020

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016, the International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI) launched a new research project *on ICH Safeguarding and Disaster Risk Management in the Asia-Pacific Region.* The focus of the project was the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and the spectrum of slow and sudden onset disasters that affect the region, from the vast cyclone- and flood-prone deltas of Bangladesh and Myanmar to the low-lying atolls of the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Pacific, where sea-level rise is acutely felt.

The IRCI project was directly responding to the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 (SFDRR), the global agreement on national action for disaster risk reduction that replaced the Hyogo Framework for Action 2005–2015 (HFA). The SFDRR urges States Parties to understand the impacts of hazard exposure on cultural heritage; support the protection of cultural and collecting institutions and cultural places; and draw on 'traditional, indigenous and local knowledge and practices' as part of cross-sectoral approaches to disaster risk reduction.

In considering the impact of hazard-induced disasters on intangible cultural heritage (ICH), IRCI was breaking new ground. At the outset of the project, there were few models or tools in existence for operationalizing the calls to action set out either in the SFDRR or in the *Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (VI.3.3), which identifies the importance of 'strengthening resilience among vulnerable populations in the face of climate change and natural disasters.' Previous disaster risk management and risk reduction activities in relation to cultural heritage had tended to focus on tangible heritage (collection materials; built heritage) rather than intangible knowledge and practices.

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The goals of the IRCI project were twofold: to consider the impact of hazard-induced disasters on ICH; and to explore the role of ICH in mitigating the impacts of disaster across each of the three main phases of a disaster cycle – preparedness, response, and recovery. The results of the project are published in a project report and workshop proceedings (Iwamoto et al., 2018; Iwamoto & Nojima, 2019).

This paper reflects on key learnings from a range of IRCI-led field missions and project workshops in which the author was involved between 2016 and 2018, each of which contributed towards the development of a final set of 'Statements and Recommendations for Safeguarding ICH in Disasters and Mobilising ICH for Disaster Risk Reduction' (IRCI, 2019, pp. 149–152). The paper concludes with reflections on progress made in related research and practice over the past five years and considers where attention might most usefully be focused in the future, particularly given the compounding pressures of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF ICH IN DISASTER PREPARATION, RESPONSE AND RECOVERY

In 2016, IRCI led a reconnaissance field mission in Vanuatu to consider disaster responses following Cyclone Pam, a category 5 cyclone that devastated much of the Vanuatu archipelago in March 2015. Discussions were held with government officials working in the national disaster agencies, the Erromango Cultural Association, the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VCC), and members of the community-based governance committee that manages the World Heritage site of Chief Roi Mata's Domain.

During the mission it became evident that intangible cultural heritage (locally understood as *kastom save*, or custom knowledge) has not been integrated in any significant way into national disaster management policy and practice. Given Vanuatu's status as the country consistently most at risk of disaster in the world, with a World Risk Index (WRI) of 47.73 (Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft, 2021, p. 6), there is much to gain from understanding how local communities have been responding and adapting to this high-risk environment over millennia.

An example of local DRM knowledge can be found in the vernacular architecture of Vanuatu. In many regions, the traditional meeting house (*nakamal* or *farea*), where community-based governance decisions are made, also serves as a multi-purpose Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) measure, with locally-sourced materials and local design knowledge creating a structure that provides refuge and protects lives during cyclones, earthquakes, and ashfall caused by volcanic eruptions, and yet is relatively easily rebuilt during the recovery phase (UNESCO, 2017).

In the aftermath of Cyclone Pam, communities across Vanuatu were inundated with foreign aid in the form of building materials and construction technology. While this relief effort supported the short-term restoration of livelihoods, little consideration was given to its potential to undermine DRR knowledge and practices relating to food security, governance, settlement characteristics (architectural features; irrigation systems) and the environment that have been maintained, adapted and transmitted through time (Calandra, 2019, 2020).

The mission to Vanuatu also highlighted that disaster resilience can be unevenly distributed within communities. At Chief Roi Mata's Domain, the chair of the World Heritage committee discussed DRR knowledge that supports food security. His experience of successive cyclones had reinforced the traditional importance of planting cyclone-resistant crops (known as *kakae blong disasta* – or disaster food – in local pidgin). He and other members of the local community who had planted wild yam (*nalo*) in advance of cyclone Pam had enough food to sustain their families for several months. Those who didn't – due to breaks or blockages in knowledge transmission associated with disaster preparation – were almost entirely dependent on food aid in the aftermath of the cyclone. Food insecurity at Chief Roi Mata's Domain was further exacerbated by a range of compounding impacts, including weak governance; an El Niño-related drought after the cyclone that prolonged the period needed to regenerate garden crops; the destruction of garden seedlings by wild pigs; and human illnesses caused by water that had been contaminated following the cyclone (Ballard et al., 2020).

When ICH is not factored into DRM and DRR policy and practice across the three different phases of the disaster management cycle (preparation; response and recovery), the sustainability of tangible heritage, such as local disaster shelters and disaster foods, can also become threatened.

UNDERSTANDING THE LONG-TERM TRANSMISSION OF ICH IN A DISASTER-RICH CONTEXT

In January 2017, IRCI hosted an International Working Group session at the Tokyo National Museum. The session highlighted the need for detailed, first-hand accounts from communities to more fully understand the relationship between ICH and disaster preparedness, response, and recovery. In support of this aim, IRCI conducted a field program on the island of Gaua (Vanuatu). Two workshops were conducted with communities living at the villages of Namasari and Ontar, located on the eastern and western sides of the island respectively. As well as directly responding to the questions of the IRCI project, the workshops were an opportunity for participating communities to identify ICH that is impacted or mobilized in disaster contexts; consider how this ICH is being locally transmitted, adapted and safeguarded; and plan for future disaster events.

Participants at the workshops noted that sudden onset natural hazards tend to result in temporary disruptions to ICH practice rather than wholesale loss. To understand loss, and how to safeguard against it, we must document the full suite of social and environmental factors that interact with an ICH element over its life cycle.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans on Gaua and other Banks Islands, disaster resilience was embedded in a web of inter-island exchange that was underpinned by the *Suqe* (a system of grade-taking) and related ICH practices such as the distribution of *som* (shell money), pigs and other local produce. These ICH practices were integral to the spread of disaster risk across the islands of northern Vanuatu. Following a disaster, hard-hit islands could rely on this inter-island network for food security and other survival needs (Campbell, 1990).

From the mid-1800s, missionaries discouraged the practice of the *Suqe*, and movement between islands was discouraged by colonial authorities. At the same time, a rise in epidemics decimated local populations. Communities began to participate in the market economy, and *som* (shell-money) transactions dwindled. Diverse food systems were replaced by market crops that did not fare well in cyclones, increasing dependence on food aid. It is this kind of cumulative impact involving a range of factors, rather than a single hazard event, that leads to ICH transformation and loss, and an increase in disaster vulnerability.

The Gaua workshops also reinforced that most disasters are culturally constituted. Communities in Vanuatu have been living with, recalling, and adapting to physical phenomena over thousands of years. While natural hazards such as cyclones are often catastrophic at a national economic level, they are often regarded locally as familiar disruptions from which communities will inevitably bounce back.

Threats to ICH arise from unprecedented hazards for which appropriate responses are not already culturally embedded. Gaua communities identified slow-onset hazards resulting from climate change as the most insidious and impactful. New and unrecognizable garden pests, for example, are devastating food crops and there is no relevant custom knowledge (*kastom save*) to combat them. Equally challenging are those sudden or gradual onset hazards (volcanic eruptions and floods; sea-level rise and droughts) that force the displacement of communities whose ICH practices are founded on ancestral ties to the land (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021).

On Gaua, the 2009–10 eruption of Mt Garet led to the temporary resettlement of western village populations to the eastern side of the island, with associated disruption to certain ICH practices (e.g. the weaving of *gat*, a local basket). It was

only once forests had regenerated and people had the opportunity to return to the western side of the island 18 months later that suspended ICH practices, including the manufacture of *gat*, were able to resume. Given the scale of climate change, there is likely to be an exponential increase in permanent displacement and relocation of populations throughout the Asia-Pacific region in coming decades that will trigger the loss and adaptation of place-based cultural practices, languages and identities (Dunlop & Spratt, 2017; Kim, 2011).

The IRCI field mission on Gaua emphasised the importance of adopting a longitudinal perspective on the impact of single-event natural hazards, which feature as one amongst a combination of historical factors that can force changes to ICH and an associated recalibration of disaster vulnerability and resilience. The experience also highlighted the critical role of communities in defining disasters on their own terms, and identifying ICH elements that are fundamental to strengthening disaster resilience.

ICH AND ADAPTATION

In December 2018, IRCI hosted its final workshop in Sendai, Japan, with disaster and culture specialists from throughout the Asia-Pacific region. As part of the event, delegates visited the coastal village of Takenoura, Onagawa Town, Miyagi Prefecture, which was impacted by the tsunami that followed the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. The community performed the lion dance (*shishifuri*), which is commonly practiced at New Year to bring luck to people and drive away evil spirits. The lion dancers are accompanied by flute and drum musicians.

Two fundamental learnings emerged from this experience:

1) Disasters can lead to communities re-shaping their ICH to ensure their continuity. In the case of the *shishifuri*, roles traditionally performed by men became inclusive of women, as so many male practitioners lost their lives during the tsunami.

2) Decisions around whether to adapt an ICH practice, or fight for its survival, can depend on its relevance in a post-disaster world. While many of the tangible materials of the lion dance were destroyed by the tsunami, a makeshift lion head was crafted using rolled cushions, slippers, and soft drink cans so that the practice could continue. It was the performance of *shishifuri*, and not the nature of the materials used, that helped people to process and heal from their trauma (Kubota, 2019, p. 92).

All ICH is adaptable and in a constant state of evolution, which can be more pronounced and more visible during times of disaster. Much as the normal process of change in ICH is not planned for, there are very rarely plans in place

for the rapid adaptation of ICH in disaster contexts. As demonstrated in the case of *shishifuri*, and indeed other ICH elements in Japan following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, practitioners and communities will collectively decide on the viability, utility and scope for modification of cultural practices, commensurate with the nature, scale and severity of the disaster. Populations under extreme pressure, including migratory and refugee populations, will often turn to their cultural practices in support of stability, adjustment and survival (Kim, 2011, p. 262; Wilson & Ballard, 2017; Chatelard, 2017).

REFLECTING ON THE KEY FINDINGS

At the conclusion of the 2018 Sendai workshop, delegates developed a set of statements and recommendations about ICH and disasters, drawing on key learnings from the various missions and workshops facilitated by IRCI over the course of the project. Four main recommendations were tabled:

- Continue building on our understanding of the nature of disaster impacts on ICH (including recording and monitoring the transmission or reproduction of ICH elements over long time frames and through successive disasters).

- Further explore and promote the role of ICH as part of the solution in community-based DRR and post-disaster recovery.

- Continue through the post-disaster recovery and preparation phases to promote community-based safeguarding and mobilization of ICH in DRR.

- Enhance dialogue and activity between ICH and DRR agencies and practitioners involved in planning and policy development at national, regional and international levels.

In light of the foundational work undertaken by IRCI since 2016, how might we now view priorities for ICH safeguarding and sustainability in an increasingly disaster-prone world?

The latest *Asia-Pacific Disaster Report* (ESCAP, 2021) describes the Asia-Pacific region as a 'riskscape', in which converging and cascading risks increase the likelihood of vulnerability and impede sustainable development. To help manage these composite risks, practitioners working at the intersection of culture and heritage must move beyond a 'hazard-by-hazard approach', develop models that rest within broader programs of 'systemic national action', and address the emerging 'disaster-climate-health nexus' (ESCAP, 2021, p. 2). Nation states will need to:

1. Address natural hazards within the broader context of other forms of emergency (including anthropogenic hazards, conflict and disease), as defined by the *Operational principles and modalities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in emergencies* (UNESCO, n.d.). As the IRCI project has demonstrated, natural hazards that affect ICH often heighten or compound risks already present over longer time frames through exposure to other natural and human-made hazards, conflict and disease.

2. Expand the scope for response by combining models of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA). The key lesson from the Fifth Assessment Report (5AR) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is that climate change has already placed us in a context of permanent crisis or emergency (IPCC, 2014).

3. Invest in both the safeguarding and adaptation of those ICH elements that are:

a) *Most **vulnerable** to disasters and most **valued** by communities.* Climate change is accelerating, and particularly impactful on communities whose cultural practices are intimately tied to vulnerable landscapes.

b) *Critical to strengthening **resilience***. Reflecting a global responsibility to address issues of cultural rights and climate justice, communities, as the 'first responders' to disasters, need to be supported in identifying and strengthening ICH practices and elements that are a catalyst to building resilience.

4. Review National Action Plans (NAPs) and National Adaptation Programs of Action (NAPAs) to ensure that DRR and CCA policies and programs will serve to maximise the safeguarding of national ICH. While bespoke safeguarding plans for individual ICH elements have their place, a more holistic integration of actions that address the overall health of populations and environments underpinning ICH activity are critical. Such a review should not be led from the top-down but involve, and be informed by, ICH bearers and practitioners who are on the front-lines of emergencies and dealing with complex overlapping crises.

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