

UN cultural body seeks to save drone singing and other dying traditions



1 October 2009 – A new United Nations-backed initiative to prevent age-old cultural practices from dying out was launched today, with traditions ranging from Latvian female drone singing to a collective fishing rite in Mali becoming eligible for funding to ensure their survival.

They were among 12 practices from eight countries inscribed on the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (**UNESCO**) List of Intangible Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding at a meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

The Committee considered the traditions to be endangered despite the efforts of communities or groups concerned. Countries involved will now implement specific safeguarding plans, with the practices eligible for financial assistance from a special fund.

Traditions to be safeguarded include the “Suiti cultural space” of a small Catholic community in predominantly Lutheran western Latvia, characterized by vocal female drone singing, wedding customs, colourful costumes, the Suiti language, local cuisine, and folk songs, dances and melodies, at present only familiar to a few, mostly older people.

Droning comes in for protection in Mongolia, too, where Tsur music of the Uriankhai, simultaneously blending sounds from a three-holed pipe and the human throat, has faded due to neglect and disrespect of folk customs and religion. Touching the Tsur mouthpiece with the front teeth and applying the throat produces a unique timbre comprising a clear, gentle whistling sound with a drone.

Two other Mongolian practices are earmarked – Biyelgee ethnic dances in Khovd and Uvs provinces, embodying the nomadic way of life and typically confined to the small space inside the ger (tent); and the Tuuli oral tradition of heroic epics that can run to thousands of verses of benedictions, eulogies, spells, myths and folk songs.

Other practices inscribed today include the Kalyady Tsars (Christmas Tsars) ritual in Semezhava, Belarus; the Qiang New Year Festival, wooden arch bridge design, and Li textile techniques of spinning, dyeing, weaving and embroidering, all in China; Ca trù singing, a complex form of sung poetry in northern Viet Nam; and Cantu in paghjella, a male singing tradition combining three vocal registers in Corsica, France.

African traditions include the Sanké mon collective fishing rite in Mali on the second Thursday of the seventh lunar month, combining the sacrifice of roosters and goats to the water spirits of Sanké pond, followed by collective fishing over 15 hours and a masked dance; and oral traditions and performing arts of the Kayas in the sacred forests of the Mijikenda, Kenya, which are also sources of valuable medicinal plants.

Yesterday the Committee inscribed 76 traditions from around the world, including the tango, religious processions and fertility dances on UNESCO's the List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

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