



International Society for Ethnology and Folklore
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SIEF and UNESCO – Making a Difference

Position Paper

PREAMBLE

The Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore (SIEF) – the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore – is an international organization that facilitates and stimulates cooperation among scholars working within European Ethnology, Folklore Studies, Cultural Anthropology, and adjoining fields. In 2018, SIEF was accredited as an NGO under UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

With this position paper, SIEF contributes to ongoing discussions regarding the identification and definition of advisory functions to be fulfilled by accredited NGOs, as expressed in paragraph 96 of the 2003 Convention's Operational Directives.

SIEF's membership has extensive expertise to offer UNESCO in the area of cultural heritage. In particular, its members are specifically trained to use engaged scholarship to examine, document, and understand cultural forms, and are employed by a wide range of different kinds of institutions, such as universities, museums, research centres, archives, and related NGOs). As a result, members are in a particularly good position to explore and understand how the perspectives and practices involved in designating them as "heritage" can have both intended and unintended impacts on those forms and on the communities in which they emerge and exist. Our perspectives are essential for facilitating equitable participation, rejecting cultural domination, and recognizing the value of cultural diversity.

This position paper has three main objectives: First, it informs SIEF Working Groups and SIEF members about the implications of the UNESCO NGO accreditation. Second, it serves as a basis for communication between SIEF and different stakeholders in the field of ICH within and beyond UNESCO. Third, it aims to encourage reflexivity in the diverse scholarly and political practices relating to the field.

SIEF AND ICH

SIEF's disciplines of Ethnology and Folklore – the study of living, dynamic cultural practices – pioneered the exploration and understanding of vernacular traditions around the globe. We are dedicated to developing new knowledge about societies across time and space. SIEF's expertise and approaches engage directly with living heritage and the dynamic cultures that reflect who we are as communities, groups, and individuals. UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage calls for the identification, documentation, and safeguarding of distinctive and vulnerable cultural practices, a valorizing approach to heritage that requires these contemporary, qualitative methodologies to complete the picture.

The ICH Convention itself is closely intertwined with the disciplinary heritage of Ethnology and Folklore; our scholarship, documentation, and reflection offer reflexive models of co-

production now found in many other disciplines. SIEF is thus uniquely placed to undertake the essential work of assessing how ICH strategies and actions impact communities and their traditions.

The act of heritage labelling and listing – heritagization – is not, in itself safeguarding, but inevitably transforms communities’ relationships with their own cultures, creating a contested field. These transformations call for Ethnology and Folklore’s community-centred approach to ensure that the voices of those communities are heard, honoured, and integral to evolving processes of safeguarding.

SIEF thus affirms its dedication to ensuring that heritage professionals and scholars are respectful of, and responsive to, the communities with whom they work and in which they live. As an organisation historically closely linked to the concept of safeguarding, we recognize our responsibility to contextualize earlier disciplinary interpretations and approaches. SIEF is therefore sensitive to processes both within UNESCO itself and in the institutional networks involved in ICH policy.

OUR PRACTICE

Living Traditions

SIEF recognizes the complexity of cultures, groups, and individuals, and our methodologies actively seek out and acknowledge the multiple voices that create culture, community, heritage, and tradition. These are all processual and contextual phenomena, rather than fixed entities and structures. Innovation and change are key elements of such dynamics and the research praxes of Ethnology and Folklore thus focus on these areas, continuously revisiting key concepts such as change, adaptation, and varying contemporary understandings.

Engaged Practice

SIEF is composed of engaged researchers, practitioners, and experts, making us ideally equipped to explore issues around cultural stability and change from the perspectives of those who create culture, the communities themselves. We have long-standing traditions of working with diverse cultural voices, based on in-depth ethnographic work, participant observation, qualitative interviewing, digital humanities, exhibitions, and archival work, backed up by decades of ethical practice in documenting, engaging with, and facilitating community needs and practices, all within a framework of ongoing consent with stakeholders – our informed consent agreements are living documents, sensitive to contributors’ dynamic engagement.

Multi-Skilled Professionals

Our disciplines of Ethnology and Folklore recognize that there is no firm division between research and applied research: all of our work has impact “on the ground” and the two work hand-in-hand.

As a leading international organization that brings together diverse fields of enquiry, and members from forty-nine countries, SIEF is central to discussions related to issues of culture and heritage, and how best to support, celebrate, and represent living traditions in a globalizing world. SIEF is dedicated to overcoming imbalanced power relations in knowledge production and cultural policy. Many members have multiple roles as researchers, academics, trainers, community workers, cultural brokers, and policy advisors, along with extensive, ever expanding knowledge about world cultures, wide international networks, and cross-disciplinary partnerships. SIEF therefore has a unique dual function as an NGO and as a leading association of multi-skilled professionals.

Monitoring and Reflecting on Impact

Our work centres on living culture and the making and transformation of heritage, focusing on agents of cultural change, such as communities, media, and tourism, bound together by networks, power relations, and institutions, large and small. We explore how instruments such as ICH safeguarding work in society, which knowledge resources are mobilized for this purpose, and how their logics are expressed. We are therefore uniquely placed to assess and analyse the impact of measures such as “listing” and “de-listing”, the rights of communities to embrace or reject such listings, and the ways that these interventions may mitigate or amplify cultural change.

OUR ROLE

SIEF underscores the importance of informed advice and guidance at all stages of interaction with living traditions and cultures. We have expertise on a wide range of practical issues that align closely with UNESCO’s transnational goals, along with skills, experience, and monitoring capabilities around documenting, interpreting, and analysing community and institutional life, assessing their dynamic processual aspects.

SIEF has a strong track record of exploring transnational understandings of culture(s), urban and rural. Our work fosters community agency and self-determination, within the bounds of accepted norms of human rights, and the conditions required to enable them, challenging hegemonic practice and taking a moral stance when required.

SIEF supports and advocates for inclusive and comprehensive approaches, championing work with, for example, minorities, diasporas, and non-national cultures. Our work promotes dialogue across institutions, communities, and groups of scholars, and we have a strong track record of ethical practice on individual and institutional levels. In particular, we can support other stakeholders through our expertise in contemporary concepts of culture and in a thoughtful, reflexive approach to knowledge, both from living tradition and from the archive.

SIEF offers networking, training, teaching, and research, bringing academic and applied work together with community co-creation in pursuit of equitable participation and mutual recognition. We have broad experience with creating best-practice models, toolkits, policy statements and white papers, reports, ethically robust guidelines for documentation and consent, and visionary archiving/data policies. We can serve in leadership, consultancy, research, and evaluation roles.

How SIEF Can Make a Difference

SIEF encourages its members and Working Groups to engage actively with the Convention. The commitment can be on very different levels, ranging from the critical input to negotiations and listing processes, or follow-up research on impacts for communities and beyond. We encourage and support communities in taking an active role in engaging with the Convention in socially sustainable and inclusive ways.

SIEF can make a difference by contributing, for example, to the following aspects and fields of action:

- As one of the very few scientific organizations accredited, we can make an important contribution to international responses to the Convention with our inclusive and participatory concepts and working methods. Our bottom-up ethnographic approach partners with communities and core actors to explore ways of thinking, needs, and challenges experienced when engaging with the Convention’s application. These insights

can inform UNESCO's processes of evaluation, audits, governance, and the development of new Operational Directives.

- SIEF can contribute its experience-based knowledge and understanding of complex cultural processes, including institutional power and ethical issues, to the mechanisms of the Convention. In this way, it can also make an important contribution to the monitoring of working methods, evaluative mechanisms, and best practice.
- SIEF, with its wide international research and practice networks, is committed to increasing comparative knowledge by enhancing understandings of transnational complexities in the field of ICH. We aim to support our members and Working Groups in participating in UNESCO's national and regional commissions and related bodies.
- SIEF is established in both higher education and applied cultural practice, and thus can play an important role in linking research, teaching, and training, particularly by preparing young researchers, advocates, and community workers in Ethnology and Folklore for practical careers in the field.

With these fields of actions and ranges of expertise, we contend that SIEF and its members can make a positive difference in the reflexive processes of understanding, processing, and critically evaluating the complex, sometimes contested field of cultural heritage.