

# EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

Hanna Schreiber\*

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## 14th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Bogotá, 9-14 December 2019

Colombia hosted the 14th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which took place this year in Bogotá from 9 to 14 December 2019. It was the first Committee session to take place in the Latin American and Caribbean region. The meeting was presided by María Claudia López Sorzano, Secretary of Culture of the City of Bogotá. The opening ceremony hosted the President of Colombia Iván Duque Márquez and UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay among more than 1,000 participants, who had the possibility to admire the elements of the Carnival of Barranquilla, performed on stage especially for this occasion (the Carnival was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008).

This year the meeting agenda was filled with unprecedented decisions and political challenges. A few days after cherishing the Carnival of Barranquilla, the Committee took the decision to remove from the Representative List the Carnival from Aalst (Belgium), inscribed in 2010. This decision received a lot of media attention due to the accusations it used anti-Semitic

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imagery, an accusation lodged with UNESCO by many organizations, including the Anti-Defamation League. This marked the first time such a situation has ever happened. The consensual decision to remove the Aalst Carnival from the List was preceded by a letter from the Mayor of Aalst, Christoph D’Haese, with a formal request that the Carnival be removed from the List. At the same time internal inter-community consultations and a report submitted by Unia, Belgium’s independent public institution that combats discrimination and promotes equal opportunities ([www.unia.be](http://www.unia.be)), underscored the absence of any malicious intent, a fact which explains why the representations in the context of the carnival do not constitute criminal acts under the Belgian and European law (see more: LHE/19/14.COM/12). However, the Intergovernmental Committee, led in this case by Austria, did not find the explanations in this regard satisfactory. The decision was not commented on by the delegation of Belgium.

Another challenge with which the Committee was confronted was related to the Indian-Chinese dispute around the nomination of Sowa Rigpa, the science of healing (Dec. 10.b.14) submitted by India. Sowa Rigpa is widely known as traditional Tibetan medicine. The opinion of the Evaluation Body was positive about the file, although it noted that one criterion (Criterion 3 regarding safeguarding measures) was found not to have been fully satisfied. With reference to this criterion the mechanism of a “provisional upstream dialogue process” with the State Party was implemented by the Body and the answer sent by India to the question on Criterion 3 was found to be satisfactory. The main problem was related to the list of consulted communities, with many of them coming from the unregulated border territories between China and India, i.e. Aksai Chin and Arunachal Pradesh. China, as a current member of the Committee, fiercely opposed the nomination, claiming that it constitutes a step toward “politicizing” UNESCO and abusing the Convention for solving territorial issues. During closed negotiations between both States held during the Committee meeting, Palestine played an active mediating role and asked for taking a decision on referral of this file without discussion. Again the Committee acted on a consensual basis in this matter.

Apart from these two unprecedented matters, the Committee took many other decisions. It examined altogether 45 files and decided on the inscription of five new ICH elements to the Urgent Safeguarding List (from Philippines, Kenya, Mauritius, Botswana, and Belarus), 35 elements on the Representative List (including traditional Turkish archery, Morna, music from Cabo Verde, Irish harping, Ethiopian epiphany) and two new inscriptions to the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (a biocultural programme for the safeguarding of the tradition of the Blessed Palm in Venezuela and a safeguarding strategy of traditional crafts for peace building from Colombia). New multinational nominations inscribed into the Representative List drew particular attention: transhumance, submitted by Austria, Greece, and Italy; alpinism submitted by France, Italy, and Switzerland; and date palm, knowledge, skills, traditions, and practices, submitted successfully together by 14 Arab

States: Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Once again the persistent tendency to overturn the draft decisions of the Evaluation Body by the Committee in favour of States submitting nominations was very visible.

Other important decisions taken by the Committee included discussion and adoption of new strategic documents: “Intangible cultural heritage in emergencies” (LHE/19/14.COM/13 Rev.); “Reflection on the listing mechanisms of the Convention” (LHE/19/14.COM/14); and “Reflection on the participation of non-governmental organizations in the implementation of the Convention” (LHE/19/14.COM/15). The process of revising listing mechanisms starts in March 2020 and concrete recommendations are to take the form of changes to the Operational Directives, which will be adopted by the General Assembly of States-Parties to the Convention in June 2022. This process is financially supported by the government of Japan.

Alongside the 14th Committee meeting, the annual ICH NGO Forum meeting also took place. Milestones for the institutionalization of the ICH NGO Forum were achieved: Bylaws and a Code of conduct were adopted by the representatives of NGOs accredited to the Convention to provide advisory functions to the Committee; new working groups were created; and an overall discussion on the role of NGOs in the reform of the listing mechanisms was held. The report of the activities of ICH NGO Forum will be presented both to the Secretariat and to the 15th Committee meeting, which will be hosted next year by Jamaica.