Intangible cultural preservation means human protection

VietNamNet Bridge – Since UNESCO started honouring spiritual and cultural values of humanity with the intangible cultural heritage title in 2003, the official status has been granted to nine intangible cultural heritages in Vietnam, posing challenges for the country in preserving the heritages in accordance with its commitment to UNESCO. Professor Ngo Duc Thinh from the Vietnam National Cultural Heritage Council talked about the community's role in protecting intangible cultural heritages.

A palanquin procession ceremony at the Hung Kings festivals

UNESCO has recognised Vietnam's nine spiritual cultural values as intangible cultural heritages. They are Hue’s Nha Nhac (royal court music); Gong space culture in Tay Nguyen (Central Highlands); the northern province of Bac Ninh’s love duet singing; the Giong festival; Ca Tru ceremonial singing; Xoan singing; Don Ca Tai Tu music; the worship of Hung Kings; and Nghe Tinh Vi-Giam folk singing. However, the majority of Vietnamese people know little about the heritages such as Hue’s Nha Nhac. What do you think about this?

I think that the public's interest depends on the type of heritage. Hue’s Nha Nhac is royal court music which served kings and mandarins in the past; however this social class does not exist now. For these reasons, Nha Nhac is less popular than other types of heritage.

Meanwhile, the northern province of Bac Ninh's love duet singing and Phu Tho's Xoan singing is popular in
Do you think that the UNESCO title will change awareness of State management agencies and locals towards these precious heritages?

Yes, it will change them. Intangible culture is latent in the human and in performance spaces. For example, we can see the performance space and cultural value of artisan Quach Thi Ho whenever she sings Ca Tru.

The intangibility relates to the human, so preserving intangible culture is protecting humans.

For this reason, preserving intangible cultural heritage in Vietnam is the responsibility of not only the State management agencies but also the community. UNESCO has also stressed the community’s role in preserving intangible cultural heritages.

You said intangible cultural heritage preservation means human protection. It's a pity that numerous artisans have not been honoured. What do you think about this problem?

From this year onwards, relevant agencies will grant Meritorious and People’s Artisan titles to artisans who have significantly contributed to intangible cultural heritages.

The Government issued two decrees on these titles in two fields: intangible culture proposed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism; and traditional crafts by the Ministry of Industry and Trade.

However, the provisions related to the artisans’ honour need to be more flexible. I think it is not reasonable to depend on the numbers of medals they have gained and students they trained to recognise Meritorious and People’s Artisans.

Truthfully, the honourable titles are considered as precious and timely medicine to console and encourage old artisans.

Vietnam National Cultural Heritage Council, of which you are a member, has proposed the Government build various heritage dossiers to submit to UNESCO, contributing to enriching cultural treasures. According to you, will the dossier on Vietnamese Four Palace Religion be approved by UNESCO?

The dossier on Vietnamese Four Palace Religion has been submitted to UNESCO and will be examined next year.

As I know, the international friends and UNESCO’s scientists are expecting this dossier and urged our Government to complete it. However, this religion has had to overcome numerous social barriers in Vietnam to be submitted to UNESCO, including many people’s view that the religion is a form of superstition.

Has this lesson been learned from the experience in building the dossier on Worship of Hung Kings?

Yes, the dossier on Worship of Hung Kings has been reviewed and corrections made many times in accordance with UNESCO’s suggestions.

Initially, the dossier only focused on Hung Kings temple relic site in Hy Cuong commune, Viet Tri city, in the northern province of Phu Tho; however it was not appreciated by UNESCO due to the lack of community.

Many villages in Vietnam have Hung Kings temples, of which 106 are in Phu Tho; therefore, representatives of UNESCO presented the certificate recognising Worship of Hung Kings as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity to the three abbots of Thuong (Upper), Trung (Middle) and Ha (Lower) temples, not the province’s leaders.

Vietnamese State should find ways to raise public awareness of intangible cultural heritage preservation in their community.
accordance with the country's commitment to UNESCO.

*Nhan Dan*