MAYO COLLEGE GIRLS' SCHOOL MODEL UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE 2017

BACKGROUND GUIDE

UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC, AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

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Agenda:

THE NEED FOR CONTEXTUALISED EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS: ORAL TRADITIONS & ORALITY AROUND THE WORLD.

We live in a globalised world, and feel no hesitation in calling ourselves a global citizen of this multi-dimensional world. What does this mean? Social media has a run of the land, it helps us interact with people not only of our country, but many countries other than ours. Foreign brands are at the tips of our fingers, and we have our own food favourites from the various cuisines of the world. It would therefore, be safe to say, that we know much more of the world around us than our previous generations did.

Do we though?

We get a lot of our information from news, online media, and other textual sources of our choosing. We know of the various wars, the falling governments, the efforts of the UN and what is happening where. This information is different, we think, we are learning so much of the world! We now understand different parts of the world!

The answer to these questions, is a very incomplete yes. Yes, we do have more access to information than our previous generations ever did- digitalisation has taken care of that. Yes, we now know of the trouble in Syria, the Presidential elections in the US and the workings of the United Nations. But what we see as a complete lens to understand world events, do not help us understand *why* these things happen the way they do. They also do not help us know about a lot of processes and phenomena that do not make it to the world stage.

There is a profound absence of a structure that helps us understand why people different places think differently from the way we think; we try to understand and evaluate world events just from

the way we think is correct. Sometimes we are not able to realise that there are many aspects within our own culture, history and language that do not originally belong to the society and region we come from. How do we understand this? Moreover, how do young individuals at preliminary levels of education like in schools be better able to understand the world that they live in? Is a dependence on written texts and documents the only way to imbibe knowledge?

UNESCO's endeavours have always been inclined towards not only preservation, but better integration and absorption of cultural institutions that are an important part of regional societies. It comes from the belief that there is no homogenous or 'correct' way to understand things and see the world, rather different societies understand and articulate the things important to it in different ways. All these are equally important and integral to world knowledge. The 2003 **Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage** and the 2005 **Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions** were important steps in laying down the categories of culture and heritage and the guidelines through which they need to be understood and steps for their preservation need to be put in place. These conventions focus on these institutions at a much larger scale, looking at common principles and a global commitment to upkeep them. This is what it has to say on them:

The oral traditions and expressions domain encompasses an enormous variety of spoken forms including proverbs, riddles, tales, nursery rhymes, legends, myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances and more. Oral traditions and expressions are used to pass on knowledge, cultural and social values and collective memory. They play a crucial part in keeping cultures alive.

Some types of oral expression are common and can be used by entire communities while others are limited to particular social groups, only men or women, perhaps, or only the elderly. In many societies, performing oral traditions is a highly specialized occupation and the community holds professional performers in the highest regard as guardians of collective memory. Such performers can be found in communities all over the world. While poets and storytellers in non-Western societies such as the griots and dyelli from Africa are well known, there is also a rich oral tradition in Europe and North America. In Germany and the USA, for example, there are hundreds of professional storytellers.

Because they are passed on by word of mouth, oral traditions and expressions often vary significantly in their telling. Stories are a combination – differing from genre to genre, from context to context and from performer to performer – of reproduction, improvisation and creation. This combination makes them a vibrant and colourful form of expression, but also fragile, as their

viability depends on an uninterrupted chain passing traditions from one generation of performers to the next.

Although language underpins the intangible heritage of many communities, the protection and preservation of individual languages is beyond the scope of the 2003 Convention, though they are included in **Article 2** as a means of transmitting intangible cultural heritage. Different languages shape how stories, poems and songs are told, as well as affecting their content. The death of a language inevitably leads to the permanent loss of oral traditions and expressions. However, it is these oral expressions themselves and their performance in public that best help to safeguard a language rather than dictionaries, grammars and databases. Languages live in songs and stories, riddles and rhymes and so the protection of languages and the transmission of oral traditions and expressions are very closely linked.

Like other forms of intangible cultural heritage, oral traditions are threatened by rapid urbanisation, large-scale migration, industrialisation and environmental change. Books, newspapers and magazines, radio, television and the Interne can have an especially damaging effect on oral traditions and expressions. Modern mass media may significantly alter or over replace traditional forms of oral expression. Epic poems that once took several days to recite in full may be reduced to just a few hours and traditional courtship songs that were sung before marriage may be replaced by CDs or digital music files.

The most important part of safeguarding oral traditions and expressions is maintaining their every day role in society. It is also essential that opportunities for knowledge to be passed from person-to-person survive; chances for elders to interact with young people and pass on stories in homes and schools, for example. Oral tradition often forms an important part of festive and cultural celebrations and these events may need to be promoted and new contexts, such as storytelling festivals, encouraged to allow traditional creativity to find new means of expression. In the spirit of the 2003 Convention, safeguarding measures should focus on oral traditions and expressions as processes, where communities are free to explore their cultural heritage, rather than as products.

Communities, researchers and institutions may also use information technology to help safeguard the full range and richness of oral traditions, including textual variations and different styles of performance. Unique expressive features, such as intonation and a much larger number of varying styles, can now be

recorded as audio or video, as can interactions between performers and audiences and non-verbal story elements including gestures and mimicry. Mass media and communication technologies can be

used to preserve and even strengthen oral traditions and expressions by broadcasting recorded performances both to their communities of origin and to a wider audience.[1]

Such endeavours can very well aid and contribute to branching areas of education, wherein the UNESCO has striven for many years to not only provide equal and comprehensive education to children all over the world, but also have emphasised on the need for quality education that aids sustainable development. UNESCO has also been entrusted with leading the **Global Education 2030 Agenda** through **Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030**. Its many targets aim to create an equitable, safe and inclusive environment for children to pursue their primary and secondary education with a view towards skill development and effective learning.[2] It becomes interesting and imperative for us to bring together the ideals enshrined in both these documents together through a new approach of learning and school education.

The role of oral institutions in depicting global cultures has been a very interesting but incomplete area of study. Whether it be the traditions of storytelling, oral transmission of knowledge, religious practices, customs and traditions, understanding through the verbal medium is a part of each individual's upbringing around the world. I want to take you a step further. I want to tell you that these oral traditions are worth understanding not just for general knowledge purposes. Rather, they can also be key to better able to understand your own experiences and better connect them with people different from yourself.

 Cultural experience becomes unique to that individual in the sense that it would differ from another individual living in an area completely different from their own. Only if we take pains to understand how a person experiences their life through the stories, value systems and the notions of familiarity that their family, friends and neighbourhood give them, we will not be able to relate to their experiences. We will always view them as different from us, we might even feel that they are operating in a manner that is not correct because it is so different from our own. Thanks to the internet, wherein we have been heavily exposed to Western culture, we can understand to a certain extent what a school student in a high school in America goes through in their teenage life. Would you know that about a person of the same age in Egypt? Or Maldives? Or Brazil?

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[1] http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/oral-traditions-and-expressions-00053
[2] http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/

There is a heavy emphasis on Eastern societies trying to understand how Western societies work; it also comes from an indirect pressure for these societies to conform to Western standards. As citizens of the 21st century, we know that this is an incomplete view of world affairs. Every society and community has something that we can learn from. We can adapt it to suit our own needs and create value-addition in our own societies. A case in point would be using the traditional clay terracotta *matkas* to store and cool everyday perishable materials as a low budget and basic alternative to the refrigerator.

How do we correct this imbalance in knowledge acquisition process then? Clearly, we need to develop educational tools that enable individuals all over the world to understand the intricacies of culture in different regions, and do it in a way that they can adapt that knowledge to apply it to their own societies. Understanding oral traditions and how orality works and can be implemented, can go a long way in creating a level field for such a process.

This agenda focuses on understanding the need for oral traditions in school education at two levels: firstly, as a part of the official school curriculum to be more knowledgeable about world culture and the need for its preservation. Secondly, it also seeks to formulate methods through which aspects of oral traditions can be picked up and be included in the teaching process itself. The purpose of this committee is to be able to build upon existing UNESCO conventions and target goals on the issue to bring forward a more focussed document that advises education policy in schools.

But before we delve further in that, I would urge you to understand this agenda by decoding a few terms. What is 'culture'? What is 'intangible heritage'? What is 'oral'?

Culture
We often hear the term 'pop culture', short for 'popular culture'. What does this mean? We see this to be a representation of on-going trends in food, clothing, language, movies, political opinion, literature etc., which we as residents of this society at the present time relate to and understand. It can be described as a representation and manifestation of accepted norms in society that becomes the basis of how the people within it rationalise and understand themselves and the things around them. Culture is not stagnant, and can change over time; that is why we sometimes refer to the 19th

century or 18th century culture to be different from 20th century or 21st century culture. Similarly, culture can also be distinguished through region where 'Indian culture' is different from 'American culture' which is different from 'Russian culture' and so on. Culture cannot be defined as one thing; it is a more omnipresent reflection of what a society likes and considers itself to be a part of.

Intangible Heritage

Let us understand these two words separately. *Intangible* refers to something that cannot be measured or seen in material terms, it has no physical presence. Its importance lies in the value that it adds to the things it is attached to. For example, happiness is intangible- it cannot be seen, but it adds value to your mood and sense of being. At the same time, something like cyberspace is also intangible- it has no physical presence per say, only a manifestation on our electronic devices when we access it through Internet portals.

Heritage on the other hand, can simplistically be described as a valuable asset that is owned valued by a group of people- either in the shape of a community, a society, a state or a nation. It has both historical and cultural value, and is handed down from one generation of society to the next to be representative of its best aspects. In this way, heritage is not only expected to have the characteristics of the group of people who value it, but also be an embodiment of the best elements among them. In this sense, monuments and historical architecture is often seen as heritage. But if we expand the scope of what heritage can mean, we may find more unconventional examples.

Intangible heritage therefore, can be understood as those elements or aspects of a society/community/nation that may not have a material or physical presence that can be seen, but is of immense historical and cultural value to them. It becomes a way through which they define themselves and also uphold the values that they enshrine. Language and oral traditions, by this parameter, is one of the most important examples of intangible heritage.

Oral

Oral can simply be understood as something that comes from the word of mouth- the spoken word. However, it may also encompass other aspects of speaking other than vocabulary. Understanding orality delves into *how* a language is spoken. This includes the accent, which merely is the way the

tongue and teeth move around when words are spoken a certain a way- often it also involves the role of the epiglottis, vocal cords, and the stomach being exercised a certain way while speaking. Which sound is enunciated, which are left out; why do certain words do not have an equivalent counterpart in another language; how certain words encompass complex concepts and emotions within a single word- all become a part of orality.

Oral traditions and the written text

Since we associate oral with the spoken word, it is important to understand that the preservation of oral traditions does not equate to the *absence of any written material associated with the said tradition.* What this essentially means is that for the sustenance of different forms of oral traditions and orality, there will and should exist some written texts that help substantiate and even interpret them. However, the idea behind these texts is not *replace* the said traditions, rather to *supplement* and *support* their existence. In a very general analogy, as an English dictionary does not replace the spoken language, rather helps it to be better understood by its speakers, other oral traditions may be supplemented in a similar manner.

In order to move forward and articulate how we can protect oral traditions and the institution of orality around the world, we need to understand why it matters in the first place.

1) **As a means of global cultural education**

The most evident aspect of why oral traditions and orality need to be preserved and protected is because of the educational aspect of their existence. They are representatives of various cultures and regional processes in different parts of the world and are in some respects a much better means of acquainting school students with these. There are two broad elements to this educational process:

● As a means of direct information:

Linguists, anthropologists, historians and sociologists often draw upon fieldwork data to study societies and processes over time. While some fieldwork draws upon finding different primary

documentation and archival information to support what they are looking for, a large part also rests on conducting oral interviews with the inhabitants of the region they are researching in. Interacting with persons in this fashion open up a host of considerations that these scholars learn about that particular community- the dialect, accent, choice of words, manner of speaking and what elements they choose to talk about. These elements, while very preliminary, are often crucial when trying to understand entire communities and the processes that shape and sustain them.

Anthropologists and sociologists study societies and their behaviour for a living. A large part of how a society functions is through the culture it produces and the communities who identify themselves with various aspects of this culture. The culture manifests itself in various forms- architecture, paintings, music and language. As societies change, they also develop differently in different parts of the world. This difference is often wrongly understood as a pattern of development and 'progress'. One of the earliest means of studying these varied societies was by learning about it through the textual evidence that it produced- government documents, literature, historical texts, etc. Such an activity, however, focuses on analysis based on the *similarities* found within these various spaces and understands them in light of the *presence* or *absence* of these similarities.

As these disciplines progressed, they found it more fruitful to understand them in light of the *differences* that they found in these, as they would enable a more accurate study based on the unique qualities of these regional communities. The traditions of orality often focus and celebrate the characteristic features of a said community. They pick and mould the behaviour and functioning of that community in a fashion that best fits them, without needing to adhere to a common structure often demanded by norms of writing.

Other than language, oral historians often draw upon the memories of their interviewees to understand history through *experience*. An apt example would be the many Jews that were interviewed post the Holocaust to better understand Nazi rule in Germany, or the Indians-Pakistanis interviewed in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition. Understanding lived experience helps the historian to get an insight into a major event of social-cultural-political importance in a way that formal documentation cannot; oral documentation constitutes many aspects that might not be as prominent or revealing if encountered just on paper. The oral historian, in fact, uses the oral testimony of his interviewee and shapes it to form a historical narrative, where the interviewee

becomes the narrator of his/her own story. This format enables the historian to look at individual cases as uniquely as joining them into a collective history of a larger event.

- As a means of alternative analysis

Peter Winch, in his article *Understanding Primitive Society*, comments on the work of a scholar E.E. Evans Pritchard regarding his study of an African tribe- the Azande. The Azande are believers of magic and witchcraft, and this has an important function in their everyday life. To any resident of the 21st or even the 20th century, like Pritchard, such a belief was absurd and was reflective of a primitive culture; a level of societal behaviour that was indicative of a lack of civilisation as well as bereft of the 'logical scientific thinking' that is a prerequisite of the progressive world. This qualification, at the time of this study, was possessed only by the West, which put it in the category of a 'developed' set of nations.

Amongst other things, Winch had an interesting point to make. Does believing in a different set of logic separate from one's own; automatically disqualify it as not rational? If we do not associate magic, but rather science to be the reason why the sun rises in the morning or sets in the night, does that make that make it the only 'correct' way of interpreting this? The Azande did not question *how* something happened using magic as a premise, they were interested in arguing for *why* it happened in the way it did. What we called science, engineering, and metaphysical phenomena, they called magic.

While this may be an oversimplification of what Winch was meaning to say, the larger point I'm trying to make is this- the culture, practices and beliefs in a society, which are enshrined in its oral traditions, can help us understand how differently the world and its phenomena can be understood. Our institutionalised education in schools is structured in a way that makes us unable to understand any other method of interpretation or analysis of information that is different from our own. We are often caught understanding different communities and nations in binaries like 'primitive' and 'backward' on the one hand and 'developed' and 'progressive' on the other. An introduction to understanding oral traditions, orality and how they work will be an essential step for young people like school students to develop multiple prisms of logic and rationality.

2) As a means of understanding our own culture

Orality and oral institutions to a large extent reside in the institution of language. Language is not just a means of communicating and expressing ideas between people, it is also something that has a life of its own and changes over time. These changes can be brought about by various processes- absorption of different cultural influences over a long period of time in a single region; individuals moving from place to place absorbing the different elements of language that each region has to offer; and the settlement of large migrant populations from different parts of the world within the same region. All these processes affect what happens to the language and the way it is perceived and spoken by an individual. This is why residents within the same city may speak the same language differently depending upon what part of the city they reside in. The differences in the way they see their language is not to do with the logic of dialects and accents, their *absorption of certain elements over the others* changes due neighbourhood culture they come in contact with.

Understanding this brings us to a crucial point- *language and culture is interrelated.* It is this relationship that defines how oral traditions develop and are sustained in an environment. A study conducted by Jenny Cheshire, Paul Kerswill, Sue Fox and Eivind Torgersen on the multicultural city of London is an example of the same. What they essentially were able to do was study the different resident groups residing in London to reconstruct what they called 'Multicultural London English' (MLE). Their study is able to dissect two levels of how a language like English is differently spoken in different parts of the city. The first level attempts to understand how language is affected by the integration of culturally-ethnically-linguistically diverse groups through the generations of single families. The addition of each new cultural-ethnic-linguistic group introduces a new element within the spoken language in the family. The second level understands this process by looking at the settlement of different cultural-ethnic groups in a particular community that brings across changes in the spoken language. This second level introduces changes in the spoken language by *association* with other linguistic elements.

The changes in a globally spoken language like English is often visualised in terms of a movement from West to East. What this means is that we often assume that English will be learned and taught in schools in the East in a way that it is done in the West. Today, depending upon the schools we

attend and the media we have access to, we model our spoken and written English on an American or British model. But the processes of cultural integration and oral traditions of a region, sometimes in a way that mixes and matches both, affect even a West-originated language like English. A study by Steven Mace, attempting to trace the life of a British soldier posted in India in the early 20th century, was able to bring across an interesting point as far as the affect local phenomena have on a spoken language.

Talking about the various postcards and photographs with brief descriptions that the soldier in question was sending back to his family in England, Mace mentions how the term 'loose-wallah' caught his fancy. Mentioned in a very offhanded fashion, in a way once would refer to a phrase often used and casually understood, the soldier had no inkling of whether his family would be able to understand the term for what it stood for (loose-wallah essentially meant a petty thief, pickpocket or similar). Even today, terms like 'guru', 'loot' and 'pyjamas', commonly used in American and British English, have origins that are not rooted in the West. They are regularly used and specific meanings, and are looked at as natural editions to a language they originally do not belong to.

In summary, changes in a language are natural and inevitable. These changes are brought about through a constant process of interaction with elements of culture and social processes. This interaction produces a form of oral traditions that are very much ingrained in how people in a society or community live, even if they do not consciously realise it. Understanding and studying these makes for deeper knowledge about our own society and why we speak the way we do, and what does that language value and hold representative of that culture.

Why should oral traditions and orality be studied in schools?

Drawing from the above reasons, understanding oral traditions and orality as a part of school curriculum serves many purposes. School education is often blamed for not being inclusive of many aspects of our society, and being taught in a manner that is not encouraging of critical thinking. Knowledge on these aspects are only restricted to young adults who study these at the higher educational levels like in colleges and universities. There is a need not only to know more about the

world through the way they understand their oral traditions, but also pick on methods and techniques to reform the way education is executed in schools.

UNESCO and the UN as whole enshrine ideals of inclusive growth, where sustainable and quality education becomes an important part. However, it has been seen that while individual actions on protecting intangible cultural heritage and providing holistic school education have been worked towards separately, there is a need for a plan that bridges the two. There is a need for an interdisciplinary recognition that these two issues are in fact, connected to each other and can aid in their respective resolutions. Debate and discussion on the agenda within committee will hopefully lead to comprehensive and well-formulated solutions.

Questions to consider

1) Are texts the only means of understanding 'facts' and 'information'? What can oral traditions help us understand that texts don't?

2) What are the various methods through which oral traditions can be understood and taught in the world context in schools?

3) What are the aspects of certain oral traditions that can be picked and implemented to improve school education?

4) Can oral traditions and orality be made compatible with existing curriculum structures? How?

5) How can one bridge the gap between how oral traditions and orality is understood in schools and in higher educational levels like colleges and research centres?

6) How can the 2003 UNESCO Convention on intangible cultural heritage be adapted to be better suited to school education in the context of oral traditions?

7) How can the Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030 be made more inclusive of a holistic education inclusive or oral traditions and orality?

8) Is there a need for a separate convention/goal on the same altogether?

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