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Intersections

Bridging the Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage Practices

Nothing is so natural, familiar and simple as intangible cultural heritage (ICH). Put in words, however, makes it abstract and very often inapprehensible. Especially so, when people with different (professional) backgrounds and knowledge debate about it. The term reflects a set of ideas and policies generated on an academic and professional international level through UNESCO,[1] with the aim to valorize the diversity of cultural expressions, respecting in the first place the communities, groups and in some cases individuals (further referred to as CGI), who in different, today relevant ways, take part in cherishing skills and knowledge traced in the past and transmitted over time. For its bearers however, this knowledge and these practices are part of everyday life and become *heritage* once identified through the heritage sector.

Taking in consideration the strong presence and position of CGI, the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (further referred to as the 2003 Convention) presents a counterpoint to the UNESCO 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural an Natural Heritage (further referred to as the 1972 Convention) which is based on the concepts of outstanding universal value and authenticity. Even though the term *heritage* today encompasses both tangible and intangible cultural heritage along with natural heritage, it seems, and practice shows, in the past it proved incongruent and somehow impossible to apply the notion of authenticity and universal value to a living practice of a specific community (due of course to cultural and social dynamics). This incompatibility excluded intangible cultural heritage from the heritage discourse of the 1972 Convention. What is worth reflecting upon is that it also excluded folklore as a vivid performative heritage in the 1960s and 1970s.[2] In *Theorizing heritage* Kirschenblatt-Gimblatt asks "…if folklore is such a bad word, why heritage is such a good one?" Indeed, taking her words further, "… folklore is made, not found" gives us ground to compare this statement to what Laurajane Smith referrers to as the "making of heritage." The making of heritage according

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1   I believe it is worth recalling the long process preceding the adoption of the 2003 Convention e.g. in N.B. Salazar, 'The heritage discourse', in: T. Nikolić Đerić e.a. (eds.), *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector. A Companion to Discover Transformative Heritage Practices for the 21st century.* Bruges, 2020, p. 23-24.

2   B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Theorizing heritage', *Ethnomusicology* 3, 1995, p. 367-380; L. Smith, 'All Heritage is Intangible: Critical Heritage Studies and Museums', in: R. Knoop, P. van der Pol and W. Wesselink (eds.), *All Heritage is Intangible: Critical Heritage Studies and Museums.* Weert, 2011, p. 6-35.

to Smith happens on three levels, folkloristic on that end is generated only on one, I dare to say, the professional level. Nevertheless, as production of knowledge in the present that has resources in the past, folkloristic is part of the heritage making. If we think about the 1972 Convention which included heritage sites and monuments that as evidences of culture are valorized from the present perspective and are made heritage, it is worth reflecting more on why other evidences of culture, respectively studied and as such valorized by folkloristic, were not included in that specific heritage paradigm and had to wait thirty more years and the change of nomenclature to be regarded as heritage on an international level. Museums and heritage sites are made, as well as folklore, through the interpretations of cultural manifestations (these are manifested in manifold material and performative ways). The only difference is the subfield of expertise (archaeology, anthropology, art…) and the medium (in situ, exhibition, choreography…) of representation. Expanding on the nomenclature further, it could seem even more logical to regard folklore as heritage than the actual living practices covered by the intangible cultural heritage paradigm. By stating this, I in no way want to hierarchize culture nor heritage as cultural practice of many contemporary societies. Rather, I want to emphasize the difference of heritage as contemporary act of valorizing cultural manifestations and (intangible) culture (framed maybe wrongly within the heritage paradigm) as contemporary act of living. In this regard the 2003 Convention is not only an instrument to valorize knowledge and practices transmitted from generation to generation (again, part of which was earlier regarded as the study-subject of folkloristic) but rather a par-excellence example of how all forms of heritage should be rethought in relation to different interest groups, in first instance the communities (or groups) living with or along this heritage.

Another possible dimension of this exclusion might be reflected in the materialist orientation of Western heritage studies stipulating hierarchization of cultural manifestations in this specific framework. A third reason I can suggest was (is) the problem of the heritage sector to democratize access to heritage and its management. I see this impossibility reflected in the Authorised Heritage Discourse conceived and explained by Laurajane Smith but also in the authoritative representations[3] within the anthropological fieldwork which were (and often still are) 'the voices' generating and communicating knowledge, partly constituting what is today regarded as intangible cultural heritage (or simply 'culture' as Salazar[4] noted) through written studies and museum exhibitions.

The heritage discourse reflected in the 1972 Convention was criticized at large, especially its Eurocentric standards, leading to the awareness of multiple and diverse interpretations of heritage and the impossibility of a globally agreed-upon concept of heritage. At the same time, the 1972 Convention affirmed the importance of identifying (tangible and natural) heritage and

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3   J. Clifford, 'Introduction: partial truths', in: J. Clifford and G.E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing cultures: The poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. California, 1986, p. 1-26.

4   Salazar, *The heritage discourse*, p. 23-24.

raised awareness of its values as well as its vulnerability. It also showed its potential in empowering individuals and building resilient communities. Further, the specific *modus operandi* of the 1972 Convention (in relation / without any relation to intangible cultural heritage) generated a fruitful platform for cultural heritage activism, part of which related to ICH, along with a general need of heritage democratization.

This uncomfortable situation on an international policy level was (finally and partly) surpassed with the Programme of Proclamations of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity in 2001, 2003 and 2005, preceding the entry into force of the 2003 Convention. "The programme of the Proclamation adopted an innovative approach assigning a major role to the local communities and to the custodians of the tradition in the safeguarding of their intangible heritage."[5] Heritage elements were selected on the basis of six criteria:

- possessing outstanding value as a Masterpiece of the human creative genius
- rootedness in the cultural tradition or cultural history of the community concerned
- plays a role as means of affirming the cultural identity of the community concerned
- is distinguished by excellence in the application of skills and technical qualities displayed
- constitutes a unique testimony of a living cultural tradition
- is threatened with disappearance due to insufficient means for safeguarding or to processes of rapid change.

Starting with the Proclamation programme we can trace the developments in applying the 2003 Convention, which – seen from today's perspective – seem quite far away from the first ideas on working with and safeguarding of ICH. This is especially so if we look at the first two criteria implying its universal and historical value. These very first inputs towards a general public (potential communities of bearers and practitioners especially) and the heritage sector, generated some kind of long-lasting uncertainty even though everyone 'knew' what ICH is all about.

The clumsy use of terminology, which was relying on the concept of binary oppositions, didn't explain the concept but it rather generated misunderstanding. The term *intangible cultural heritage* was coined as the very opposite to material and tangible. This term, on a conversational level, didn't mean anything in any language before 2003, and more importantly before 2006, after the 2003 Convention entered into force. This obviously raises the question: with whom was/is this heritage communicating? Further, even though one might think that the opposition would exclude one element from the other, the use of the binary system in heritage terminology brought us, paradoxically to a rather new but fastly growing 'problem' embedded in the

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5   K. Matsuura, 'Preface', in: UNESCO, *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible heritage of Humanity. Proclamations 2001, 2003 and 2005.* Paris, 2006, p. 3.

idea of the *intangible dimension of tangible heritage*. The problem is reflected in the often witnessed difficulty to differentiate these two concepts. There are still not many works reflecting on this issue from the ICH perspective, but there are many scholars from the 'tangible part' of the heritage sector that often refer to ICH when speaking about the techniques and methods used in building and architecture, or to emotions, stories and memories relating to specific heritage sites, monuments and museum objects. Of course this is not entirely wrong, but a more precise definition of the research subject and choice of wording is needed. I will give one example. When in 2003 professor emeritus Nuobu Ito wrote about the intangible culture of heritage sites and monuments from the ICOMOS position, he starts with a bold statement:

"Intangible culture is the mother of all cultures."[6]

Let's focus on the fact that he didn't use the word 'heritage' in this syntagm. I would like to propose this is because (in this specific context) he was referring not to 'intangible cultural heritage' but rather to culture as "(…) human product moulded and matured in an inspired or cultivated brain."[7] In his truly inspiring text, Ito identifies seven categories or point of interest of intangible culture (!) involved in the tangible cultural heritage. Aware of other subjects that might be of interest in this context, for the purpose of the article, he focuses only on skills related to constructing buildings and spaces: skills on basic planning, on measuring unit, on the decision of measuring unit, on L-shape squares, on lumbering and processing timber, on joints and on special design techniques. He concluded that through such visual information, it is possible to approach the past (!) intangible cultural heritage.

This short paragraph enables us to emphasize a pertinent position of ICH in relationship to tangible cultural heritage. ICH is often understood as supporting knowledge and skill for the conservation of tangible heritage (heritage sites as well as museum objects) and as something frozen in the past. I personally do agree that these skills are part of the intangible cultural heritage, but are in no way 'past ICH' (because something like 'past ICH' doesn't exist) nor the only ICH manifestation related to built (tangible) cultural heritage. If we switch positions and try to understand heritage from the communities' perspective, we will discover many more ways of addressing intangible cultural heritage related to sites, monuments and even objects.

Years ago, I have studied the temple complex of Khajuraho as an Indology and Cultural anthropology student. All of the abovementioned planning, building and design skills, presented by professor Ito were present in a similar way even in the Indian example I was working on. These activities are inseparable from past and present religious' practices or – I might even add – from *knowledge on nature and the universe*. But what was (is) interesting and what I have witnessed during my short stay in Khajuraho, is the way people today

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6   N. Ito, '*Intangible cultural heritage involved in tangible cultural heritage*', in: 14th ICOMOS General Assembly and International Symposium: *Place, memory, meaning: preserving intangible values in monuments and sites* (27-31/10/2003, Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe), p. 1.

7   Ibidem, p. 1.

still use one of the twenty-two temples for everyday religious purposes. With a fourteen years' distance, my professional experience and the developments in the heritage sector in mind, this is what I would call 'ICH related to heritage sites'. A position where tangible heritage 'supports' intangible heritage's needs and vice-versa.

This position is similarly addressed in Ayesha Pamela Rogers's excellent study *Values and Relationships between Tangible and Intangible Dimensions of Heritage Places.*[8] Writing about the contemporary authorized and unauthorized uses of Ali Mardan Khan's resting place in Lahore, Rogers illustrates the multiple values attributed to it by different communities. The tomb is officially protected and under the care of the provincial Department of Archaeology. It is closed for the public but opens for religious functions on Thursdays, which is regulated by the authorities. At the same time there is another group that uses the tomb, but without the approval of the authorities. This unauthorized use sees female devotees climb to the dome of the tomb and walk around their religious leader seeking fulfilment of their prayers. Although Rogers in her work refers to the intangible dimension of heritage places, as obvious from the title of her article, I will use two cases presented in the article to propose a distinction between 'intangible cultural heritage' and the 'intangible dimension of tangible heritage'.

The contemporary use of the tomb by a group of devotees is clearly a ritual which can be traced in history. It has been transmitted for generations and has a meaning in today's everyday life. This is clearly an ICH practice as understood by the 2003 Convention and it is closely connected with the heritage site as devotees actively use the tomb.

When Rogers presents the case study of the Plain of Jars in the People's Democratic Republic of Lao in the same article, she discusses a multitude of intangible dimensions of this heritage site (from its archaeological value to memorial values on the Secret War) as well as ICH practices and knowledge (tales of giant ancestors and medicinal purposes) related to the same site. It is exactly here that I want to emphasize the often misuse of the concept of intangible cultural heritage by (non)professionals who want to address values related to heritage sites and monuments. Of course values are intangible; but not every knowledge, memory or story related to heritage sites may fall under the concept of 'intangible cultural heritage' as understood by the 2003 Convention. These performative categories represent rather the intangible dimension of the tangible.

I find its unclear usage inappropriate and unethical as it can be misleading for the general public. When using the word intangible in the heritage context, we have to be clear on what kind of intangibility are we referring to. With no critical distance it undermines the meaning of the concept of ICH (mostly oriented towards a more democratic relation of communities and heritage) with possible dangerous consequences. When Laurajane Smith says "all

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8   A.P. Rogers, 'Values and Relationships between Tangible and Intangible Dimensions of Heritage Places', in: E. Avrami e.a. (eds.), *Values in Heritage Management: Emerging Approaches and Research Directions.* Los Angeles, 2019, p. 172-185.

heritage is intangible"[9] and Nuobu Ito "intangible culture is the mother of all culture"[10] they address totally different aspects of heritage; Smith primarily that of heritage as a performative practice of valorisation and remembering and Ito skills needed to build and conserve tangible heritage.

From the few examples I presented in the above lines we can see the great potential for a value oriented conservation practice of heritage sites which could in some cases encompass ICH as practice, but also a set of theoretical ideas developed for the sake of safeguarding the very practice or knowledge, but in relation to tangible heritage also as measures of preservation. Unfortunately, as these studies show, the position of CGI in relation to heritage sites is still far away from a dialogic and participatory practice presenting one of the greatest challenges for future oriented heritage practices. Emphasizing the intangible dimension of tangible, as presented in previous lines, minimizes the role of CGIs related to ICH and/or heritage sites, as well as the values underpinning ICH.

Participation and change are the two concepts underlying the essence of understanding / identifying and safeguarding ICH and it is from this same practice that the tangible heritage sector, including museums, can learn.

Intangible cultural heritage and museums

I have been working in an ethnographic museum and in an ecomuseum as a professional program manager, while at the same time being part of the community concerned with a set of ICH practices managed by the ecomuseum. In the past 12 years, I have witnessed ICH and museums working closely together but not 'as one'. These collaborations are nothing new, especially in ethnographic and later to a greater extent in community museums and ecomuseums. Some practices, such as the use of film and photography to contextualize and explain how specific museum objects were used in respective cultures, started with the very first established ethnographic museums and exhibitions. Already in 1900, the anthropologist Félix-Louis Regnault and his colleague Léon Azoulay conceived an audio-visual museum of man, explaining that "having a loom, a lathe, or a javelin is not enough; one must also know how these things are used."[11] Even if the example has a positive note, the general framework within which these practices were delivered bares the burden of colonial power relations. I believe it is the postmodern thought and consequently the post-modern turn in anthropology[12] that influenced much of what has been going on in the heritage sector (and humanities in general) during the second half of the 20th century and accordingly, in what in the 1980s became known as New Museology strongly influenced by de Hugues de Varines's ideas and reflected also on a practical level in the concept of

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9   L. Smith, *All Heritage is Intangible*, p. 5-36.

10   N. Ito, *Intangible cultural heritage*, p. 1.

11   J. Rouch, 'The Camera and Man', in: P. Hockings (ed.), *Principles of Visual Anthropology*. Berlin, 2003. p.79-99, p. 81.

12   J. Clifford, James and G. E. Marcus, *Writing culture: the poetics and politics of ethnography*. Berkeley, 1986.

ecomuseums.[13] Even though the assumption is that community museums and ecomuseums have a strong orientation to communities and people as active contributors to the (eco)museums' policies and practices, an assessment is strongly needed to address the challenges faced by engaging with these remarkable ideas. The fact that many ecomuseums and community museums lack financing puts them in uncomfortable negotiating positions. It is hard to realize truly inclusive practices where the widest possible interested community (and not only authorized representatives) is actively and responsibly engaged on a managerial level, and collaborating with professionals within the field. It raises the question of the possibility of a genuine New Museological practice.

Museums' social role is not questionable as museums in all possible diverse forms are social practices and contribute to the education and enjoyment of the public.[14] Nevertheless, the emphasis on their social role is more than needed as to align the inequalities within the sector and within societies. For a long period has the elitist and exclusive approach to culture excluded living heritage (sector) but also many groups of people (society) from enjoying and exercising culture in its diverse forms (tangible, intangible, academic and amateur, in museums, in situ, in theatres, on the streets…). When talking about the contemporary social role of museums, we need to overcome the idea of the social role as preserving artefacts and transmitting knowledge for future generations, which indeed already is a social role, but need to strive for transparent and inclusive organisations that pose questions relevant to today's societies and engage with different groups allowing and stipulating interaction and dynamic relations between heritage and people. This is especially needed of course in the tangible sector but intangible cultural heritage in many contexts is also suffering from the 'authoritative heritage discourse syndrome'. It is exactly this specific view of museums' social role that enables us to work actively within both fields and to set in motion the principles as well as skills and knowledge 'stored' within what we regard as the living heritage for a future oriented and inclusive heritage practice. Because, no matter whether we talk about museology or new museology, the 1930s or 1990s, the question is to what extent were CGI involved in the production of knowledge that museums generated and displayed, and to what extent was the research done inside the community available to the same communities afterwards?

A new perspective is emerging. It is not related to the subject of inquiry, but to the epistemology and then methodology of identifying, collecting, documenting, displaying, … heritage making! The practice proposed in the following lines merges museum functions with some of the basic characteristics of ICH and wishes to overcome, among others, the threat of identifying all participation in museums (using stories and memories about

13   A.C. Valentino and B. B. Soares, 'Hugues de Varine', in: B. B. Soares (ed.), *A history of Museology. Key authors of museological theory.* Paris, 2019, p. 116-125.
14   *Museum Definition,* https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/ (26/08/2020).

objects as an example) as working with ICH[15] and the fact that the ICH-museum relationship is mostly trapped in the same unidirectional communication, having museums dictating these dynamics and 'using' living heritage for its own purpose (eg. contextualizing objects) and not allowing active participation of practitioners in management of objects related to living heritage practices as one possible example. Even though a lot has changed and positive effects of the collaboration between museum professionals and practitioners are already evident,[16] we need to bear in mind the different socio-political and cultural contexts museums and intangible cultural heritage operate in, and therefore need to emphasize the importance of participation and the continued reflection upon this concept and practice.

Museums can learn from ICH practice (and practitioners), as Léontine Meijer-van Mensch states, in the framework of Fiona Cameron's concept of the 'liquid museum': "This liquid museum tries to be an answer to contemporary museum work issues; a sort of mould to reframe museum realities that we have been living for the past twenty years. (…) Nevertheless, in order to adhere to this concept, especially in conservation and collection management, one would need to rethink and reshuffle what he/she has learned and put in practice for so many years."[17]

And here another question emerges, and that is, whether all museums should engage with ICH. For Art, Technical or Natural History Museums this may sound far-fetched at times. But practice shows, there is space to learn from each other. Before trying to identify some intersecting points, it is important to note that not every encounter with communities means that we as museum professionals engage with ICH. The implications are much deeper.

The next lines are conceived as an exploration of possible heritage practices sprouting on the intersection of museum functions (according to the ICOM museum definition) and ICH safeguarding measures, always questioning if these two should at all work together, needless to say then also work 'as one'. The key difference between preservation (measures commonly applied in museums) and safeguarding (measures related to ICH) is that preservation implicates the need of keeping objects unaltered and prevent decay of materials in this way communicating cultural values embodied in these objects, while safeguarding implicates socio-cultural dynamics that allow people to appropriate activities (and related objects) to the needs of their lives.[18] The idea of a future oriented heritage practice which would reconcile the needs of CGIs with the social role (understood as intertwined in all museum functions,

15   T. Nikolić Đerić, 'Interview with Filomena Sousa', in: T. Nikolić Đerić e.a. (eds.), *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector. A Companion to Discover Transformative Heritage Practices for the 21st century.* Bruges, 2020, p. 33.

16   J.N. Collison, S.K.L. Bell and L. Neel (eds.), *Indigenous Repatriation Handbook.* Victoria, 2019. Available online: https://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/first-nations/repatriation-handbook.

17   T. Nikolić Đerić, 'Interview with Léontine Meijer-van Mensch', in: T. Nikolić Đerić e.a. (eds.), *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector. A Companion to Discover Transformative Heritage Practices for the 21st century.* Bruges, 2020, p. 69.

18   T. Nikolić Đerić e.a. (eds.), *Museums and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector. A Companion to Discover Transformative Heritage Practices for the 21st century.* Bruges, 2020, p. 72.

as museums – through collection, documentation, exhibitions, educational programmes etc. – serve societies) of museums, is examined through the concept of intersections. The term is borrowed from mathematics as a pragmatic and visual explanation of the new, hybrid practice occurring when museums and ICH CGIs work together. This doesn't mean that I'm hiding away from intersectionality as a methodological[19] and theoretical approach which could be further explored in the heritage discourse to address inequalities and the diverse range of experiences born on different intersecting levels (which heritage, curators background, visitors background, socio-political context informing the practice etc. – the intersecting elements are endless).

These practices, born on the intersecting point of museum functions and ICH safeguarding measures, are further referred to as the 'third space' within the heritage sector. The practice is suggested as a *third practice* as it comes neither from the museum nor from the ICH perspective, but it informs both in accordance to specific needs. The third space is thus a symbolical space that "… enables other positions to emerge."[20] Drawing further from Homi K. Bhabha's insights on critical theory[21] we want to understand these hybrid practices not as a combination of two different 'things' but rather as new sites that are not referable through old principles if we want to be able to "participate in them fully and productively and creatively."[22]

It is worth mentioning that in March 2020 I participated in the ICOMOS Emerging Professionals Working Group (EPWG) webinar presented by professor Cornelius Holtorf from Linnaeus University in Kalmar, Sweden, UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures. One thing that caught my attention is the very much present concern with adequately addressing the future of heritage, as today it is informed by *presentism*[23] not allowing change to enter into the practice on different levels. The idea underlying ICH is exactly in identifying and allowing change not only in performing the practice, but also understanding it (including not understanding it or leaving to fade).

The intersection methodology proposed in the recently published book *Museum and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Towards a Third Space in the Heritage Sector. A Companion to Discover Transformative Heritage Practices for the 21st Century*, is straightforward and not innovative in terms of intersecting museum functions and safeguarding measurers. The contribution it delivers lays in accepting the notion of change, informed by dynamic intersubjective relations within the strongly 'socialized' (i.e. emphasizing its social essence and role) heritage field. The exploration of the intersections starts from the basics; the safeguarding

19   It is important to underline that the contribution of intersectionality is in a methodological sense: to anticipate threats and problems/ to investigate all possible networks and relationships building a more responsive heritage practice.

20   J. Rutherford, 'The Third Space. Interview with Homi Bhabha', in: J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference.* London, 1990, p. 207-221.

21   H. K. Bhabha, 'The Commitment to theory', *New Formations* 5, 1988, p. 5-23.

22   J. Rutherford, *The Third Space*, p. 216.

23   See also C. Holtorf, 'Conservation and Heritage As Future-Making', in: C. Holtorf, L. Kealy, T. Kono (eds.), *A contemporary provocation: reconstructions as tools of future-making. Selected papers from the ICOMOS University Forum Workshop on Authenticity and Reconstructions (Paris, 13-15 March 2017)*. Paris, 2018.

measures as stated in the 2003 Convention and museum functions derived from the ICOM museum definition. Exploring further the ICOM *Code of Ethics for Museums* and the 2003 Convention's Operational Directives, connected to a verity of inspiring practices which were accumulated working within both fields and learning from the *Intangible Cultural Heritage and Museum project* (www. ICHandmuseums.eu), the basics evolve in suggestions for a future oriented heritage practice. The intersections are not covering all aspects of the museum or ICH field as I strongly believe in their disciplinary specificities. Rather, they open up possibilities to work together and improve the status of issues from which the sector and societies can benefit.