

Is ‘Bottom-Up’ a Condescending Expression?

Tales of Indignation and Reflexivity

The case of the ICH Inventory of Elvas

In 2013 and 2014, under the MEMORIAMEDIA trajectory, I worked as an adviser in a project for an inventory of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in Elvas (Portugal). The project was managed by *Memória Imaterial*, a Portuguese non-governmental organization (NGO) accredited to provide advisory services to the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO.

The project started from an initiative of Elvas City Hall and, when this entity requested *Memória Imaterial* to collaborate, the cultural expressions to be addressed had already been identified. A team of City Hall technicians conducted a first survey by distributing a questionnaire via informal groups, parishes and local associations and organizations. This allowed the population to identify the elements they considered to be representative of local intangible cultural heritage and, therefore, worthy to be inventoried, studied and safeguarded.

Subsequently, the MEMORIAMEDIA team worked for a year with the City Hall team and with more than one hundred members of the community who were directly involved in the creation, production and transmission of cultural expressions in several localities in the municipality. Fifteen cultural expressions in different ICH domains were inventoried – cyclical events, most of them related to festivities and agricultural calendars.¹

The project was developed in collaboration with the practitioners of cultural expressions during several phases: planning, study and collection of documentation, audiovisual registering, discussion of results and public presentation. In these phases – carried out in different periods: before, during and after the cultural practices – the population and, in particular, the

1 In the ‘know-how’ domain (arts and crafts): tannery, leather and cork work from *Terrugem*; the *ronca* from Elvas; preparing sweet plums from Elvas; making the *sericaia* and cookies of S. Sebastião. In the ‘celebrations’ domain (religious processions and pilgrimages): *Procissão dos Passos* in Vila Boim; *Procissão dos Ramos* in Vila Boim; *Enterro do Senhor* in Vila Boim; *Procissão do Mandato* in Elvas; *Procissão of S. Sebastião* in Barbacena; *Aleluias* in Terrugem; *Procissão of Pendões* in Elvas; *Romarias* in Elvas and *Romarias* in Vila Boim; Oral Expressions (songs): *Cantar dos Reis* in Barbacena.

practitioners of cultural expressions, guided the team in accomplishing the field work. To be precise, they were treated as co-authors of the study and the inventory recording.

The objectives of the work were previously established in partnership with representatives of the communities and practitioners. They identified and involved other relevant people in the inventory process. They signaled the moments, details, locations and chronology of the practices/processes. They facilitated the access to documentation. They identified objects and built or natural spaces associated with the elements. They indicated the environments. They were aware of special situations of more or less intimacy in the various practices, thus influencing the way they were recorded. They shared memories, historical facts and their expectations regarding the future of the practices. Last but not least, they were the ones who provided consent for the presence of the team, the inventorying and the registration of the ICH practices.

Before publishing the first version of the inventory on the web, we met again with the community representatives to present the results achieved (contextualization articles, the database, photographic records and documentary videos). This moment was useful to avoid any inaccuracies, to confirm information about the practitioners and the vocabulary associated with the intangible and tangible heritage, as well as to correct some chronological inconsistencies. In a third moment of the project, on April 12, 2014, a public session took place and everyone was invited to participate, in particular, those who participated in the inventorying process.

All of this is compatible with the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in particular article 15, emphasizing the role of communities, groups and individuals (CGIs) and, article 9 and 11b, relevant NGOs.² The successive versions of the Operational Directives of the UNESCO Convention elaborate this and recommend to implement procedures according to the bottom-up model. Therefore, administrative institutions and scientific and/or heritage organizations (museums, archives, research centres, etc.) are encouraged to act in a spirit of collaboration, mediation, ‘negotiation’ with communities; as supporting agents and not in a logic of owning the ‘exclusivity’ or ‘authority’ over the process.

But is the 2003 Convention basically not top-down? It is fostered by national and supranational governmental institutions that suggested the

2 M. Jacobs, ‘Article 15. Participation of Communities, Groups, and Individuals. CGIs, not Just “the Community”’, in: J. Blake and L. Lixinski (eds.), *The 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention. A Commentary*. Oxford, 2020, p. 273-289; M. Jacobs, ‘CGIs and Intangible Heritage Communities, museums engaged’, 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. 38-41; C. Bortolotto and J. Neyrinck, ‘Article 9. Accreditation of Advisory Organizations’, in: J. Blake and L. Lixinski (eds.), *The 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention. A Commentary*. Oxford, 2020, p. 153-163.

need for the direct participation of civil society but keep the power.³ These institutions defined the programs and legal instruments for the safeguarding of ICH, i.e. this process was not born out of populations' claims or out of their democratic participation in these decisions. That is, contrary to what, in theory, it is intended to happen, in practice, it all began with a top-down procedure.

A speech on April 12th, 2014

At the aforementioned meeting in April 2014, with more than one hundred people present, I enthusiastically congratulated the municipality and the population for having identified the ICH expressions they wished to be inventoried and for having decided how to organize that inventory – and only afterwards having required our services. I congratulated them “for spontaneously having followed UNESCO recommendations, that is, for having adopted a *bottom-up* approach: an approach from the ‘bottom to the top’, from the community to the experts or to the academia.”

As soon as I said this, I realized that I had committed a *faux pas*, since I was literally saying that the community was ‘below’ us, the experts. It was not what I meant, but it was what I had just said. I think that at the time I managed to get around the issue and the audience was not offended by my words, but this episode made me think how we, academics, use terms without truly questioning them and when we sometimes try to explain them to ICH practitioners, they are inadequate and ‘treacherous’, ‘perverting’ the sense we wish to give our actions.

In several meetings and conferences on safeguarding ICH, I heard talking about the *bottom-up* model. Most of the time the model appears in the discourses without being explained, defined or questioned. Almost intuitively, we refer to it as an ideal approach that values the interests, decisions and solutions of groups and communities about their territory, their heritage or different dimensions of everyday life. It is true that the complexity of the implementation of the model is assumed in creating valid evaluation systems on methodologies, practices and results. *The bottom-up* expression is mentioned in the literature produced on ICH.⁴ According to the current recommendations of the UNESCO, such a model seems to be the most indicated to the processes of ICH safeguarding.

So, why shouldn't I talk about a *bottom-up* model in Elvas' public session? If we are talking about a participatory methodology model, shouldn't we talk openly, for instance with practitioners, about the model we're working with?

3 J. Leal, 'Cultura, Património Imaterial, Antropologia', in: Direção-Geral do Património Cultural e.a., *Atas do Colóquio Internacional Políticas Públicas para o Património Imaterial na Europa do Sul: percursos, concretizações, perspetivas*. Lisboa, 2013, p. 131-144. Available online: http://www.igespar.pt/media/uploads/dgpc/Politicas_Publicas_para_o_Patrimonio_Imaterial_na_Europa_do_Sul_DGPC_2013.pdf (22/01/2020).

4 See the many references and an analysis in E. Herz, 'Bottoms, genuine and spurious', in: N. Adell e.a. (eds.), *Between Imagined Communities and Communities of Practice*. Göttingen, 2015, p. 25-58.

About which words we use? Can we just use this terminology among academic peers but not with ‘community members’?

The truth I sense in this is that the *bottom-up/top-down* terminology leads to a structured and hierarchical system arranged into two different levels of power – a higher level that is ‘on top’ and a lower level, which is ‘below’ – thus fostering the existence of subordinates or situations where the final decision will ultimately be, inevitably, at the ‘top’.

One could argue that the terms ‘down’ and ‘up’ do not imply an absolute hierarchy, a pejorative, condescending or even discriminatory judgment, and that the *bottom-up* model defends, above all, the need to reverse the process and the idea that democracy is only truly implemented if starting from the bases. Considering this argument, we ask: how can we explain the *bottom-up* model to the communities without the idea of hierarchy lying behind?

On the one hand, there seems to be no way of addressing the *bottom-up* model with the ICH practitioners without bearing in mind that when we talk about who is ‘at the bottom’ we usually mean communities, groups or individuals. On the other hand, if the citizens’ decision is equally or more important than the rulers’ decision, why shouldn’t we value them at the same level? Or why shouldn’t we place communities and citizens at a higher level, for instance, ‘above’ a central government?

Between *bottom-up* and *top-down*, several authors began to support a meso-level, where the relations between the local/micro and the global/macro becomes intensified: “(...) on the one hand, the literature on local and regional development has developed sound ‘meso-level’ analytical tools which combine inductive and deductive perspectives on local and regional development dynamics. On the other, the macro-economic approach to development has made significant steps towards becoming more open to inductive reasoning and, hence, to the consideration of local specificities.”⁵

One way of explaining what happened in April 2014 is the tension between an outsiders’ and an insiders’ vocabulary. In anthropology this is developed as the *emic/etic* terminology.⁶ To follow an emic perspective is to use a culturalist approach that pays attention to the details and specificities of each context by taking into consideration the interpretations of the social actors. According to an *emic* approach, the patrimonialization process activation should be initiated by the communities, the local actors, and not by external agents.

A trip to UNESCO Paris

In 2014 the application of the *cante alentejano* was presented at the 9th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the UNESCO. On November 27th, 2014, in Paris, the *cante*

5 R. Crescenzi and A. Rodríguez-Pose, ‘Reconciling top-down and bottom-up development policies’, *Environment and planning A* 43:4, 2011, p. 774.

6 See for instance T. Headland, K. Pike and M. Harris (eds.), *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*. London, 1990.

alentejano was inscribed as an element in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The *cante alentejano* is usually defined by the melodic structure and the type of performative organization that characterizes it: polyphonic singing performed in a group and without instruments. This *cante* is called *alentejano* because it originally came from that Portuguese region, *Alentejo*, which is situated in the South of the river Tejo and above the region of the Algarve.⁷

I do not intend to comment here on how the singers and local communities were involved in the inscription process. *Cante alentejano*'s application was considered an example of good practice, so we can deduce that the basic conditions have been verified and, among them, the respect for practitioners' participation.⁸ However, I do wish to comment on the difference verified between this result (the good evaluation of the application) and the way that the 25 singers of the Choral Group of Serpa were treated during the trip to Paris, where the group performed to celebrate the inscription of the *cante alentejano* on the Representative List, live, during the 9th session of the Committee.

My reflection is based on the report and testimony of Paulo Barriga, journalist from *Diário do Alentejo* who accompanied the Choral Group of Serpa on this trip. These sources exposed a treatment that was, according to me, not in line with the spirit of the Convention, especially if we compare it with the treatment that other individuals enjoyed, like for instance the Portuguese representatives of entities involved in the application process, government representatives from the ministries responsible for culture and tourism, representatives of local administration and representatives of academic institutions.

The report (never publicly commented or contradicted) described the bad conditions in which the singers traveled and stayed in Paris, the way they were ignored and even humiliated by several Portuguese entities. In a first analysis this news revealed two things: a) that the newspaper *Diário do Alentejo*, and journalist Paulo Barriga were informed and intended to inform about how the 'legitimate bearers' of ICH expressions should be recognized in the processes of patrimonialization and b) the way the singers were treated revealed devaluation of their role as protagonists.

On November 26, 2014, the day before the Committee's decision, the journalist wrote: "(...) because they are a '[cultural] good', the *cantares* [songs] have a legitimate holder, the choral groups. That's why a group of singers were brought to Paris, (...) [the Choral Group of Serpa]. After all, the *cante* is celebrating. And UNESCO recognizes in this way of singing the asset value that we have always identified (...)."⁹

7 S. Cabeça and J. Santos, 'A mulher no Cante Alentejano', in: S. Conde (ed.), *Proceedings of the International Conference in Oral Tradition. Vol II*. Ourense, 2010, p. 31-38; S. Castelo-Branco and J. Freitas (eds.), *Vozes do Povo: A Folclorização em Portugal*. Oeiras, 2003; A.A. Marvão, 'Motivações e Sociologia do Cante', in: Comissão Promotora - Alentejo, *Atas do 2 Congresso sobre o Alentejo. - Vol. I*. Beja, 1987.

8 *Cante Alentejano polyphonic singing from Alentejo, southern Portugal*, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/cante-alentejano-polyphonic-singing-from-alentejo-southern-portugal-01007> (06/08/2020).

9 Translation by the author.

Then he described what actually happened: “(...) Serpa’s singers are in Paris to climb the great podium of UNESCO. But they came by bus from the left bank of the Guadiana [a Portuguese river]. Serpa’s singers are in the city of light, but only saw the city light through the windows of the bus. Serpa’s singers are the stars (...) but have no dignity to be invited to the reception that the ambassador gives today at his home, under the pretext that the *cante* can be inscribed on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Serpa’s singers sleep in a ‘dump’ more than an hour from Paris, while the guests of the ambassador stay overnight in the multi-star hotels in the fancy zones of the city. Serpa’s singers, all singers, look good in photography, especially if the ambassador’s guests and, by the way, the ambassador himself fit into the photograph. Otherwise, the singers, those of Serpa and all the others, are a hindrance when they are not singing or when they are not being photographed alongside those who still think they are the owners of the *cante*.”

The journalist denounced the disrespect for the singers of the Choral Group of Serpa who came to sing at UNESCO headquarters in Paris. He denounced the long and tiring bus ride (no one found it important to find the necessary means to pay for the plane trips); the fact that the singers were not invited to the reception that the ambassador gave at his home (celebrating the possibility of the *cante being inscribed in the Representative List*) and the bad conditions in which they were hosted, an hour from Paris. Conditions that, according to Paulo BARRIGA, contrasted with the conditions of other Portuguese who, representing other entities involved in the application, considered themselves to be the ‘owners of the *cante*’.

The journalist ends the report, concluding: “(...) the *cante*, as I already said, has a legitimate holder: the choral groups. Groups that continue to sing, even after spending whole days inside a bus, sleep in a ‘dump’ or stand outside the ambassador’s house (...).”¹⁰

It should be noted that in addition to this journalistic report, the described episode didn’t have consequences known by the general public. The incident, which may be considered a diplomatic gaffe, had no exceptional repercussions or impact on the way choral groups relate themselves with the different entities present in Paris, how they salute the inscription of the *cante* in the Representative List or how they are committed in promoting and safeguarding this element of ICH. But I think it is significant to highlight this episode because I believe that the patrimonialization process of ICH should be an exercise of good governance. The implementation of the 2003 Convention will only be successful if the allocation of heritage value is in the hands of communities, without being subdued to political interests. The way in which the Group of Serpa was treated shows that we still have a long way to go. This episode may be an example of how the patrimonialization process of ICH can reproduce systems that, speaking on behalf of a collective, subversively, ignore ICH practitioners and bearers’ rights and voices.

10 On 26/11/2014 Paulo BARRIGA published the following article: *O Diário do Alentejo a acompanhar a candidatura do cante a Património Imaterial da Humanidade em Paris*, <https://sites.google.com/site/amigoster-rasborba/alentejo-noticias> (26/1/2020).

For instance, the visibility and voice given to practitioners in the General Assemblies of the States Parties and in the Sessions of the Intergovernmental Committee is still restricted. Usually, CGIs only appear in the Committee sessions through the exhibition of videos and photos – or ‘live’ to ‘act’ in a few minutes and in a kind of ‘show case’ or as sidekick of Delegates, celebrating the inscription of a specific ICH element on the UNESCO Lists.

Between concepts and practices

One of the roles allocated to organizations working in the field of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage – such as museums, NGOs, category 2 UNESCO Centres and others – is the decoding of the 2003 Convention and other Basic Texts for the benefit of ICH communities and practitioners. The Convention, the concept of ICH and most legal instruments that inform the ICH safeguarding paradigm were designed by experts through an *etic* process. Explaining the academic and legal language to other ICH actors is important because an informed population yields more and better participation.

This task is not always easy. Sometimes we find inconsistencies between the theoretical or political discourses on the one hand and the practices in the field on the other hand. In these cases, adopting a vocabulary that better corresponds to the purpose of safeguarding ICH is crucial. But as I demonstrated in two cases, we should keep on questioning the words we use in different contexts. Reflexivity, but also indignation, can help to sensitize the observations, experiences and relations between different actors and stakeholders. What does the concept of *bottom-up* infer? Is an *emic and etic* terminology useful? How can we defend an informed and effective involvement of communities, groups or individuals and try to avoid the misuse or merely lip-service use of the participatory paradigm for diplomatic negotiations and political, ideological and mercantilist instrumentalization. My aim is to provoke/promote debates about conceptual models that are usually articulated without a real discussion and contribute to the construction of sustainable and responsible action spaces where practitioners, citizens, NGOs, States, researchers, etc., dialogue and collaborate with transparency, common language and common purposes. It is a collaborative work guided by ethical principles, enhancing the empowerment of the CGIs, diversity and intercultural dialogue.