

A Major Advance towards
a Holistic Approach to Heritage Conservation:
the 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention

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By adopting the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the October 2003 General Conference of UNESCO of 190 Member States, signalled a historic turning point in the comprehension of the concept and definition of heritage within contemporary societies, and of related actions for its safeguarding and preservation.

Only two decades following the adoption of the World Heritage Convention in 1972 were needed to progress to a new stage in the analysis of heritage on an international scale. For some, this was an indication of the extreme mobility of ideas; for others it restored the cultural balance or simply reflected the rapid acceleration of ideas through time, among the actors of the international community of heritage. However, it really represented the achievement of an idea born in 1946 with the coming into being of UNESCO itself: that of the universal nature of cultures.

Over the past fifty years, the concept of cultural heritage has broadened to a very great extent. The Hague Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in times of Armed Conflict (1954) was concerned only with 'cultural property', as its title made clear. The Venice Charter (1964) was in fact rather narrower, referring to 'monuments and sites' and dealt specifically with the

architectural heritage. Through the development of policies in relation to the World Heritage Convention cultural heritage rapidly expanded to include groups of buildings, vernacular architecture, industrial and the 20th century built heritage. Over and above the study of historic gardens, the concept of "cultural landscape" highlighted the interpenetration of culture and nature.

The emergence in the second half of the 20th century of an anthropological approach to culture and the refocusing of social sciences on processes, often to the detriment of objects, have been further significant factors in the redefinition of heritage, regarding this as an entity made up of various, complex and interdependent expressions, revealed through social customs as well as the physical heritage.

Today, it is the diversity of expressions that defines heritage rather than adherence to a descriptive standard. This process, explicitly dependent on the recognition of the complexity of heritage, was not obvious while simplified visual representations of the diversity of cultures through their heritage expressions dominated thinking. African habitats and sculpture, European monuments, the lost pyramids of Latin America and the national parks of North America, are now no longer simply perceived as images par excellence of the

heritage of humanity, but have acquired a new dimension, through the intermediary of the concept of their inherent or associated intangible values.

It is the quest for the meaning of cultural expressions that has paved the way for the acknowledgment of a new approach to heritage. This quest, which has acquired growing importance over the last twenty years, has made it necessary for us to identify the social customs and systems of beliefs, including myths, of which intangible heritage is the sign and expression. The definition of intangible cultural heritage and its better appreciation as a source of identity, creativity and diversity have therefore greatly contributed to draw a comprehensive approach to heritage which will now apply to both tangible as well as intangible heritage.

For most of UNESCO's 60 year life legal standard-setting activities focused on the protection of tangible heritage. As a consequence, the safeguarding of intangible heritage remained for a long time rather neglected, although a first step in this direction was made in 1973, when Bolivia proposed that a Protocol be added to the Universal Copyright Convention in order to protect folklore. This proposal was not successful but it helped to raise awareness of the need to recognise and include intangible aspects in the domain of cultural heritage.

It was not 1982 that UNESCO to set up a 'Committee of Experts on the Safeguarding of Folklore' and created a special 'Section for the Non-Physical Heritage', which together resulted in the Recommendation on the Protection of Traditional Culture and Folklore, adopted in 1989. This Recommendation set an important precedent in relation to recognising "traditional culture and folklore". It also encouraged international collaboration, and considered measures to be taken for its

identification, preservation, dissemination and protection.

Since 1989 several regional assessments on the impact of this Recommendation have been made. They culminated in the Washington International Conference in June 1999 organised jointly by UNESCO and the Smithsonian Institution. Experts taking part in this conference concluded that a new or revised legal instrument would be required to address questions of terminology and the breadth of the subject matter more adequately. The Conference underlined the necessity to place an emphasis on tradition-bearers rather than scholars. It also highlighted the need to be more inclusive, encompassing not only artistic products such as tales, songs, etc., but also knowledge and values enabling their production, the creative processes that bring the products into existence and the modes of interaction by which these products are received and acknowledged.

In the nineties, two new UNESCO programmes witnessed the increasing importance of intangible cultural heritage: the Living Human Treasures system, launched in 1993, and the Proclamation of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, launched in 1998. In the framework of this second programme, nineteen forms of cultural spaces or expression were proclaimed as "Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage" by the Director-General of UNESCO in May 2001, another set of twenty-eight "Masterpieces" gained international recognition in November 2003, and forty-three in 2005. These proclamations provide a useful indication of the types of intangible heritage that different Member States wish to safeguard. Also, the experience gained through these programmes confirmed that a new international law instrument for the protection of intangible heritage would be needed. After several

studies commissioned by UNESCO had been undertaken on the advisability and feasibility of adopting a new normative instrument for this purpose, the General Conference concluded that a new Convention would ensure the most appropriate protection. In 1999, the process of drafting this new instrument began, trying to find the most appropriate approach to the specific protection needs of the intangible heritage. The final draft of this new Convention was submitted to the 32nd session of the General Conference and adopted by a large majority in October 2003. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage entered into force in April 2006, three months after its legal adoption by 30 States, and by the end of April 2007 the Convention has 77 States Parties.

This unquestioned success demonstrates the need to protect heritage by operational activities in parallel with the implementation of normative instruments, and this two-fold approach is increasingly recognized by Member States. It has revealed an extremely positive dimension of the work pursued at international level. As discussion on legal instruments for the protection of the heritage requires all Member States of UNESCO to be present and offers them all the chance to voice their views, the new concepts and notions that gain recognition through international normative action are, consequently, expressions of a truly universal approach. Discussions between 1999 and 2003 on the definition of the Intangible Cultural Heritage have therefore greatly benefited from the exceptional wide representation of cultures, as compared to the narrow geographical and cultural composition of the expert Assembly that had drafted earlier measures, such as the 1964 Venice Charter,

The success of the new Convention is also explained by the fact that it is now widely recognised that in all cultures the tangible and intangible heritage are closely interrelated. Cultural heritage operates in a synchronised relationship involving society (that is, systems of interactions connecting people), and norms and values (that is, ideas and belief systems that define relative importance). Heritage objects are the tangible evidence of underlying norms and values, and thus they establish a symbiotic relationship between the tangible and intangible.

The intangible heritage must be seen as a broader framework within which tangible heritage takes on its shape and significance. The Istanbul Declaration, adopted at the Round table of Ministers of Culture organised by

Mr. Koichiro Matsuura, Director General of UNESCO, in Istanbul in September 2002, stresses that 'an all-encompassing approach to cultural heritage should prevail, which takes into account the dynamic link between the tangible and intangible heritage and their deep interdependence'. Yet the underlying idea, forged fifty-two years ago by Claude Levi Strauss, 'is not to demonstrate that major groups that composed Humanity have brought, as such, specific contributions to our common heritage'. Instead, it is by ensuring greater and equal representation of all cultures that we come closer to the idea of safeguarding 'the very fact of diversity' through the reformulation of our approaches to heritage.

The Shanghai Charter, adopted at the 7th Asia Pacific Regional Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in Shanghai in October 2002, recommends the establishment of 'interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches that bring together movable and immovable, tangible and intangible, natural and cultural heritage' and the development of 'documentation tools and standards in establishing holistic museum and heritage practices'.

But, what is meant by these 'holistic approaches for the tangible heritage and intangible heritage' and how can they be put into practice? The tangible cultural heritage, be it a monument, an historic city, a landscape, a work of art or a collection, is easy to catalogue, and its protection consists mainly of conservation and restoration measures. The intangible heritage in contrast is ultimately made up of processes and practices and therefore needs different safeguarding approaches and methodologies. It is fragile by its very nature and therefore much more vulnerable than other forms of heritage as its survival and transmission onwards hinges on 'actors' within the expression of the intangible tradition, and on social and environmental conditions. Safeguarding the intangible heritage therefore involves collection, documentation and archiving as well as the protection and support of its bearers.

While the tangible cultural heritage is designed to survive long after the death of the person who produced or commissioned it, the fate of the intangible heritage is much more closely related to its creators as it depends in most cases on oral transmission. Therefore, the legal and administrative measures traditionally taken to protect material items of cultural heritage are in most cases not appropriate for safeguarding a heritage whose most significant components relate to particular systems

of knowledge, values and the social and cultural context in which it is created.

Taking into account the different needs for conservation of monuments, cities or landscapes on the one hand and for safeguarding and transmission of cultural practices and traditional knowledge on the other hand, it will therefore be necessary to develop a threefold approach which will (i) put tangible heritage into its wider context, (ii) translate intangible heritage into "materiality" and (iii) support practitioners and the transmission of knowledge and skills. A holistic heritage approach will therefore mean viewing the tangible heritage in its wider context, particularly in the case of religious monuments and similar sites, and relating it more closely to the communities concerned in order to take into better account the relevant spiritual, political, or social values. In order to safeguard intangible heritage, it also needs also to be 'translated' from its oral form into some material manifestation, be this in archives, inventories, museums, audio and film records. Although this might be regarded as 'freezing' the intangible heritage and reducing it into documents, it should be clear that this is only one aspect of safeguarding and will require great thoughtfulness and care with regard to the most appropriate methods and materials chosen for this task.

Thirdly, one fruitful model for supporting practitioners and the transmission of skills and knowledge might be the policy, first developed in Japan and now been adopted more widely, of designating and protecting 'Living National Treasures', i.e. masters who possess specific traditional knowledge and skills. UNESCO started to work with a similar concept in 1993 with its 'Living Human Treasures' system designed to enable tradition holders to pass on their know-how to future generations. When artists, craftspeople and other 'living libraries' gain official recognition and support, better care can be taken to ensure the transfer of their skills and techniques to others.

These thoughts are gained from the recent work on the notion of intangible cultural heritage in order to implement a more holistic approach to heritage conservation programmes. Even if tangible and intangible heritage are very different, they are the two sides of the same coin: both carry meaning and the embedded memory of humanity, and both rely on each other when it comes to understanding the meaning and importance of each. 🇬🇧