‘Our Culture is dying’: Safeguarding versus representation in the implementation of the UNESCO ICH Convention

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ABSTRACT

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is grounded in a belief that there is some benefit ‘to humanity’ for communities to continue to practise, or ‘safeguard’, their valued cultural forms. The implementation of the Convention often requires selecting ‘representative’ elements to display to outside audiences, sometimes for financial gain. Missing from both the Convention’s discourse and many implementation plans is the recognition that what a community might most hope to safeguard may differ from what they would choose to share with others as culturally representative of them. Using examples from Malawi, I argue that the Convention’s combined goals of representation and safeguarding may be too ambitious. As it stands, the Convention has been less effective as a tool for cultural conservation than it has been for creating opportunities for cultural groups to display their cultural phenomena to outside audiences, whether for identity, pride, diversity or moneymaking. Being explicit that the implementation is often about representing rather than safeguarding could create more clarity and produce more deliberate, effective and ethical outcomes.

Keywords

intangible cultural heritage, cultural sustainability, economic development, folklore, dance, Malawi

The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is grounded in a belief that there is some benefit 'to humanity' for localised distinctive cultural practices and communities to thrive within contexts of globalisation, widespread cultural shifts and new technological developments. The discourse of the Convention emphasises *safeguarding* and the inherent value of ICH initiatives for cultural conservation among practitioners or 'communities'. However, its implementation often forefronts displays of cultural forms for outside audiences, for example, through festivals, museum exhibitions and publications. Moreover, the impetus for listing ICH elements is often economic; cultural practitioners, communities or countries often submit elements to the UNESCO ICH lists to enhance cultural tourism or other commercial enterprises. Using examples from Malawi, I argue that the Convention may be too ambitious in its mandate to safeguard, represent and often commercialise ICH at the local level. What a cultural group cares most about conserving is often not the same as what they would select to share with outsiders or what would be commercially successful. Equating what cultural values or practices members of a cultural group are most concerned about *safeguarding* for themselves with what they would choose to *represent* about themselves to outsiders is at the core of many of the issues that arise in the Convention's implementation.

The Convention language and intention are primarily esoteric. According to the text of the Convention, safeguarding 'means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the ICH, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage'. The premise is that we live in a world where there are thousands of different cultural groups. Each culture or group is distinctive and valuable:

> The 'intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

The Convention stipulates that the international world and individual countries should provide motivation, the possibility and strategies for people at the local level to continue to practise their distinctive cultures. This orientation is inherently esoteric; it is people or communities 'on the ground' who should be determining what cultural forms they want to identify for safeguarding, and the primary value of this safeguarding should be that the people reap the benefits of community-based cultural preservation efforts to 'ensure recognition of, respect for, and enhancement of the intangible cultural heritage in society' (2003 Convention).

The implementation of the Convention has foregrounded the inscription of cultural elements by States Parties on three lists: List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and Register of Good Safeguarding Practices. Of these, only one is explicitly about saving culture: the List of Intangible Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. However, the Convention as a whole (across the lists) is titled with the word 'safeguarding', and it is explicitly presented in the preamble as motivated by the 'grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage'.

The list with the most inscriptions is the representative one, which also exists within this framework of the urgency for cultural conservation. According to the Convention language, the value of inscribing elements with the goal of 'safeguarding' on this list should first and foremost be for the 'communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals' who recognise elements 'as part of their cultural heritage'. Yet, the word 'representative' suggests that, for each cultural group, certain things stand out as important to their identity and as things about which they are proud. These are the things that they feel *represent* them. The idea of being represented often suggests an outside audience: when we are all the same, we do not need to identify things to represent us. We just *do* culture. When we are diverse, one group putting certain things forward as 'this is who we are' or 'this is what makes us distinct' is inherently exoteric. There is often a difference between what people are concerned about in terms of cultural loss and desire for *safeguarding* versus what they think is *representative* of themselves or what they want to display

to others about what is distinctive or important to their cultural identity. A paradox inherent in the Convention is the conflict between cultural *safeguarding* as esoteric and cultural *representation* as exoteric.

Malawi case study

To illustrate this tension, I will examine an example from my research in Malawi in southern Africa. The fieldwork for the case study took place in 2013, though I continue to conduct research in the region on various dimensions of culture. Neither the UNESCO listing protocols nor the approach to cultural conservation in Malawi have seen significant change over the past decade. The case study is thus useful for illustrating the problem I'm outlining.

During the course of researching traditional dances in the northern region of the country starting in 1995, I had frequently heard people express a concern that 'culture is dying' (Gilman 2009, 2015). I knew about the country's Department of Arts and Crafts, whose mission is to 'promote, develop and preserve Malawi's arts and crafts'.[1] In the early 2000s, I learned about the UNESCO ICH Convention. Well aware that culture is dynamic, I knew that culture would never expire. However, I also realised that people were expressing a real sentiment regarding cultural shifts taking place. What then, I wondered, was the relationship between people's concern about the death of culture and the efforts of the national Department of Arts and Crafts or the international UNESCO.

When I was first doing this research in 2010 and 2013, there were two items listed on the representative list for Malawi: *vimbuza* and *gule wamkulu* (the latter listed with Zambia and Mozambique). By the time of writing in 2020, there were four. Malawi is a country with many ethnic groups, each of which has numerous cultural elements, including multiple dance practices, some of which are secular, and others that are associated with religion or spirituality. I was curious about how the listing of these two elements related to people's concerns about cultural loss.

To explore this question, I interviewed some people across social, cultural and economic demographics in different regions in the country and asked about their concerns regarding cultural change. Frequently expressed concerns included languages loss, lack of strong ethnic identity, youth not undergoing initiation rituals, youth having babies outside of marriage, alcohol abuse, children not being disciplined and people no longer going through the appropriate processes for marriage, no longer embracing cultural values, not adhering to funeral procedures, not eating together, not respecting elders, not dressing appropriately and so on. Interestingly, the types of cultural forms that are typically designated for safeguarding were rarely mentioned. For the most part, few mentioned such things as traditional dances or storytelling. They were more likely to complain that kids watched American or Nigerian TV than that they were no longer dancing local forms.

When I pressed and asked about the dances and folktales, the types of elements that typically make it to the UNESCO lists, a common response was that interviewees were concerned that the youth weren't so interested in these 'traditional' forms. Ms. Chiumia, a woman in her 80s, was sullen when she explained in an interview on 20 April 2013 that, these days, the youth are only concerned with the present. They aren't interested in the past. Even if the elders attempt to teach them or try to tell them folktales, the youth are not interested. She said that she and other elders have stopped trying because the youth won't listen. I asked if there was any aspect of culture that she thought was still vibrant, and she answered in Chitumbuka, 'kulije' ('there is not').[2] Interviewees explained that the importance of such things as folktales and dances was their role in instilling cultural values about family, elders, the proper way to get married, ethnic identity and so on.

Mr. Kalolokesya is Ngonde (an ethnic group in the Karonga District of northern Malawi), and was born and raised in a rural village, but he spent most of his adult life living and working in high-level government jobs in urban areas. When I met him, he was retired and had returned with his wife to live in a house near the village where he had grown up. At the time, he was involved in an organisation to revitalise Ngonde culture. In a conversation in July 2010 about the value of music, dances and drama, he explained that these cultural elements tell stories about people, assist in demonstrating cultural values, and demonstrate ways of doing things'. During an interview on 18 July 2010, at his home in the Karonga District, I asked Mr. Mwakasungula, a Ngonde Village Headman, what cultural forms were important to his community. He explained that it is not possible to isolate cultural practices because culture does not exist in parts, but rather is a whole way of life that is reflected in many things, including music, language and dance. He emphasised that one cannot isolate one part as being more important than any other. Mr. Chipeta was the chair of the Tumbuka Language and Culture Association, whose mission is to revitalise Tumbuka language and culture. In an interview on 2 July

2013, he criticised the government's efforts to promote culture. He explained that they 'define culture narrowly to be just dancing, not a whole way of life'. He said that efforts 'need to go beyond dancing'. Ms. Kunje, who was involved in an organisation to promote Yao culture, explained in an interview on 18 July 2013 the important value of dances in the country as ethnic 'badges'. Each ethnic group has distinctive ones, which makes the group culturally distinct. In her discussion about strategies to conserve culture, however, she focused primarily on language, initiation rituals and the cultural and historical knowledge of the Yao people.

This perspective continues into the time of writing. Attention to ICH in the country is typically focused on listing elements on the UNESCO lists, and cultural conservation initiatives are often tied to tourism, economic development or political partisan objectives more so than addressing concerns about cultural change. By contrast, people concerned with cultural loss emphasise that the most important reason to conserve such things as dances and folktales is the need to preserve the cultural values – family, the respect of elders, cultural identity – that are disseminated through them, more so than the forms themselves.

The disjuncture between Malawian people's concerns about cultural loss versus what tends to be the focus of many safeguarding initiatives resonates with other contexts on the continent. Susan Keitumetse, for example, argues for the need to reconsider 'what constitutes ICH so that it can be dealt with in its entirety, as opposed to the current prevalent bias towards performing arts in several parts of Africa' (2012,151). The deepest concerns of the people I interviewed were about features of their culture that were internal, esoteric – not the things that could be extracted, listed and displayed. And the reason they gave for preserving such things as dances was a desire to sustain these esoteric *values* (cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett1998; Smith 2006; Stefano 2012).

This perspective echoes widespread criticism of the Convention's implementation. The types of cultural forms that can be put forward as representative are often those that can be named and extracted from a cultural context, a process that Valdimar Tr. Hafstein calls 'artifactualization' so that something can be 'done' to them. Listing requires 'itemization' and decontextualises elements 'from the social relations in which they take place in order to recontextualize them' as items on national inventories and 'international lists with reference to other heritage of humanity' (2018, 80). The strategies in the safeguarding plans for listed items usually include a series of activities that bring visibility and expand audiences for the element outside of the community most associated with it. A dance form can be artifactualised – named, documented and programmed in a festival. Similarly, a recipe can be named, documented, cooked and served at an event, and disseminated through a digital exhibit. A weaving tradition can be named and documented, and woven mats can be sold at a market and displayed in a museum exhibition.

This exoteric emphasis is especially evident in the many situations where the ICH designation is tied to economic development, which has increasingly become the focus in Malawi, as its leaders strive to develop cultural tourism. By contrast, the cultural dimensions that interviewees highlighted most frequently are not listable. 'Respecting elders' is not listable on either the representative list or the list in need of urgent safeguarding, even if it's the cultural phenomena for which a community has the gravest concern. What is listable are those things that can be put forward as *representative*. This is not to claim that people in Malawi (and elsewhere) do not value such things as dances, weaving traditions and recipes and want to conserve them; rather, my intent is to highlight, as have others, the limiting nature of cultural conservation efforts that target mostly those cultural phenomena that can be artifactualised.

Listing and their concerns

I then did some research to learn how people concerned about cultural death felt about the safeguarding efforts inspired by the Convention. I focused primarily on *vimbuza* because I was living in the northern region where it is practised. *Vimbuza* was proclaimed as one of the 90 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005. In 2008, it was incorporated into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. *Vimbuza* refers to an illness caused by spirits that produces physical and mental symptoms. It is also the name of the rituals in which spirits embodied in a healer diagnose and cure these ailments.[3] It is an esoteric form. Rituals often happen at night in designated huts, temples or outside spaces. Members of the surrounding community and relatives of the afflicted might watch; however, it is generally not open to outside audiences. The ritual involves drumming, singing, clapping, idiophones (e.g. waist and ankle rattles), specialised clothing items and rhythmic movement, thus overlapping aesthetically with music and dance forms. Because of this overlap, it is

sometimes performed as a dance in non-ritual settings, without the participation of spirits (Gilman 2015).

The candidature file submitted to UNESCO for *vimbuza* emphasises its importance for medicinal purposes in addition to its cultural value. The application guidelines require an action plan for safeguarding. The UNESCO page for *vimbuza* explains that the 'project seeks to'

- encourage the transmission of skills and knowledge to younger generations, and
- raise awareness about the importance of safeguarding the Vimbuza as part of traditional health practices.

It then lists a series of activities in an action plan:

- legal protections and training Vimbuza healers on intellectual property rights;
- creating an inventory based on field research in close cooperation with the practicing community;
- organizing dance festivals, thematic workshops and discussion panels broadcast on radio and television;
- developing educational programmes for young museum visitors of Mzuzu Regional Museum; and
- distributing educational leaflets in the Chitumbuka language.[4]

This plan includes strategies for strengthening the tradition among Tumbuka people, such as legal protections and training healers on intellectual property rights. Other strategies listed in the candidature file, but not on the UNESCO site, included creating an association of *vimbuza* healers and dancers and providing supplemental health training to healers associated with 'modern medicine', such as workshops on HIV/AIDS transmission. These initiatives would contribute to strengthening the cultural vitality of *vimbuza* among Tumbuka people. However, the bulk of the activities – including festivals, book, radio programme and museum exhibition – would do less to ensure transmission of the tradition than to provide opportunities to share it with outside audiences. Such exoteric efforts could contribute to conservation objectives by raising the visibility and the social acceptance of what is a controversial cultural form in the country, yet they would have relatively limited impact within communities of practice.

In my interviews, I investigated whether the listing of *vimbuza*, its safeguarding efforts or any initiatives by the Department of Arts and Culture or UNESCO was having a positive impact on people concerned about cultural loss. The answer, for the most part, was *no*. Ms. Kwinika explained in an interview on 18 April 2013 simply that 'they [government officials] just talk. They say a lot of things'. But, up to the time of the interview, she had not seen anything. If they are doing something, she reflected, it must be elsewhere because she had seen nothing.[5] Most people didn't know about UNESCO or *vimbuza*'s listing, nor had they experienced any impact as a result. This was true for those I interviewed who were *vimbuza* healers, the chair of the Tumbuka Language and Cultural Association, as well as those Tumbuka with no particular connection to the tradition.[6] This is not surprising given the lack of effective integration of the local in national development initiatives. In his essay about the tourism efforts associated with Malawi's Chongoni Rock Art, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Oris Malijani writes that community members' 'interests are rarely taken into account in decision-making processes related to cultural heritage tourism development. Notably, there is a problem with communication and collaboration between government authorities, local communities, and other stakeholders' (2019, 35).

Second, when I explained to people that *vimbuza* was listed, many did not think it was appropriate. Some attitudes I heard in interviews included the following:

- It is a disease. Why would you want to keep someone sick?
- It is not 'pure culture' because it is a disease and healing ritual.
- *Vimbuza* encourages people not to seek medical help they need.
- *Vimbuza* is devil worship.

The first two reasons emphasise that, as an illness and curing mechanism, *vimbuza* does not fit the category of culture most suited for conservation efforts. The latter two reasons indicate the controversy in Malawi regarding *vimbuza* and other similar rituals. Traditional healing practices continue to exist alongside Western medicine and Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam; however, there is a long history of attempts to suppress these traditional practices because of the privileging of Western science and medicine and Christianity (see Gilman 2015; De Kok 2005).

Vimbuza healers I interviewed had a variety of responses. Most did not know about its status with UNESCO. For those who knew or when I explained it to them, some thought safeguarding efforts, especially the

festival, degraded *vimbuza* – reducing it from a form of medicine to an empty cultural form devoid of its spiritual or practical significance. Some of those who believe in *vimbuza* as a form of medicine and healing hoped that the UNESCO status would lead to greater legitimacy – not as a cultural form or dance to be displayed, but as a legitimate healing practice. Ms. Chirwa, a *vimbuza* healer interviewed on 5 April 2013, explained that she thought it was good that the ministry had put forward the application to UNESCO because, if *vimbuza* were to stop, people who were afflicted with the disease would 'go crazy and die'.[7] While she was explaining, her husband entered the room to make sure that I understood that *vimbuza* was not 'chikhalidwe' ('culture') but 'matenda' ('illness'). Asked about the safeguarding initiative of hosting a *vimbuza* festival, Ms. Makwakwa explained that a person who is possessed cannot dance for entertainment because, during the possession, people are not in control of themselves. She elaborated that a possessed person who was controlled by spirits would not dance in a particular place, start and stop at the right time, or behave in a way that was deemed appropriate in the festival environment (see Gilman 2015).[8]

Whether it should be safeguarded was obviously a subject of controversy among the 'community' to whom *vimbuza* 'belongs'. Tumbuka people are not in agreement, and people in the country where it is listed do not agree either. This is not to say that *vimbuza* should not have been listed. Rather, it raises the question about the criteria for selection and the intended objectives of inscription. As the second element in the country to be inscribed, there is a great deal of controversy within the 'community' with which it is associated whether it should be 'safeguarded', and, as was made evident in interviews and informal conversations, many Tumbuka people would not select *vimbuza* as the cultural form to represent themselves to outsiders, even if they deemed it a valuable cultural practice.

Representative as distinct from safeguarding

The choice of what to inscribe on the representative list becomes even more fraught when one considers the economic dimensions of listing. As has been widely acknowledged, in practice, the goal for many countries and communities to inscribe elements on ICH lists and engage with heritage efforts more generally is motivated by economic objectives inasmuch as cultural ones (Flint 2006; Fairweather 2006; World Tourism Organization 2012). In the cases of Malawi, or Zambia where I have been researching more recently, this dimension could be especially important because of the widespread poverty in the country and paucity of natural resources. In both countries, the department of tourism and department of arts have been brought together into a single ministry in the past decade in order to facilitate the integration of cultural and economic objectives.[9] Safeguarding practices, such as museum exhibitions, books, websites and festivals, all feed into the goal of developing cultural tourism. Much has been written about the impact on a cultural form when it is taken out of context and adapted for display to an outside audience. What has been given less attention is that the following premise is inherently flawed: what a cultural group holds most dear and would want to safeguard would be the same as what they would want to share with outsiders in tourism settings or what they think they could or would successfully *sell* to others for revenue. In other words, it does not necessarily hold that the cultural practice a group might want to safeguard for itself is the same as what they would like to share with the world. In some cases, this might be true. In many cases, it would not.

What I am arguing is that the Convention might be too ambitious. What if the Convention were changed to split safeguarding from representation? What mechanisms could be put into place to address the issues associated with cultural shifts leading to concerns about cultural loss? What mechanisms could be put into place to create more visibility and opportunities for cultural groups to display themselves and the cultural phenomena about which they are proud or that they could market to outside audiences, whether for identity, pride, diversity or moneymaking? As it stands, the Convention is better suited to accomplish the latter than the former: the existing listing and implementation mechanisms are effective for identifying things to represent cultures more so than they are for safeguarding the kinds of less identifiable and extractable things or those things that may not be appropriate for either public knowledge or exoteric sharing. If the two objectives were separated with the understanding that they often do overlap, the listing process could be clearer about the intended outcomes.

The process of listing with an outward-facing goal would require intensive on-the-ground fieldwork and community-based organisation and management (Abungu 2012). As it stands, much of the application for an element to be inscribed focuses on questions about its cultural value. By contrast, if the goal was representation

or moneymaking, the questions would necessarily be different and might include the following:

- What is the goal of the representation (e.g. cultural identity and pride within a community or the country, international visibility, moneymaking)?
- What would you like outsiders to know about you?
- What would you like to share with outsides about yourselves?
- How do you define yourselves (what is the 'community' in this context?)
- Who is the intended audience?
- What are the desired outcomes?
- Who would benefit? (consider hierarchies within the group, based on class, gender, access to the cultural form, age, etc.)
- What would be appropriate ways of sharing or displaying these cultural forms that would best ensure that the audience learned what you hoped?
- What would be an appropriate amount and mechanism for remuneration?

Some of these questions are already part of the process; what I am stressing is the importance that the members of the group or practitioners explicitly and thoughtfully select elements that they feel are appropriate for outside audiences.

A hypothetical example: Malipenga

I will now briefly explore how this could work for the Tumbuka in Malawi. In my interview with Ms. Kwinika, she explained that she did not think it was proper for *vimbuza* to be promoted as culture because it is a disease. She explained that practitioners drum and dance to heal a person who is possessed. It is an illness, so it is not appropriate that it should be promoted as culture. Instead, she suggested that dances, such as *ingoma* or *mbotosha*, would be better choices because they are 'pure cultural dances', as translated from the Chitumbuka into English by my research assistant Mercy Moyo.[10] While I disagree with the idea that *vimbuza* is not 'pure culture', Ms. Kwinika's suggestion contributed to the thinking that led to this essay. Unlike *vimbuza*, which, in addition to being controversial, is highly esoteric, *ingoma* or *mbotosha* could have been a better choice if the objective were to pick something that people widely consider to be culturally salient and for which there is little issue with exoteric sharing.[11] Inspired by her suggestion, I will now explore the potential for the hypothetical listing of *malipenga,* a dance form of the Tumbuka people, that most would agree is an example of a 'pure cultural dance'. I have not selected either of the two options offered by Ms. Kwinika because I am less familiar with them. My previous research on *malipenga* as practised by the neighbouring Tonga ethnic group informs my discussion (Gilman 2000). To be clear, I am not advocating for any of these dance forms to be listed, because the choice would have to come from people in the district themselves. I am only offering this as a hypothetical example, inspired by Ms. Kwinika's suggestion.

Malipenga is a male dance form that is part of a large complex of dance practices across this part of Africa. In Malawi, the Tumbuka and Tonga ethnic groups both claim a variant of *malipenga* as an important cultural form, and similar types of dances exist for other ethnic groups, but with different names and aesthetic variations, such as the Chewa's *mganda* and the Yao's *beni*.[12] The most common 'natural settings' for *malipenga* performances are intervillage competitions, public events that are open to outsiders and are energised by big audiences. A dance team of young men and boys from one village invites those from nearby villages for a multi-day competition. Each day, the teams assemble in a public space, often a communal gathering place in the village, for a long afternoon of entertainment. One after the other, each group enters the arena and moves in a row and column formation around a central point, often a mango tree, showing off their innovative marching-like steps while dressed in smart white shorts and shirts, mimicking, and sometimes parodying, European military marches. One or more song leaders lead the singing in a call-and-response format. A large audience signals the success of the event. The audience response – assessed through the level of clapping, ululation and monetary gifts – along with plenty of arguing and negotiation, determines the winner of the competition.

Malipenga is a multigeneric event that features numerous different cultural elements: bugles made out of gourds, locally made drums, rhythms, melodies, song texts, costumes, props, creative groups names and dance movements and formations. The gathering of people for performance events, ululation and giving money to performers, along with the organisational structure of the teams, system for raising funds, rehearsing and training new dancers are also important parts of Tumbuka cultural practices. Moreover, *malipenga* events provide opportunities for people to gather, eat together, share accommodations and other resources, and for young

people to find partners and future spouses.[13] It is thus a cultural element that in itself comprises multiple other elements and encompasses numerous dimensions of local cultural practices and values.

If *malipenga* were advertised internationally through its inscription on the representative list, it could raise the visibility of the region and its cultural practices while increasing revenue-generating opportunities. Because competitions are already large events open to the public, inviting outsiders, either from within the country or international visitors, to join as audience members would not be overly disruptive. It could even increase a competition's success. These events happen seasonally; the element could easily be put on a calendar for those in Malawi who want to travel around their country to experience the cultural practices of different regions at various times of the year, thus inspiring domestic tourism. And tourist agencies could advertise to international guests that, if they come to Malawi during a particular time, they should consider travelling north to experience *malipenga*. The current focus of international tourism in the country is the lakeshore and wildlife parks. Few currently spend time in Tumbuka areas, other than to pass through the city of Mzuzu and town of Rumphi to buy supplies or stay overnight in transit. An increase in tourist attractions in the region could augment the tourist industry locally and thus could contribute to the local economy, and the regional cultural attraction could enhance tourism at the national level by drawing more people to the country for cultural attractions as well as opportunities to enjoy the natural resources and wildlife.

Other safeguarding efforts, similar to those in the *vimbuza* application – such as an association of *malipenga* teams, publications, exhibitions and festivals – would contribute to the Convention's cultural and the country's economic objectives. *Malipenga* has always been adapted and performed in events other than village-based competitions, such as national holiday spectacles, festivals and political rallies (Gilman 2009). Adapting the dance for a *malipenga* festival or a festival featuring a variety of music and dance forms would align with what already typically occurs. With some forethought, an annual festival could be used to reinforce the local competition season. The winners of the local competitions could be showcased at district, regional or national events. These festivals would augment opportunities for performers to showcase their cultural forms and expand their opportunities to make money, thus contributing to both cultural vitality and economic development (Gilman 2020).

Such initiatives could further other goals of the Convention. Expanding the visibility of *malipenga* could enhance cultural pride for Tumbuka people. As the elders often complain, Malawian youth tend to be more interested in foreign cultural forms, such as American popular music and Nigerian movies and television. The increased attention on *malipenga* could potentially motivate youth to participate in local cultural practices, in combination with their interest in national and international popular culture. As mentioned earlier, those concerned about cultural loss explained that song texts are important for transmitting cultural values. Providing more opportunities and incentives for singing existing songs and for composing new songs would increase the dissemination of values and also create opportunities for expressing a diversity of viewpoints, an important dimension of these song traditions. Inscribing *malipenga* alongside elements from other ethnic groups would contribute to the valuing of cultural diversity within the country more widely.

The economic benefit could be widespread. At the village level, attendees could pay for accommodations, food, drinks, crafts and payment to the performers. If more people came to the region, the local hotels, restaurants, gas stations, markets and vendors along the road and in the cities would benefit from increased sales. The World Tourism Organization recognises that 'no tourism destination can succeed without a variety of attractions' and recommends bundling for the most successful economic outcomes from cultural tourism (2012, 25). Local foods, crafts and musical recordings could be sold during *malipenga* events, thus simultaneously promoting multiple traditional forms while increasing opportunities to generate revenue. And tourists could be encouraged to combine *malipenga* forays with adventures to the nearby lakeshore and Nyika National Park.

Possible issues

This hypothetical example would not be problem-free. Similar issues to what have widely been documented for ICH initiatives in contexts across the world would likely arise. Here, I will outline some, but not all, of the issues one might anticipate. The listing process often results in a single country or cultural grouping claiming a cultural form as its own, even when it is practised by other people in other locations. *Malipenga* is associated with both Tonga and Tumbuka peoples, though there are aesthetic differences between the two. As already mentioned, many other closely related dance forms exist across the region.

Listing the Tumbuka variant could result in Tongas not being able to highlight this dance form that is equally important to them. It could result in a sense of ownership or branding of these forms more generally as Tumbuka or even Malawian, rather than the current situation where it is widely accepted that they are widespread. No variant is considered to be more valuable than others, and no ethnic group has a more legitimate claim than any other.

As Hafstein reminds us, 'safeguarding is a tool of transformation', and efforts to promote *malipenga* would necessarily lead to changes in the dance form and the contexts in which performances take place (2018, 97; cf. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Kapchan 2014). Performers and organisers would likely adapt dances in a variety of ways that would differ from what typically occurs in 'natural settings' and could ultimately contribute to transformations in the form that would not otherwise have occurred. *Malipenga* competitions that typically take multiple days could be adapted to a shorter time frame. An increased audience could mean that some competitions might move to new locations that would require changes in the settings, formation and movements. A new space might not allow for the audience to stand as close to create the periphery of the performance arena or might not be amenable to teams moving in marching formation around a central point. Song leaders and composers might select or compose songs that are appropriate for outside audiences rather than singing those with the most relevance to local communities. These types of adaptations are already typical for *malipenga* performed outside of intervillage competitions; increasing audiences in village spaces could contribute to augmented changes over time in the local setting.

As has been widely argued, selecting certain practices to be showcased as heritage can draw attention to those elements and direct attention and resources away from other important cultural practices (Hafstein 2018, 86). If *malipenga* were the only cultural element inscribed for the Tumbuka, it is likely that *malipenga* would thrive and become iconicised at the expense of other Tumbuka artistic forms, which would have gender-related and cultural implications.[14] The enhanced visibility of a male dance form would mean less visibility for women's cultural forms and for female artists. This privileging of men could augment financial opportunities for men in the community, further contributing to existing gender inequities. Effort would have to be made to be explicit about how to integrate participation beyond those who perform by making sure that the benefits extended out to other demographics. For example, though *malipenga* is performed by men, women value the tradition and play important roles at competitions as lively audience members, vendors and hosts. Explicit attention would have to be given to how to incorporate different segments of the community into the success of the performance as beneficiaries of the financial rewards.

Villages where competitions are held would have to figure out how to host outsiders. Many villages are far from towns or cities, and the roads to many are not accessible by vehicle, other than hearty four-wheel drives. Villages that are closer to towns or paved roads might benefit the most because they are the most accessible. Furthermore, most villages do not have the types of accommodation expected by domestic or international tourists, which would make it difficult for them to host a multi-day event. Developing guest houses for only a short *malipenga* season may not be viable, thus requiring strategising for how to transport people from towns to villages each day of a competition or shortening the event to one day to minimise the need for overnight stays. As a result of these logistical issues, in combination with the quality of organisational skills and performance expertise, certain villages with successful competitions would likely become popular destinations, yielding more financial benefit to its residents than neighbouring ones.

The influx of tourism could also lead to additional efforts, such as 'traditional villages' to draw tourists to the area, some of which could contribute to the perpetuation of stereotypical ideas that associate African people and their cultural practices with exoticism and primitiveness (see McGregor and Schumaker 2006, 658). Cultural displays for tourists in African contexts can reify false perceptions of African peoples as dwelling in a homogenised traditional past' (Fairweather 2006, 721).

Utilising *malipenga* to develop cultural tourism would contribute to its commodification. The outcomes would be many (see Bendix 2009; Yun 2019); here, I will suggest only a few. Though dynamism is part of the tradition, tourism could lead to an idea of a static authentic form that would discourage the innovation that has made *malipenga* relevant and vibrant for so many decades (e.g. Fairweather 2006, 659; Bendix 1997). The opportunities for making money could create a more formalised occupation for dancers, where some members of a community become experts and receive remuneration, thus reducing the access or participation of a larger swath of the population in an activity that is considered to be widely accessible now.

It would also be important to create structures that

ensure that performers and other people on the ground were the primary beneficiaries of the tourism revenue. As it stands, the limited cultural tourism in the country tends to benefit those in higher economic positions rather than the practitioners who produce the attraction. For example, Malawian hotels and other tourist institutions currently hire local performers for very little remuneration so as to localise and provide cultural flavour for their guests. The performers tend to make very little, while the business owners benefit from the entertainment the artists provide. If cultural tourism were to be developed in the manner I am describing, the performers and members of their communities should be front and centre of those organising and benefitting from tourist funds. And the World Tourism Organization's recommendation for bundling activities, gender, class and age would have to be taken into consideration to maximise the benefit across multiple sections of the population.

Conclusion

The Convention has become a powerful tool for a top-down global insistence of the inherent value of localised cultures and the need to promote them in the face of a global capitalist system where certain countries and certain cultural forms dominate. The Convention mandates signatory countries to take culture into consideration in their attention to the social, cultural and economic well-being of their citizenry. Yet the blurring of safeguarding, representation and commodification is one of the many paradoxes in the language and implementation of the Convention, which sometimes results in undermining its very objectives. As Hafstein (2018) demonstrates, the listing, artifactualisation and heritagisation of elements, especially because the focus is often on tourism or economic objectives, can contribute to the exact opposite of what is intended – in the more extreme cases, either the preservation of cultural forms that have run their course, ossification of dynamic traditions, or ironically, cultural loss. By contrast, bringing people to *malipenga* rather than creating new events in new contexts aligns with ecomuseological approaches to intangible heritage conservation, which aim to sustain cultural practices in context rather than removing them for display in static spaces (Gilman 2020). As Michelle Stefano explains, 'in a holistic management approach, intangible cultural expressions remain in continued social practice – that is, in the hands of their communities, or their *true agents of change*' (2012, 234). When people visit a local community to enjoy a dance tradition, the community can retain control over the event and performances and ideally be the primary beneficiaries. This strategy contrasts with what has happened to date with the *vimbuza* implementation plan; a festival and museum exhibition enabled outsiders to learn about and experience *vimbuza* in contexts created specifically for exoteric display. Aside from the few people who performed at the festival, practitioners reaped no benefit, financial or otherwise (Gilman 2015). In the hypothetical example I provided for *malipenga*, anticipating the numerous issues that would likely arise could produce cultural tourism that strategically mitigated problems to increase its successful implementation and benefit across the social spectrum.[15]

Richard Kurin notes that 'the inventories and lists by themselves may have value for recognizing and valorizing various traditions, but will hardly save them' (2004, 74). The cultural losses that concern some Malawians and many others in locales throughout the world are the result of massive cultural changes caused by huge shifts in the social, economic, technological and political world at global and national levels. Planning a festival or museum exhibition featuring the few elements that are inscribed on a UNESCO list does not mitigate these shifts, nor do they do much to change people's cultural choices. When I asked Mr. Kalolokesya whether his organisation's efforts to revitalise Ngonde culture would ensure that his children and grandchildren spoke the language and participated in Ngonde cultural behaviours and practices, he answered, 'everything starts at home'. Ironically, all of his offspring were raised in Malawian cities and are now well educated and living in cities in Malawi and Europe. He explained that their connection to Ngonde culture is limited. His experience was different from that of his sons and daughters because he was brought up in the village. He was raised with 'strong knowledge of village life', which he retained during his decades of working in the civil service in Malawi's urban centres. Now that he is retired, he has returned to his family's home in the rural area. Similarly, when I asked Mr. Mwakasungula about his offspring's relationship to Ngonde culture, he laughed and explained that his children have settled all over the world, in the United Kingdom and Australia, for example. He described them as 'detribalised' and 'urbanised'. At the time, these two men were on the board of an organisation whose goal was to sustain the Ngonde language and revitalise Ngonde culture, yet they were aware that their efforts likely would have little impact on their own descendants. Festivals and exhibitions of Ngonde cultural elements could inspire some Ngonde, including their offspring, to learn something about

their culture. However, revitalisation requires immersion and continued, ongoing experience and commitment to cultural lifeways. If the intent is to 'safeguard', to address the real changes happening on the ground as a result of global shifts, new and different mechanisms would have to be developed or added to the Convention, or new strategies at the local level would need to emerge.

Being explicit that the implementation is often about *representing* cultural elements to outside audiences for *financial gain* rather than safeguarding esoteric cultural practices could create more clarity and produce more deliberate, effective and ethical outcomes, as illustrated in the hypothetical example I have outlined. Would this approach address some of the other concerns about cultural loss? Yes and no. Promoting *malipenga* could inspire greater cultural pride among Tumbuka and enhance opportunities to participate in local cultural practices, including the elements associated with *malipenga* – such things as songs, movement, rhythms, costumes – alongside the community values necessary for putting on a competition. However, this focus on *representation* and *outward display* would likely do little to change people's behaviour around respect for elders, marriage or dress, the values most emphasised in my interviews about cultural loss. But neither does the Convention as it stands do much to address this loss. An explicit focus on exoteric displays could, however, contribute to pride and interest in local cultural practices and a motivation to continue doing them. The bundling of the dance element with other cultural forms could contribute to the conservation of multiple cultural practices. The enhancing of interest and opportunities for such cultural elements would bring people together to participate in their culture in a manner that was valued locally, nationally and internationally, thus serving the Convention's interest in fostering cultural diversity and social justice.

ENDNOTES

1. Quoted from *vimbuza*'s candidature file, shared with me by the Malawi National Commission of UNESCO staff.
2. This interview was held in the Chitumbuka language, with translation by Bernadette Mwabulungu.
3. For more detailed studies of *vimbuza*, see Chilivumbo (1972), Friedson (1996) and Soko (2014).
4. 'Action Plan for the Safeguarding of the Vimbuza Healing Dance', UNESCO, https://ich.unesco.org/en/projects/action-plan-for-the-safeguarding-of-the-vimbuza-healing-dance-00043 (accessed 28February 2020).
5. This interview was conducted in Chitumbuka, with translation by Mercy Moyo.
6. My example in Malawi differs significantly from other contexts in the world where the UNESCO designation is widely known (e.g. Foster 2015; Lowthorp 2015)
7. This interview was held in Chitumbuka, with translation by Bernadette Mwabungulu.
8. This interview was held in Chitumbuka, with translation by Mercy Moyo.
9. The World Bank produced a study at the request of the Malawi's Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture to analyse the potential for tourism in the country. A key component of the report was that cultural tourism is undeveloped and has the potential to contribute significantly to economic development (2010).
10. Unfortunately, I do not have access to the Chitumbuka phrase she used.
11. *Ingoma* is associated with the Ngoni people. Ngoni and Tumbuka people are the majority ethnic groups in this part of Malawi.
12. For more about these types of dance forms in the region, see Gunderson and Barz (2000), Mitchell (1956), Ranger (1975).
13. For more information about *malipenga* in Malawi, see Gilman (2000), Kamlongera (1986), Kerr and Nambote (1983), Koma-Koma (1965) and Mpata (2001). These essays are all about *malipenga* as Tonga people practise it. Little has been written about the Tumbuka variant.
14. Since the country's independence in 1964, dances have been a tool for projecting a national identity rooted in diversity. National events featuring the dance performances of ethnic groups from each of the districts were a central part of the single-party authoritarian rule of Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1964–1994). These types of events continue to be part of the national and political culture, since the transition to a multiparty system of government in 1994. They contribute to sustaining the vitality of many traditional dance forms; at the same time, they have produced a canon of sorts, where those dance forms not typically included in these events have been less likely to survive than those that have (see Gilman 2009).
15. See Foster (2013) for a fascinating example where a community devised creative ways to simultaneously maintain the inward-facing dimensions of a Japanese new year ritual while developing opportunities for tourists to experience an outward-facing version.

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