

Intangible Cultural Heritage: Our Living Heritage

Cultural Heritage: Tangible or Intangible

In 1960, an influential thinker of the 20th century wrote that culture cannot be abridged to its tangible products, because it is continuously living and evolving. He actually caught the essence of cultural heritage, which is composed not only of tangible properties, but also and especially of the essential elements representing the living culture of human communities, their evolution, and their continuing development. Therefore, it includes all immaterial elements that are considered by a given community as essential components of its intrinsic identity as well as of its uniqueness and distinctiveness in comparison with all other human groups. In other terms, the culture of a people is composed by the totality of elements representing the very heart of its distinctive idiosyncrasy.

Until the very last decades of the 20th century, this holistic perception of culture had not been adequately perceived by the international community. The main legal instruments adopted with the purpose of protecting cultural heritage were solely devoted to tangible cultural expressions, the significance of which was to be evaluated on the basis of an objective and standardized perception of their artistic, aesthetic, architectural, visual, scientific, and economic value.

Thanks to these instruments, this perspective, developed in the Western world, became the globalized evaluation method used by the international community as a whole in order to establish the value of cultural heritage. This lack of perception of the need to provide adequate safeguarding for immaterial cultural heritage was presumably the result of the confidence that this heritage was automatically and appropriately preserved and developed at the local level, in the context of the social evolution of the communities concerned. In other words, the depositaries of intangible cultural heritage (IHC) were considered to accomplish spontaneously and appropriately the mission of transmitting to future generations the necessary knowledge to preserve and perpetuate their own immaterial heritage, with no need of any international action in that respect.

Although this spontaneous process could be considered as having worked out fine for many centuries, its dynamics were abruptly broken by the advancement of the process of globalization which has marked the most recent decades. In fact, intensification of intercultural contacts, which in many cases has translated into the imposition of certain cultural models over others, has quickly put under threat the capacity of the oldest generations to transmit their knowledge and knowhow to the youngest.

At present, we are aware on a daily basis of the definitive loss – throughout the world – of languages, knowledge, knowhow, customs, and ideas, leading to the progressive impoverishment of human society. In August 2004, at a meeting organized by UNESCO in Tokyo, the Minister of Culture, Education, Science, and the Church of Greenland stressed that in her country they “have dozens of names for snow and ice because it is important for the hunters to differentiate them, but many

children today know only a few of these names”.

This example epitomizes a process widespread in and characteristic of our contemporary world, in the context of which the cultural archetypes and interests of dominant societies globalize, to the prejudice of minority cultures, leading to cultural hegemony and uniformity at the local, national, regional, and international level. Such a process will eventually lead to the crystallization of uniform and stereotyped cultural models and to the contextual mortification of the value of cultural diversity.

In cultural terms, uniformity means not only loss of cultural heritage but also standardization of the different peoples of the world and of their social and cultural identity into a few stereotyped ways of life, of thinking, and of perceiving the world. Diversity of cultures reflects diversity of peoples; this is particularly linked to ICH, because such a heritage represents the living expression of the idiosyncratic traits of the different communities. Mutual recognition and respect for cultural diversity is essential for promoting harmony in intercultural relations, through fostering better appreciation and understanding of the differences between human communities.

Evolution of the International Safeguarding of IHC

As previously noted, at first the affirmation of the Western-rooted idea of cultural heritage – conceived as embodied in the material products of arts and architecture – prevented the immaterial portion of culture from emerging as an interest belonging to international law. However, since the early 1970s, part of the international community has been aware that the scope and meaning of culture go beyond its mere tangible products, and that appropriate safeguarding is to be devoted to its spiritual side.

As early as in 1972, during the negotiations leading to the adoption of the World Heritage Convention, a number of state representatives shared the idea that the scope of that Convention was too narrow, and that the action of the international community in the field of cultural heritage should extend to its immaterial manifestations. Then, a year later, the government of Colombia proposed that a Protocol be added to the Universal Copyright Convention in order to protect folklore. More generally, the driving force for the safeguarding of ICH originated from countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, motivated by their own conception of culture centered on living traditions.

In 1982, the Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies offered a new holistic definition of culture as “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.” The cultural heritage of a people is therefore to be understood as including “both tangible and intangible works through which the creativity of that people finds expression: languages, rites, beliefs, historic places and monuments, literature, works of art, archives and libraries”.

On 15 November 1989, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the first specific international legal instrument on ICH, the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore (RSTCF). Although still limited in scope (since the concept of “folklore” is more restrictive than ICH), the RSTCF emphasized the importance of folklore as “part of the universal heritage of humanity

and [its role as] a powerful means of bringing together different peoples and social groups and of asserting their cultural identity”, as well as the danger “it faces from multiple factors”. The most innovative principle included in the RSTCF is the proclamation that “folklore, as a form of cultural expression, must be safeguarded by and for the group whose identity it expresses”. The RSTCF then establishes a set of principles providing guidelines for the identification, conservation, preservation, dissemination, and legal protection of folklore, as well as for promoting international cooperation.

During the 1990s, a number of initiatives for the safeguarding of ICH were undertaken in the context of UNESCO. Among such initiatives the launch by UNESCO, in 1994, of the Living Human Treasures programme is to be highlighted. In 1996, the Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development emphasized that development presents new challenges for heritage conservation. A year later, the UNESCO General Conference adopted a resolution in which it decided “to highlight the importance of the ICH for peoples and nations by proclaiming spaces or forms of cultural expression part of the ‘oral heritage of humanity’”. This led the Executive Board to launch, in 1998, the Programme of the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

The purpose of this Programme, which represented the immediate predecessor to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH), was to honour the most remarkable expressions of ICH, selected on the basis of the nominations presented by UNESCO member states.

The Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity were selected according to six criteria, which were applied with a view to ascertaining that those masterpieces meet the requirements of “a strong concentration of ICH of outstanding value” or “a popular and traditional cultural expression of outstanding value from a historical, artistic, ethnological, linguistic or literary point of view”.

UNESCO’s action in the field of safeguarding of ICH was eventually completed on 17 October 2003, when the General Conference adopted the CSICH. The Convention entered into force on 20 April 2006.