

Intangible Cultural Heritage: Significance and Stakes

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Abstract

Intangible cultural heritage plays a significant role in cultural sociology, representing practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills passed from one generation to another within a particular community or society. It encompasses oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, and traditional craftsmanship. Through this research paper titled "Intangible Cultural Heritage: Meaning and Challenges, we aim to define intangible cultural heritage and examine the challenges associated with its preservation.

Keywords: *Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Identity, Globalization, Cultural Diversity, Heritage Safeguarding.*

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Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage, as a non-material aspect of culture, represents the living diversity of humanity's heritage and serves as a fundamental medium for cultural diversity. The core "constructive factors" of intangible cultural heritage lie in its intrinsic identity, acting as a vital element of the cultural identity of its creators and bearers. This heritage is continuously re-created in response to the historical and social evolution of communities, closely tied to their cultural identity, authenticity, and human rights.

The international community has recently recognized the need for the global protection of intangible cultural heritage. This acknowledgment culminated in the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. While this convention accurately highlights the key elements of intangible cultural heritage and provides a sound philosophical foundation, its practical approach—modeled on the 1972 World Heritage Convention—has been criticized by specialists as insufficient for preserving the unique characteristics of intangible heritage.

Efforts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage must align with the principles of international human rights law, albeit indirectly, as such heritage forms a part of cultural rights. It is essential for ensuring the realization of individual and collective rights for its creators and bearers.

Until the late 20th century, the international community lacked a comprehensive understanding of culture. Legal tools for protecting cultural heritage primarily focused on material expressions of culture, whether in times of armed conflict or peace (Khofadja,2004,p.123), and were based on objective and standardized assessments of artistic, architectural, aesthetic, scientific, or economic value.

The failure to recognize the need for adequate protection of intangible cultural heritage likely stemmed from the belief that this heritage, as an integral part of the cultural and social identity of human societies, would naturally and effectively be preserved and developed locally. It was assumed that the custodians of intangible cultural heritage would inherently fulfill their role of transmitting essential knowledge for its preservation to future generations without requiring international intervention. (Ibrahim,2005,p.6).

While this spontaneous preservation was historically successful, its dynamics have been abruptly disrupted by globalization, which has dominated the world in recent decades. Increased cross-cultural communication

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has often led to cultural marginalization, the imposition of dominant cultural models, and threats to the ability of older generations to pass on their knowledge and skills to younger ones. (Zaid,1978,p.60).

Today, the global community is witnessing an irreversible loss of languages, knowledge, skills, customs, and ideas, leading to a gradual impoverishment of human society. In August 2004, during a UNESCO meeting in Tokyo, it was noted that "*globalization is merely another form of colonization.*"(Morsli, 2013,p.69).

This phenomenon reflects a common trend in the modern world, where the cultural patterns and interests of dominant societies have been globalized at the expense of minority cultures. This process leads to cultural domination and homogenization at local, national, regional, and international levels. Ultimately, it results in the standardization of cultural models and the contextual freezing of cultural diversity. (Morsli,2013).

Cultural homogenization implies not only the loss of cultural heritage, understood as the tangible expressions of diverse human groups and communities, but also the stereotyping of social and cultural identities worldwide into a few standardized lifestyles, ways of thinking, and perceptions. The diversity of cultures mirrors the diversity of peoples and is intrinsically linked to intangible cultural heritage, which represents the living expression of the unique traits of various communities. (Ghalioun, 2005)

In 1960, a thinker observed that culture cannot be reduced to its tangible products, as it continuously lives and evolves. (Al-Sayyid, n.d.) This insight captures the essence of cultural heritage, which includes not only material assets but also the fundamental elements that embody the living culture and continuous development of human societies. It encompasses all intangible elements deemed essential by a community as part of its intrinsic identity, individuality, and distinction from all other human groups. Essentially, a people's culture comprises elements that represent their unique essence. (Al-Khashli, 2004)

Intangible cultural heritage plays a vital role in cultural sociology as it embodies the practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills transmitted across generations within a specific human group or community. This heritage, lacking a tangible physical existence, is an integral part of the identity and traditions of societies. It includes oral narratives, performing arts, social customs, rituals, and traditional craftsmanship. This paper seeks to shed light on the concept of intangible cultural heritage and the challenges associated with its preservation. (Al-Khashli, 2004)

Definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The term "intangible cultural heritage" refers to the non-material aspects of culture passed down from ancestors, becoming an essential part of an individual's identity. It serves as a cornerstone in shaping societal identity and fostering social cohesion. For example, traditional dances, songs, and even local foods are elements of intangible cultural heritage that distinguish one community from another. (Abu Zayd, 1978)

UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills—along with the instruments, objects, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities and individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." (Tawfik, n.d., p. 8) It is deeply rooted in communities and their cultures, forming an integral part of their identity. (UNESCO, n.d-a.)

Unlike tangible cultural heritage, such as buildings or artifacts that can be physically preserved and displayed in museums, intangible cultural heritage is timeless. It exists primarily through practice and is transmitted through experience and repetition, deeply ingrained in the collective memory of communities and societies. This type of heritage is an integral part of global cultural heritage, representing a vital legacy for both current and future generations. (UNESCO. (2003)

Intangible cultural heritage encompasses a diverse range of knowledge, social perceptions, cognitive understandings, skills, competencies, and techniques rooted in traditions across various fields of cultural heritage. These elements reflect the true connection to cultural identity, held by individuals or groups, and pertain particularly to:

- Traditional music, folk songs, and chants
- Melodies and rhythms
- Theater, dance, and kinetic expressions
- Religious ceremonies
- Culinary arts
- Oral literary expressions, historical tales, fables, wisdom, myths, riddles, proverbs, sayings, and sermons
- Traditional games. (People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, 1998)

This heritage is characterized by its high cultural diversity, encompassing a multitude of customs and traditions unique to each community and people. Preserving this type of cultural heritage is one of the most fundamental cultural, social, and educational principles, as it enhances communication and interaction across generations and supports sustainable development within communities. It acknowledges the value of diverse forms of expression that constitute the collective history of societies, allowing communities to retain their unique identities through the protection of traditions, values, beliefs, linguistic skills, rituals, music, dance forms, culinary practices, and more. (UNESCO. (2003)

The Importance of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Intangible cultural heritage is a vital factor in maintaining human cultural diversity in the face of increasing globalization. Understanding the intangible cultural heritage of various local communities can help protect their cultural identities and foster dialogue among them. (Morsli,2013)

Challenges in Defining Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Defining intangible cultural heritage poses several challenges due to its subjective nature and diversity across cultures:

1. **Lack of Standard Characteristics:** There is no universal set of characteristics to classify an element as intangible cultural heritage. Each community has its unique practices, which hold varying levels of importance.
2. **Contextual Interpretation:** The immaterial nature of this heritage can be difficult to interpret, as it requires an understanding of the contextual meanings embedded in these practices. What may seem ordinary in one culture could hold profound significance in another. This subjectivity complicates efforts to create an inclusive definition. (Petronela, 2016)
3. **Dynamic Nature:** Intangible cultural heritage evolves continuously, influenced by generational interactions and external factors over time, adding complexity to its definition and preservation. (Mustafa, 2008)

Cultural Relativism and Intangible Cultural Heritage.

The concept of cultural relativism plays a crucial role in defining intangible cultural heritage. It asserts that each culture should be understood on its own terms and not judged by the standards of another culture. This perspective recognizes that diverse cultures have distinct value systems, practices, and beliefs, emphasizing the importance of respecting and preserving their intangible cultural heritage. (Lenzerini, 2011)

Cultural relativism acknowledges that all cultures contribute to the rich diversity of humanity. Therefore, the intangible cultural heritage of a specific community or society should be valued for its intrinsic worth. By recognizing the importance of cultural diversity in defining intangible cultural heritage, we can avoid imposing biases or ethnocentric perspectives when evaluating these practices. (Mustafa, 2008)

UNESCO's Role in Defining Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Recognizing the immense value of intangible cultural heritage, UNESCO has taken a leading role in defining and safeguarding it globally. The organization aims to preserve intangible cultural heritage through various initiatives:

1. **Raising Awareness:** Engaging local and global communities to understand the significance and value of intangible cultural heritage and appreciate its role in fostering cultural diversity and social cohesion.
2. **Documentation:** Collecting and preserving information about intangible cultural heritage practices and knowledge through photographs, audio and video recordings, and interviews.
3. **Transmission:** Ensuring the continuity of intangible cultural heritage by passing down knowledge and skills from generation to generation, preventing the heritage from disappearing over time.
4. **Research:** Conducting studies to gain deeper insights into intangible cultural heritage, analyzing its role in societies, and understanding how it evolves and changes across generations.
5. **Education:** Providing information and training to individuals, enabling them to understand and appreciate intangible cultural heritage and recognize its importance in their daily lives.
6. **Revival Efforts:** Initiating various global projects to revive practices and traditions at risk of extinction or already lost.

In summary, UNESCO strives to provide a comprehensive system to safeguard and promote intangible cultural heritage through a variety of activities and initiatives, ensuring its continuity and sustainability amid contemporary challenges. (Lenzerini, 2011)

Criteria for Recognizing Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO

To determine which elements of intangible cultural heritage merit recognition and protection, UNESCO employs specific criteria, which include:

1. **Connection to Human Creativity:** The element must result from human creativity and ingenuity, possessing artistic or cultural value worthy of recognition.
2. **Embodiment of Social Cohesion:** The element should play a role in fostering unity and cohesion within the community, strengthening social bonds.
3. **Transmission of Knowledge:** The element must serve as a medium for transmitting knowledge and wisdom across generations, whether through formal or informal education.
4. **Promotion of Sustainable Development:** The element should contribute to sustainable development in economic, social, or environmental dimensions.
5. **Reflection of Identity Formation:** The element must be closely linked to the community's identity, reflecting traditions and values that define its uniqueness.
6. **Unique Cultural Expressions:** The element should showcase unique cultural aspects, providing a source of cultural expression not found elsewhere.

These criteria ensure that elements added to UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage list possess genuine cultural significance and merit protection and celebration. They provide a framework for evaluating the cultural and societal importance of these heritage elements and their role in enriching humanity's collective legacy. (UNESCO, (n.d.)

The Development of International Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage

The preservation of cultural diversity, as highlighted in Article 1 of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, is reflected in the "uniqueness and plurality of the identities of the groups and societies that make up humanity", considering it a "source of exchange, innovation, and creativity." Cultural diversity is essential to humanity and is closely tied to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Mutual recognition and respect for cultural diversity, along with the proper protection of the intangible cultural heritage of the diverse peoples that make up the world, are vital for fostering harmony in cultural relations. By enhancing understanding and appreciation of differences among human societies, we contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive global community. (Morsli,2013)

As previously noted, the Western conception of cultural heritage, focusing on material arts and architectural products, hindered the recognition of the intangible aspect of culture as a subject of international law. However, since the early 1970s, part of the international community has acknowledged that the scope and meaning of culture extend beyond tangible products and that its spiritual dimension also deserves appropriate protection. Beginning in 1972, several country representatives participating in negotiations for the adoption of the World Heritage Convention argued that its scope was too narrow and that international efforts in cultural heritage should also encompass intangible cultural expressions. (Bouchenaki, 2003, October)

In general, the momentum toward safeguarding intangible cultural heritage originated from countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, reflecting their cultural perspectives that emphasize living traditions. This eventually led to what has been described as a "balanced global heritage." The term "intangible cultural heritage" is a "free translation in Anglo-Saxon languages of the Japanese expression *mukei bunkazai*." (Lenzerini, 2011)

In 1982, the *Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies* introduced a new and inclusive definition of culture as "a complex whole of spiritual, material, intellectual, and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and literature but also ways of life, fundamental human rights, value systems, traditions, and beliefs." (UNESCO, 1982)

Cultural heritage must be understood as encompassing "the tangible and intangible works through which the creativity of a people finds expression: languages, rituals, beliefs, historical places, monuments, literature, artistic works, archives, and libraries." (UNESCO, 1982)

On *November 15, 1989*, UNESCO's General Conference adopted the first specific international legal instrument for intangible cultural heritage, the *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore*. (See the text of this declaration in UNESCO (2001) Although limited in scope - since the concept of folklore is narrower than intangible cultural heritage - the recommendation emphasized the significance of folklore as "part of the world's heritage of humanity and its role as a powerful means of bringing together different peoples and social groups and affirming their cultural identity" (UNESCO, 1982, Article 1), while also acknowledging the threats it faced due to various factors. (UNESCO, 1982, Article 5)

The opening sentences clearly indicate that the idea of the "subjectivity" of intangible heritage was already recognized within UNESCO. This notion was further elaborated in paragraph "a," which defines folklore as a collection of creative expressions rooted in the traditions of a particular cultural community. These expressions can be collective or individual, are recognized as reflecting societal expectations regarding cultural and social identity, and are transmitted orally, by imitation, or through other means. Examples

include language and literature, music and dance, games, myths, rituals, customs, craftsmanship, architecture, and other arts.

The most innovative principle is contained in paragraph "b" of the recommendation, which declares: "*Folklore, as a form of cultural expression, should be safeguarded by the familial, professional, national, regional, religious, or ethnic group that it represents.*" (UNESCO, 1982) The recommendation also provides a set of guidelines for identifying, preserving, disseminating, legally protecting, and promoting international cooperation in folklore preservation.

During the 1990s, numerous initiatives were undertaken within UNESCO to safeguard intangible cultural heritage. Among these was the launch of the "*Living Human Treasures*" Program in 1994. See the 2003 Convention (UNESCO, 2003).

The program aimed to encourage member states to grant official recognition to tradition-bearers and exceptionally talented craftsmen who possess extensive knowledge and skills. It also sought to promote the transmission of their knowledge and skills to younger generations. (UNESCO, 2003)

In 1996, the report of the *World Commission on Culture and Development* emphasized that "development poses new challenges for the preservation of heritage. There is not only a significant gap between means and objectives, but our definitions remain far too narrow. They are biased towards the elite, monumental, intellectual, and ceremonial aspects of heritage. It is essential to reevaluate such concepts and develop better methods for identifying and interpreting our heritage. It is vital to understand the values and aspirations that motivated its creators; otherwise, the object becomes detached from its context and loses its intrinsic meaning. The tangible can only be interpreted through the intangible." (Pérez de Cuéllar, 1996)

A year later, UNESCO's General Conference adopted a resolution highlighting "the importance of the intangible cultural heritage of peoples and nations, by declaring certain spaces or forms of cultural expression as part of the 'Oral Heritage of Humanity.'" (Pérez de Cuéllar, 1996)

In 1998, the Executive Board launched the program for the *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*. This program, which served as a precursor to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, aimed to honor the most significant expressions of intangible cultural heritage, selected based on nominations submitted by UNESCO member states. (UNESCO, 2003)

A definition of intangible cultural heritage was formulated by a group of UNESCO experts during the first expert meeting on negotiations regarding intangible cultural heritage. This definition closely resembled the one adopted in the final text of the convention.

The rationale was based on the understanding that "oral and intangible heritage has gained international recognition as a fundamental factor in cultural identity, fostering creativity and preserving cultural diversity. It plays a critical role in national and international development, tolerance, and peaceful intercultural interactions. In the era of globalization, many forms of this cultural heritage are at risk of extinction due to cultural homogenization, armed conflicts, and the adverse effects of mass tourism, industrialization, migration, and environmental degradation." See the 2003 Convention (UNESCO, 2003)

The convention came into force on April 20, 2006, and has since been ratified by 134 member states of the United Nations organization.

The Concept and Meaning of Intangible Cultural Heritage: A Critical Assessment.

Article 2 of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage defines "intangible cultural heritage" as:

"The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2)

Over generations, communities and groups continually recreate this intangible cultural heritage in response to their environment, interaction with nature, and history, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity. This process fosters respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Components of Intangible Cultural Heritage:

- **A)** Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage;
- **B)** Performing arts;
- **C)** Social practices, rituals, and festive events;
- **D)** Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- **E)** Traditional craftsmanship, provided it aligns with existing international human rights instruments, the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups, and individuals, and sustainable development. (Morsli,2013)

Human Rights Connection.

Intangible cultural heritage is closely linked to human rights in two interconnected ways:

1. **Human rights as a legitimacy criterion** for the heritage in question.
2. **The heritage itself as a tool** to enhance the actual enjoyment of human rights.

This dual perspective underscores the interdependence between intangible cultural heritage and human rights. (Labioud, 2017)

Perspective 1: Self-Identity as a Criterion.

Self-identity is a fundamental factor in understanding the distinct differences in the preservation of tangible versus intangible cultural heritage. According to the approach of the World Heritage Convention, tangible heritage merits international protection due to its "outstanding universal value" – a standard recognized globally based on shared indicators of value. In contrast, the value of a specific element of intangible cultural heritage depends on the recognition of the communities, groups, or individuals concerned.

In other words, tangible cultural heritage is categorized based on an objective assessment of its exceptional value from a universal standpoint. By contrast, intangible cultural heritage derives its value from the self-identity attributed to it by its creators and bearers, who recognize it as a fundamental part of their unique cultural heritage, even if it appears to hold no value for others.

Perspective 2: Continuous Re-Creation.

Self-identity is closely tied to the characteristic of continuous re-creation in intangible cultural heritage. This heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their historical context. (Labioud, 2017)

In summary, intangible cultural heritage stands apart due to its subjective nature, rooted in the recognition and ongoing practices of the communities that sustain it. Its value lies not in universal acclaim but in its

profound significance to the people and societies that nurture it, making it a vital part of their cultural identity and continuity.

Conclusion

Intangible cultural heritage holds immense value in understanding and preserving the diverse human experiences that shape our collective history. Despite the challenges in defining it, recognizing the importance of intangible cultural heritage fosters an appreciation for various forms of expression and contributes to social cohesion. Through organizations like UNESCO, significant efforts are being made to safeguard these practices and ensure their transmission to future generations. Embracing cultural relativism allows us to respect the unique contributions that different cultures make to the shared fabric of humanity.

Today, there is a growing global acknowledgment of the profound relationship between tangible and intangible heritage. While these two forms of heritage are distinct, they are like two sides of the same coin: both carry meaning and embody human memory deeply rooted in their existence.

Each form relies on the other for a complete understanding of its significance and meaning. Policies specifically designed to identify and promote "hybrid heritage" forms—often among the most refined cultural spaces and expressions created by humans—are now essential.

Other aspects of heritage management need to be adapted for application to intangible heritage. For instance, state parties are now required to compile national inventories of their intangible heritage. By establishing comprehensive registers and lists, research and documentation on intangible heritage at the national level will be encouraged and intensified. These records and inventories will also contribute to better recognition and protection for practitioners, the creation of more suitable legislation and safeguarding mechanisms, and the dissemination of the values and significance of intangible cultural heritage through education and awareness-raising initiatives. Since the preservation of intangible heritage, as a living heritage, fundamentally depends on those who create and sustain it, such efforts are crucial.

UNESCO's 2003 Convention explicitly and clearly outlined the need to protect the creative resources of communities and human societies and to transmit them from generation to generation to shield them from the looming threat of globalization. There is now an undeniable global interest in preserving this cultural heritage, protecting it from loss, and granting its bearers the primary right to control its use and exploitation.

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