

CHAPTER 10

Intangible cultural heritage, local knowledge and sustainable management of cultural assets and environmental recourses

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Introduction

The convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage was adopted by UNESCO in 2003 and, since then, has helped to bring about a significant increase in international debate about not only the nature and value of intangible heritage, but also about the meaning and character of heritage more generally. While it is a relatively new convention, ratification on behalf of states has gathered unprecedented momentum (within the first 3 years it had been ratified by more than 160 UNESCO member-states). This rapid process testifies to the great interest shown by states and heritage professionals alike for the key concepts of the convention and its mechanisms of implementation. More importantly, the implementation of the ICH convention has contributed significantly not only to the re-examination of the dominant ideas about the role and meaning of heritage in contemporary societies, but also to the development of new management, conservation, and/or preservation practices.

We should make a quick note on a substantial differentiation that has been developed between these two terms. They were at one time used interchangeably; however, experts and professionals recently tend to favor the first, in accordance with a general trend in re-defining heritage and its value for contemporary societies. According to a distinction found within the Burra Charter, created by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1979 and later revised, preservation means keeping an object or structure in its original state, and thereby avoiding deterioration through maintenance and/or preventive measures. “Conservation, by contrast, has more to do with the broader task of safeguarding the cultural significance of a structure or place, with cultural significance defined as ‘the aesthetic, historic, scientific, social or spiritual value for past, present or future generations.’ Not only does the task of conservation recognize the need to incorporate a certain amount of change within sites, it also recognizes that the cultural significance of sites varies for different social groups and in different time periods. Thus the term conservation

more aptly describes the broader issues that are discussed in the community of heritage professionals” (Barthel-Bouchier, 2013).

The anthropological approach to culture and the refocusing of social sciences on processes (i.e., not only on products—objects, buildings etc.—of processes), have proven to be significant factors in the re-definition of heritage as an entity made up of various complex and interdependent expressions, revealed through social practices and customs. Today, it is the diversity of expressions that create the definition of heritage. “This definition, strictly dependent on the idea of the complexity of heritage, was not obvious as the habits of visual representations of the diversity of cultures through their simplified heritage expressions were firmly anchored in minds. African habitats and sculpture, European monuments, the lost pyramids of Latin America, and the national parks of North America, etc., are no longer perceived as images par excellence of the heritage of humanity, but have acquired a new dimension, through the intermediary of the concept of intangible values. It is the quest for the meaning of cultural expressions that has paved the way for acknowledgement of a new approach to heritage. This quest, which has acquired greater importance in the last thirty years, has required 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 drawing a comprehensive approach to heritage which will now apply to both tangible and intangible heritage” (Bouchenaki, 2004).

UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage (ICH) as 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.” ICH is an all-encompassing concept, applicable both to tangible and intangible culture alike.

Intangible Heritage is manifested, *inter alia*, in the following domains:

- a. oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the 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.¹

In this presentation I will examine four ICH elements, all inscribed in the National Inventory of ICH of Greece (kept by the Directorate of Modern Cultural Assets and Intangible Cultural Heritage, <http://ayla.culture.gr>), that may help to broaden our understanding about the value of ICH in general as a crucial factor for sustainable development and more specifically its great but not fully recognized potential in carrying-out restoration projects of built heritage successfully and in the most efficient manner financially. These examples may illuminate the aptly called “subtle power of ICH” (Deacon, Dondolo, Mrubata and Prosalendis, 2004) concerning sustainable development.

1 Article 2 of the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO 2003, online: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention>.

Tinian Marble-Craftsmanship

Built heritage is the product of craftsmanship of the past that has been put to use by craftspeople who shared the then prevalent knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. Those two domains of ICH (mentioned above as d. and e. in art. 2 of the 2003 UNESCO Convention) are crucial in any restoration project. The restoration works on the Acropolis testify to that: the Tinian marble-craftsmen are among the key workers there because they possess a unique knowledge of marble-craftsmanship acquired in their birthplace, the island of Tinos. The knowledge is acquired mainly through non-formal education. Tinian marble craftsmanship is based on the master-apprentice model of transmission and corresponding hierarchical organization of marble-crafting workshops. Marblecraftspeople possess empirical knowledge of the composition and structure of marble-bearing rock, the properties of each kind of marble, and the manipulation of its veins. A part of this ICH element is also the making of the tools used in marble-crafting. The forgers of tools in Tinos also provide tools to most restoration places all over Greece, where marble or stone cutting is necessary. The exceptional tradition of Tinian marble-craftsmanship has been recognized globally, and the element has been inscribed in the Representative List of ICH of Humanity, in November 2015.²

But traditional craftsmanship either in metal-works, or in pottery etc. is not the only manifestation of the value of ICH for society and more specifically for the practice of heritage conservation.

The Sacred Forests in Epirus

Even more important are manifestations of ICH that are linked to local knowledge and the local management of natural resources, such as water, in order to prevent floods or landslides. A good such example is the tradition of Sacred Forests (or *Vakoufia*) in Epirus, which we have recently included in the Greek National Inventory of ICH.³ It is an element that combines local knowledge of sustainable water management and a system of beliefs concerning nature. Where this tradition is still observed (in *Zagorochoria* and *Konitsa* villages nowadays), it is combined with strict prohibitions on cutting wood from certain forests around the villages. Even excommunications had been used against the transgressors of the wood-cutting prohibition.

The tradition of Sacred Forests combines thorough observation and intimate knowledge of the flow of the water in the area with prohibitions that may verge on superstition. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance for the protection of the villages.

This intimate, local knowledge of water flows exists everywhere in Greece, and its bearers are the people who live and work in the fields and the forests, like the shepherds. Their knowledge could be of great use if it is taken under consideration

2 Online publication of the National Inventory File: <http://ayla.culture.gr/?p=151&lang=en>, On-line Decision 10.b.17 of the 10th Intergovernmental Committee of the ICH Convention for the inscription of the element on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Humanity: <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/Decisions/10.COM/10.b.17>.

3 Online publication: <http://ayla.culture.gr/?p=374> (currently in Greek only, soon to be translated in English as well).

in new building projects, the making of new highways and roads around the country, etc. But we must stress the word “intimate”: this knowledge can only be obtained through the use of appropriate methods of the relevant social sciences, folklore and cultural anthropology in particular. It can provide as precise information as the data gathered according the research methods of natural sciences (geology, etc.), but in a more participatory way, an approach that takes under consideration the knowledge and the perspective of the local community.

Dry Stone Craftsmanship

On the arid environment of the Cyclades, the art of dry stone craftsmanship is the means to create a livelihood out of the wind-swept hills. Dry Stone art refers to stone construction without the use of any binding material, such as mortar, cement, etc. The element is linked with customs and traditional practices associated with the organization of rural space. It has shaped numerous and diverse landscapes, forming various modes of dwelling, farming, and husbandry (i.e., creating terraces for cultivation, delineating boundaries of land, constructing seasonal settlements and shelters, managing water resources in a sustainable way, etc). It is invaluable in preventing landslides, floods and in combating erosion or desertification of the land. It also enhances biodiversity. Moreover, it has been used in public works, and artistic aspects of the craftsmanship have been acknowledged and accordingly exploited by contemporary artists.

The landscape that features prominently in Greek tourism posters is that of the dry-stone scales bordering the beaches. Dry stone also helps to bear in mind another important feature of traditional craftsmanship: the superior beauty of hand-made products.

Dry stone structures are directly linked to the knowledge of rocks and natural materials and, generally, to the knowledge of the environment (direction and intensity of winds and rain, risk of erosion, landslides, floods, etc.). During the construction of dry stone works, all these factors are taken into account, shaping and improving local natural conditions. Dry stone constructions are re-appreciated today because of their functional qualities (isothermy, regulation of ventilation, and humidity) that result naturally in this kind of building -there is no need to use expensive materials for insulation, other than the locally found stones, or extra expertise, other than that of the craftspeople in any given rural community. The contribution of dry stone to natural environment, soil and water resources management, as well as the preservation of traditional settlements, is amply acknowledged.

Nowadays, several communities acknowledge that dry stone constructions constitute part of the cultural and natural landscape in which they live. Despite urbanization and the decline in the number of permanent rural residents over the last years, an increased interest is observed in the preservation of dry stone structures in several communities. There are more and more possibilities for restorations and new constructions, whilst the demand for such structures has expanded to new sectors of activity (environmental protection, preservation and enrichment of biodiversity, cultural and eco-friendly tourism amongst others). The skill serves as a field of research and a challenge for various experts (architects, landscape architects, ethnologists, historians, archaeologists, biologists, geologists, teachers, foresters as well as

painters, poets and photographers), poised between tradition and innovation, craft-work and artistic creation.

Most importantly, dry stone craftsmanship contributes to the creation of a collective identity associated with the performance of the element at local and regional level, generating synergies and common bonds. Transmission of the craft is slow and gradual, the technique is mastered little by little through repetition and imitation, practical and theoretical learning. The process of learning in a non-formal education format promotes an affective bond with the craft and the land where it is performed. It also creates a sense of belonging to the dry stone community, which engenders ties of friendship and solidarity. Learning becomes a vital experience, strengthening relations between individuals but also between people and the land.

Dry stone craftsmanship is used in many places around the world and this fosters the creation of networks between different cultural communities, thus encouraging the exchange of knowledge and experience as well as mutual respect and appreciation of cultural diversity.

Currently, we have initiated a multi-national file for the inscription of dry-stone on the Representative List of the Humanity⁴ and the participation of interested states is growing. States of a wide region, around the Mediterranean and beyond, such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, and Switzerland are already co-operating with us for the preparation of the nomination file, and we have reasons to believe that more countries will express their interest in the future.

Wooden Shipbuilding

Wooden shipbuilding is one of the greatest and most complex arts in modern and contemporary Greece. It is a craft based on the master-apprentice model of transmission and corresponding hierarchical organization, but there are very many different aspects of this craft, a lot of specializations that have to be orchestrated by the master shipwright in a shipyard. This entails long years of apprenticeship and laborious training. Nevertheless, it was a flourishing craft almost until the 1990s and widely spread in every corner of mainland or island Greece.⁵ Due to accumulating pressure coming from diverse environments (the EU policies on fisheries is just one, the social security system's requirements another, etc.), during the last decade the number of trainees in traditional shipyards is dwindling, many small shipyards are shut down and the master shipwrights are getting retired with no one to take up their place. The chain of transmission seems to be ready to break.

We are currently paving our way in order to coordinate agents from different fields of public policy and the shipwrights themselves, so that a coherent safeguarding plan can be devised and implemented. Our prioritization of safeguarding this ICH element is not solely driven by our scientific appreciation of its great cultural

4 The multinational file is currently under process by the experts of the participating states. Nevertheless, the National Inventory File of Greece for Dry Stone Craftsmanship can be accessed online: <http://ayla.culture.gr/?p=387&lang=en>.

5 Online publication of the National Inventory File on Wooden Shipbuilding: <http://ayla.culture.gr/?p=108&lang=en>.

value. We also know from economic studies that there is economic potential in building wooden boats that are now used for leisure activities (yachting and sea tourism activities), a potential that can also create a considerable number of new jobs in the shipyards of unemployment –stricken areas such as Perama, Syros, etc.

The “subtle power of ICH”

The spirit of the ICH Convention demonstrates vividly UNESCO’s belief that culture should be considered a fundamental enabler of sustainability, a source of meaning and energy, a spring of creativity and innovation, and a resource to address challenges and find appropriate solutions. A belief we all share. But we also have to take stock of the current situation we live in, to adapt our activity to the wider picture that compels us to re-evaluate our priorities, particularly in circumstances such as the one we are still going through in Greece, a condition of uncertainty and change. It has been observed that the consequences of a society not being able to deal on its own terms with change can be disastrous. At the very least, inability to deal with change means that the society no longer determines its own historical trajectory, but surrenders to outside events. Culture shapes interpretations of experience and determines the action taken to cope with change. Different cultures produce dramatically different interpretations –and even misinterpretations- of the same event, which lead to actions that can have significant repercussions, incomprehensible in terms of the original interpretation (Stanley, 2005).

The competent body for the implementation of the ICH Convention in Greece, the Directorate of Modern Cultural Assets and Intangible Cultural Heritage, has devoted a lot of effort in enhancing the value of ICH and more specifically in promoting certain aspects of intangible heritage related to sustainable development, such as the traditional crafts and local knowledge described above, with a view also to contributing to the on-going public debate on the re-appraisal of the productive dynamics of the country. We started building the National Inventory of ICH (the main mechanism of the Convention) exactly when our own perception of Greek productivity was at a very low point. Moreover, the image of Greece abroad was marred by various allegations. Through the Inventory we try to look at Greek heritage from a new perspective. We aim to enhance certain aspects of Greek living traditions that could be used as guidance not only for overcoming a fiscal and financial crisis, but also for fostering sustainable development processes in economic activities.

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