

Global opportunities for intangible heritage: new challenges for local lives

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1. Background.

In order to discuss the opportunities, threats and challenges that globalization poses to intangible heritage, I would start from the following standpoint. The subject matter of the present round table stems – on the one hand - from constraints and possibilities proper to specific and concrete ethnographic contexts. On the other hand, they derive from economical, cultural and political processes induced by agencies that operate in social scales, which are wider than the immediate territories of the social groupings concerned, and include them.

Let us first consider a few examples. Finance and business, for instance, have nowadays become a practically autonomous sphere of social activity. They flow across national borders, induced by the fluctuations of the money market.

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As to the social organization and structure, these tend to be dynamically reconstructed through relationships with distant partners. Such relationships may be direct as in the case of travelling, or through spontaneous or forced migration, or mediation of sophisticated and efficient systems of communication, like Internet, interactive television etc.

Furthermore, in many social environments, values and attitudes are no longer accepted simply as present echoes of living traditions. They became highly reflective and now their legitimization asks for solid and good arguments, preferably validated and supported by what increasingly becomes an effective - although virtual - global public sphere. No wonder, cultural differences became once more highlighted by the culture policy agenda of most countries!

Thus, global realities belong simultaneously to our common world of daily life and to realms that go far beyond any space, that might be concretely bounded and experienced by individual social agents. So, they presuppose, by their own nature, institutional building and access to efficient communication networks.

As it is proper to cultural phenomena, global realities are clearly systemic objects and therefore should be holistically understood as such. However, if one of their aspects should be highlighted as crucial for our present discussion, I would no doubt choose *governance*, i.e., the capacity to manage - in practical terms - the connection between the various scales and nodes of the complex web in which we all live today, and

the interests of each specific group of people involved in specific territories.

Social groups whose natural or cultural heritage are identified by preservation agencies as being distinctive and, for such reason, worth of safeguarding, often become assets used for the production of consumer goods and services. As a consequence, they become involved and entangled by global systems of circulation - concerning people, signs, consumer goods and capital - that operate in multiple scales and impose, upon them, quantitative as well as qualitative demands of a new kind. The volume and rhythm of what is produced tend to be increased: people tend to produce more, and at a higher frequency. Besides this, the organization of the work processes, as well as the conception and design of the consumer goods, have to respond to demands established by dealers, consumers and other agencies that are largely external to the actual or virtual social networks, built by any individual member of the local group.

But this is not all. Cultural processes, taking place at a deeper level, must be clearly identified and taken into account in the present debate. Indeed, globalization not only increases or magnifies a previous reality in the terms of that reality, but it characteristically stimulates the emergence of new needs and trends, as well as the incorporation of new ethical and aesthetical values to the previous social environment.

Through a complex process of rooting global senses of place - on local spheres - languages, symbols and meanings are developed, not necessarily *opposing* inner and outer social

realities as distinct from each other. The so-called hybrid cultural patterns often bridge cultural difference by building permeable and flexible borders through the articulation of signs of various origins. This is perhaps one of the prominent characteristics of the symbolic borders built by contemporary cultures: they do not claim to be pure, but hybrid in nature. Not walls, but bridges to be crossed by those who know the right codes of identification.

In that respect, they are adequate signs for building identities that do not intend to be exclusive, or excluding. Instead, they contribute to put the outer world in dialogue and interaction with the self-images, memories and traditions proper to the local communities.

Going back to globalization, and following the previous argument, one could say that - in such cases - different scales and ethnical textures intersect themselves in such a way, that hyper-local realities, such as small exotic villages, distant rural settlements, domestic environments, become inseparable from regional, provincial, national or global demands, and vulnerable to them.

These hypotheses, pointing mainly to the subject matter of *heritage as economy*, raise important questions for the understanding and the monitoring of cultural preservation today. Consequently, they provide a relevant background to our present discussion: one that highlights the well-being of concrete people; the legal rights concerning the activities performed by them, as well as the knowledge and forms of expression that they have developed collectively; and finally,

the efficiency and democratic commitment of multilateral agencies in regulating and monitoring the processes through which global realities become part of local lives.

2. Territorializing cultural policies.

One of the major challenges to the preservation of cultural heritage (tangible or intangible) is the ability of accomplishing an adequate change of scale between the general guidelines formulated from afar, by the policy-making institutions, and the local circumstances of social life. This theoretical and practical challenge to heritage experts necessarily includes the critique of their role and position in the social environment where both intercultural dialogue and political negotiations take place.²

Social policies regarding health, education or income distribution, as well as those aiming at cultural processes, frequently reach only part of their objectives. Important reasons of such failure lie on the difficulty that planners and institutions usually have in incorporating to the design, implementation and evaluation of such actions the motivations, priorities and projects of the target populations, as well as stimulating their active capacity as protagonists of the social processes in which they are involved.

In other words, crucial aspects of such problems stem from their implementation mode, i.e., on how the actual articulation between the agencies that execute social policies and the involved social segments take place. And this, of

² Antonio A Arantes. Reconsidering the social aspects of sustainability: integrated conservation of the urban environmental heritage. CECI/ICOMOS.

course, depends on the values and attitudes, in the forms of organization and processes of decision-making that are, implicitly or explicitly, enforced by such agencies. There is no “impartiality” or “neutrality” in regard to cultural agency, since cultural dynamics is fundamentally a process of re-production and re-creation of social difference.

Such drawbacks might be easily understood in merely formal or logical terms. Therefore, they perhaps show limited interest for the present meeting. However, ethnographies extensively argue that cultural processes often include unexpected issues and that their developments cannot be deduced from first principles. Furthermore, it becomes worthwhile looking at such matter more closely and in concrete terms. Such will be the next step of this presentation, in which I will briefly refer to ethnographic observation carried out in Brazil, in order to eventually go back to some general principles which are pertinent to this discussion.

3. Heritage as cultural resource.

In the context of the recent increase of investments in tourism and in real estate business, the popular celebrations that take place in the South of Bahia, Brazil, became a significant source of income to the local economies. Traditionally, they are rituals of popular Catholicism, the celebration of patron saints accomplishing the important role of reinforcing the local communities’ social structure, the sense of belonging of the society members and, consequently,

they constitute the main arenas for the negotiation of prestige and staging social stratification.

In recent years, the population of those villages rapidly increased. Nowadays, they include new residents, mainly young people who come from big cities, looking for landscapes of “paradise on earth”, as well as to new ways and opportunities – both licit and illicit - of making money. Regular visitors, such as politicians, professionals and media celebrities, also return every season.

It is crucial for the newcomers’ inclusion in local life that they are accepted as active participants of such celebrations. More recently, religious disputes also became part of the game. Catholic priests, who recently returned to the region, try to take control of this activity, claiming that popular Catholicism should be absorbed by the official activities of the church. The evangelic ministers, being stricter, argue that such celebrations should not take place since they are not acceptable expressions of Christianity.

Yet, despite this conflictive situation – which is itself part of the local cultural scene - the rite did not lose its traditional meaning. New rules and criteria built in practice by “natives” and “foreigners” opened the institution to outside participants. However, at the same time, such rules and criteria regulated it as a political arena, thus reinforcing the role of the local leaders as protagonists of the whole process.

This is a good example of a situation in which a new circumstance was incorporated by social life, as an opportunity of making it symbolically more efficient, in terms of present

needs and tastes and – also - as a means of strengthening heritage as sign of historical continuity, social and personal identity and self-esteem.

But, as a matter of fact, the accommodation of costume to circumstance has limits. Whereas some specific areas of the ritual were opened to the new community members, and others such as fixing the meals, performing music, dance or painting, were kept as prerogatives of people bound by birth to the large kinship groups that form the sociological nucleus of the native community.

The example is quite suggestive of several issues related to the matter that bring us together in this afternoon's discussion. In the first place, it shows that some aspects of a complex social practice can be less permeable to innovation than others. Charged with a stronger sense of local identity, they give the cultural performance its condition of active symbol of the community, mirroring what the group considers as its own "tradition" and, for that matter, its legitimate property.

It is extremely relevant to our discussion that such "traditional" manifestations of community life have some degree of ambiguity. Although considered as one of the dearest and most singular symbols of community life, these celebrations are not totally exclusive: they are in fact made as being *partially permeable* to outsiders. To my view, such partial permeability is a key attribute of the cultural heritage's exchange value in contemporary life. In the context of a radical change in scale, from being a local event of ceremonial life

based on kinship to becoming a global one, articulating people and agencies of various spheres, such rituals incorporate new social actors and are opened to innovation. Yet it happens without necessarily losing the aura of authenticity and sacredness on which depends their verisimilitude.

Indeed, having it as it were, a hard core protected by a buffer zone of soft and permeable edges: such is the structural characteristic that helps understand the relative strength of some heritage practices that might have been otherwise devastated in our recent years of intense social change.

One last worthwhile pointing out aspect is that we, as agents of safeguarding policies, participate in local life in a way that is similar to that of the just mentioned newcomers. The objects chosen for official safeguarding tend to be those praised by the cultural communities as their own treasures, sacred and fragile, deeply rooted in social structure. Similarly, they are also highly cherished by the market of cultural commodities, and targeted by ourselves, cultural policy makers. To my view, the resources we manage, either material or symbolic, enter local life through the fissures opened by such ambiguous flexibility. So it becomes extremely relevant to critically face the consequences of our interference in local life. How far is it desirable and desired by the local community? Which are its positive and negative consequences?

4. The task of safeguarding.

On less developed regions of Europe, several programmes regarding human and social development lean on the valuation of traditional knowledge and forms of expression, as well as the aggregation of cultural value to commodities. Those programmes have, in general, produced material, psychosocial and political benefits to their target-populations. In short, they are strengthening feelings of self-esteem, social inclusion practices and awareness about citizenship rights. Therefore, it is both valid and desirable to use them as inspiration or adapt them as basis for the safeguarding of intangible heritage in particular contextual realities in other parts of the world.

In Brazil, for instance, they are now being taken into consideration for the design and implementation by IPHAN. We refer to some experimental projects of safeguarding intangible heritage, in the context of local programmes of integrated preservation, focusing both on the tangible and intangible heritage of specific social groups and their territories.

On the basis of the argument here developed, the achievement of the desirable effects produced by such policies depends on the observation of some basic premises, among which I would point out the following ones as I bring this presentation to an end:

- 1. Conservation of the material and environmental conditions of heritage production, considering the possibility of an expansion of the market demands.**

2. Control, by the local agencies, of the customary forms of transmission of knowledge and forms of expression, given the rooting of heritage in cosmology and social organization.

3. Monitoring the changes directly or indirectly provoked by the safeguarding programmes on the community's daily life, e.g. family organization, local politics.

4. Safeguarding collective rights concerned to intellectual property and copyright of traditional knowledge and forms of expression.

5. Active participation of the community in inventories and records that preserve and give the present and future generations access to accumulated knowledge.

One last aspect of the matter should still be mentioned. It refers to whether or not, and how, the local community organizes itself to interact with the external agencies of safeguarding and development. Such problem, which has a political nature, does not end on the institutional plan. The empowerment of local communities is absolutely central to ensure feasibility and efficacy to social programs such as those focused by the present meeting. Very often, the effectiveness of the policies designed by our agencies depends on important political changes, either within the social and political organization of our target communities, and/or in the worldviews and values put in practice by experts and other official personnel involved in planning, evaluating and implementing such actions.

For us, managers of a new cultural heritage policy, which takes as a priority the meaning of cultural properties to the populations they belong to, and takes advantage of their potential to improve the life conditions of these very populations, this is a socially relevant challenge that, besides, is professionally very stimulating.

It's up to us to face it!