

Intangible Cultural Heritage: Our Living Heritage

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 (ICH) 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.