Intangible heritage, from safeguarding anxiety to sustainable futures –
A message for the 20th anniversary of the 2003 Convention

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This year marks the 20th anniversary of the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage* (2003 Convention); an opportune moment to reflect on its significance. It is also the 20th anniversary of my research journey in the realms of the intangible. After completing an undergraduate degree in theatre studies at the National University of Athens, I arrived in London in September 2003 to pursue further studies in cultural heritage at UCL. The newly-adopted Convention and the elusive concept of intangible heritage have been the focus of my research ever since. The first year was followed by an internship at the Intangible Heritage Section of UNESCO in Paris, reviewing submissions for the *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, making sure that the candidates satisfied the endangerment criterion. Doctoral studies at UCL, funded by the National Scholarships Foundation of Greece and the UCL Graduate School, followed next. Aiming to examine intangible heritage on the ground and question some of the orthodoxies of the 2003 Convention, my PhD turned into an international quest for what intangible heritage meant and how it informed heritage-thinking and heritage-making by museums and heritage communities. Since then, I have researched, talked and written about safeguarding interventions in many settings around the world, academic, museum and community-based. In what follows, I would like to share some of my thoughts on the development of intangible heritage since 2003 and highlight some areas for further reflection and action.

Intangible and living heritage, an unfolding discourse

Founded in the aftermath of World War II, UNESCO has aimed to 'build peace in the minds of men and women by strengthening the intellectual and moral solidarity of humankind'[1]. Enlightenment values of humanism, including physical and intellectual freedom, equality and justice, further reflected in the *1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, have since guided its work on education, scientific research and culture. Complementing this global ethical framework is the respect for cultural diversity expressed in the idea of 'mutual understanding and dialogue between cultures'[2]. Rooted in European romantic ideas of folk and/ or distant cultures and further advocated by 20th century anthropologists, such as

[1] www.unesco.org
[2] As above.

Claude Levi-Strauss, the protection of the world's cultural diversity could be considered a second foundational narrative of UNESCO (Hylland-Eriksen 2002). Unlike the former which emphasises equal rights and common values, the latter emphasises difference, and underlines the need to protect the distinct, often endangered, identity of cultural communities. It is a narrative that finds resonance not only with late 19th and 20th century salvage ethnography, but also with late 20th century identity politics and politics of recognition (Taylor 1992).

UNESCO's mission to protect the diversity of human cultures has given shape to what could be described as safeguarding anxiety resulting from heritage endangerment and fears of cultural loss or homogenisation. Safeguarding anxiety has been an important factor in the global mobilisation around the 2003 Convention. The identification of threats to the viability of intangible heritage has informed the international safeguarding framework, exemplified in programmes such as the Proclamation of Masterpieces, which stipulated endangerment as a requirement for international recognition. Safeguarding anxiety underlies the 2003 Convention. According to the preamble, '…globalisation and social transformation…' could pose threats to intangible heritage and, hence, the adoption of 'legal, technical, administrative and financial measures' (UNESCO 2003) is necessary in order to avert its loss. To this end, governments and relevant cultural institutions are urged to take appropriate 'safeguarding measures', including activities aimed at the 'identification, research, documentation, promotion, enhancement, education and revitalisation of intangible heritage' (ibid.). The fictional dialogue between heritage doctor and patient, where intangible heritage is the 'diagnosis' and safeguarding the 'treatment', provides a humorous interlude to Hafstein's analysis of the discourse of endangerment and cure (2015). Questioning the impact of such programmes, Hafstein ultimately suggests that safeguarding is 'dispossession by another name', since '… as part of the safeguarding of intangible heritage local actors are asked to surrender to experts and councils and administrators the control over their own cultural practices' (2015: 156).

Indeed, since the Convention's adoption, the aims, methods and outcomes of heritage interventions have come under scrutiny. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's thesis that 'heritage interventions are metacultural productions and change the relationship of people to what they do' (2004: 58) has invited a critical examination of intangible heritage as part of neoliberal structures of governmentality (Coombe 2013). The creation of intangible heritage international lists and national inventories, the organisation of festivals and exhibitions, the implementation of professional heritage management training and capacity-building and the emergence of new committees and categories of regional experts, international policymakers, transnational NGOs and local culture bearers are examined as metacultural processes and invented traditions operating along political, social and economic levels. As a response to these critiques, UNESCO published in 2015 its *Ethical Principles for Safeguarding*

Intangible Heritage inviting governments to respect and include communities in decisions about their heritage (UNESCO 2015).

A turning point in the international dialogue on intangible heritage was the publication of the UN framework *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN 2015). When the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were published, there was a sense of missed opportunity to include a goal specifically about culture, heritage and the arts. Instead, a recommendation was made for other UN agencies, including UNESCO, to interweave the SDGs in their activities. Although the 2003 Convention made a brief reference to sustainable development in the Preamble, it was not until the updated Operational Directives of 2016 that a more thorough engagement with sustainable development was made. Among others, the Operational Directives describe intangible heritage as 'strategic resource for sustainable development' (UNESCO 2016 paragraph 173) and more precisely in inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability, peace and security (UNESCO 2016 paragraphs 170-197). As such, intangible heritage could help tackle issues, such as food security, health care, quality education, gender equality, sustainable water use, sustainable livelihoods, decent work, natural disasters and climate change (see also Bortolotto and Skounti 2023). It is also from this period onwards that the term 'living heritage' is introduced within UNESCO activities and used interchangeably with intangible heritage.

Although intangible heritage is nowadays well-established as a term in international heritage policy and heritage studies, concerns had been raised as to the appropriateness of the word 'intangible' even before the adoption of the 2003 Convention (see McCann et al. 1999). McCann et al. note that intangible heritage 'makes sense in the administrative logic of UNESCO' (1999: 60) but is rather technical and difficult to relate to cultural practitioners and communities. The choice of 'intangible cultural heritage' as an official term by UNESCO could be traced to the pre-existing term of 'intangible cultural property' in 1970s Japanese heritage legislation (Aikawa-Faure 2014). The recent use of 'living heritage' in UNESCO publications (UNESCO 2021) and webpages is perhaps less technical, underlines themes of cultural resilience, adaptability and change in response to external influences, and highlights the human-centred, embodied understanding of heritage. This departs from the notions of endangerment and authenticity which informed the Japanese legislation (Ishimura forthcoming) and early work around the implementation of the 2003 Convention.

Looking ahead

The number of expressions nominated by member states on the UNESCO *Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity* and the emergence of new heritage actor-networks, like the ICH NGO Forum, coupled with several research projects, conferences and publications that followed the adoption of the 2003 Convention, would suggest that the first two decades have been fruitful and that intangible heritage has generated significant actions

at global, national and local levels. The Intangible Heritage Committee and Secretariat have been responsive to criticisms concerning neoliberal and metacultural productions by developing the Ethical Principles and encouraging bottom-up approaches. An important change is that the term living heritage is increasingly used instead of intangible heritage to underline a lighter approach to safeguarding and a more flexible understanding of the term. This is coupled with a shift away from safeguarding anxiety and towards the SDGs of social equality, economic growth and environmental sustainability.

These more recent developments suggest that intangible heritage is increasingly viewed less as dying and endangered traditions and more as a resource for a better, fairer and sustainable future. Yet, calls for degrowth and post-development coming from communities, practitioners and thinkers in the Global South question the universal narratives of the SDGs and invite awareness and careful consideration of the entanglements of intangible heritage in deeper social, environmental and political relations (Kothari et al. 2019). It is therefore important to resist the uncritical adoption of the SDGs as universal, ethical imperative and consider intangible heritage in terms of subtle and ongoing processes and locally-embedded intersectionalities, which are often overshadowed in pursuit of 'goodness criteria' (Janse 2023).

Another area for further reflection and action for the 2003 Convention is the issue of participation. The Convention acknowledges that intangible heritage cannot be separated from the people, communities, groups and individuals that sustain and transmit it (UNESCO 2003). To this end, community participation and involvement are prerequisites for safeguarding. This participatory turn of the 2003 Convention, which can be tied up to late 20th century identity politics and politics of recognition, is reflective of a moral impetus for justice, equity and inclusion in heritage actions and interventions. As recent research has shown, however, it remains difficult to implement and is subject to political, economic and social forces (Alivizatou 2021). For instance, where different power structures and imbalances are at play, such as North/ South, Majority/ Minority, Native/ Immigrant, it can become a hollow word, or instrument of 'inclusionary control' (Cohen 1985). In other words, participation may not always be effective, meaningful or appropriate. A future challenge for heritage and museums professionals and researchers is to be aware of inherent imbalances and problems in safeguarding interventions, and further unpick the aims, methods and outcomes of participatory approaches and the actual implementation of the Ethical Principles.

In the world of museums, intangible heritage has offered opportunities to rethink basic areas of practice, including collections, exhibitions, research and community engagement, both practically and ethically. While at the time of my doctoral research intangible heritage was primarily related to museums with limited collections of objects and ecomuseums, more recently it is associated with ideas and methods of co-curation, the inclusion of

Indigenous knowledge, story-led exhibitions, immersive heritage, community art practice or museum performance, enabling museum professionals and the public to reimagine the social and educational role of the object-focused, museum-mausoleum (Adorno 1967). Indeed, the intensification of the restitution debates in the 21st century and the repatriation of objects from western/ universal museum collections to living communities could be related to calls for inclusive and equitable practices which have accompanied discussions on intangible, living heritage (Hicks 2020). This invites us to consider the implications of intangible heritage beyond the annual listing of national elements on the Representative List and in terms of its potential to heal 'difficult heritage' and support calls for social justice.

With the adoption of the 2003 Convention 20 years ago, UNESCO created a category that provided a new, inclusive, less-Eurocentric way for defining heritage beyond the framework of authenticity and materiality characterising the *1972 World Heritage Convention*. It could be argued that it was relevant discussions on community values, social and spiritual meanings of archaeological, historical and natural sites that also challenged the idea of the 'outstanding universal value' of the cultural heritage of humanity, and led to the inclusion of 'cultural landscapes' as world heritage in the 1990s[3]. Taking shape at the interface of international diplomacy, ethics, academic debate and community-based action, the 2003 Convention has influenced significantly how we think, talk and understand heritage and museum-work in the first decades of 21st century, and promises further thinking and doing in the face of the social and environmental challenges that lie ahead.

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