

BOOK REVIEWS

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Intangible Cultural Heritage: Safeguarding Experiences in Central and Eastern European Countries and China. 10th Anniversary of the Entry into Force of the 2003 UNESCO Convention through the Prism of Sustainable Development
Hanna Schreiber (ed.)

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Dr. Hanna Schreiber rightly pointed out, at the conference organized by the Polish National Commission for UNESCO on 25 February 2013 titled “Why and How Should Cultural Heritage Be Safeguarded in Modern Ways” (the post-conference publication was edited by the author of this review and published in Warsaw 2014),¹ that “safeguarding intangible cultural heritage still remains the missing, weakest link of the Polish heritage safeguarding, placed between ‘terra incognita’ – uncharted territory – and ‘terra nullius’ – no man’s land”.²

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¹ A. Rottermund (ed.), *Dlaczego i jak w nowoczesny sposób chronić dziedzictwo kulturowe. Materiały pokonferencyjne [Why and How Should Cultural Heritage Be Safeguarded in Modern Ways]*, Polish National Commission for UNESCO, Warsaw 2014.

² *Ibidem*, p. 157.

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The volume, titled *Intangible Cultural Heritage: Safeguarding Experiences in Central and Eastern European Countries and China. 10th Anniversary of the Entry into Force of the 2003 UNESCO Convention through the Prism of Sustainable Development* is an important attempt at making up for this “lost time”. The publication consists of nearly 40 presentations and articles on the topic of intangible cultural heritage. This impressive array of texts, which describes both the experiences as well as the practices tied to the functioning and safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in the modern world, has been published by the National Heritage Board, and edited by Hanna Schreiber.

Until recently, the role of heritage was limited to a passive conservation of the past, and thus considered as a sort of burden that inhibits progress. The modern approach to heritage, however, sees it as an important element of development, which contributes to the regional, touristic, and consequently economic development of a country. In turn, from the perspective of its citizens it plays an important role in the process of attaining cultural identity, as well as enriching the intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual spheres of their lives. Such a broad understanding of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, requires definitions clearly delineating their unique nature and precisely outlining the procedures for handling their delicate components. This is, among others, the role of the UNESCO conventions and recommendations.

We know that the UNESCO legal instruments are usually the result of far-reaching compromises amongst Member States; i.e. they contain rather general rules, which are formed into legislative acts by the States Parties. While the way in which they are implemented usually stems from the States’ own traditions and legislative practices, these factors however should never distort the principles contained in the UNESCO documents. And one such document is the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in Paris on 17 November 2003 (“the 2003 Convention”)³ and ratified by Poland in 2011.⁴

The deliberations in the sphere of culture today referred to as “intangible cultural heritage” have been ongoing for a long time and have yielded numerous publications, including in the Polish language. Jan Adamowski, President of the Council for Intangible Cultural Heritage, highlights in his article that the Polish tradition of intangible heritage safeguarding has its own history and achievements. For instance, he notes that one of its documentary bodies of the 19th century is the research initiative “by Oskar Kolberg – a work which has since attained recognition in nearly all Slavic countries” (p. 70). The deliberations of the contemporary researchers on intangible cultural heritage pertain, however, mostly to the interrelationship between the theoretical recognition of the values of intangible cultural heritage and the conservation practices, which are not always associated with an awareness

³ 2368 UNTS 3.

⁴ Dz.U. 2011 No. 172, item 1018.

of these values, but concern the custody over intangible cultural heritage. Andrzej Tomaszewski, a Polish scholar and former Director (1988-1992) of the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, Rome (ICCROM), described this state of affairs in 2003 as follows:

[t]here is a tremendous intellectual heritage of European and American scholars on the topic of intangible values of cultural goods, which places the Western cultural area at the front of the theoretical research on this issue. There is, however, also a great void between the European humanities and conservation; the latter lags behind intellectually, fetishising the material substance, unable to take up the challenge of safeguarding both the tangible as well as the intangible cultural heritage.⁵

The adoption of the 2003 Convention was preceded by UNESCO's Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore of 1989⁶ and its subsequent decisions made prior to the 2003 Convention, including those formulated during the conference in Washington in July 1999 related to the definition of intangible cultural heritage and the action plan containing a recommendation to the governments of countries to consider encouraging UNESCO to accept the normative act on safeguarding traditional culture and folklore, which ultimately happened in 2003. Since then the process of implementing the Convention has been taking place, together with an ongoing debate on its contents. On one hand, this confirms its fundamental importance for intangible cultural heritage safeguarding, but on the other hand it reveals its weaknesses and shortcomings. The currently reviewed publication on intangible cultural heritage safeguarding is thus a crucial voice in this debate.

The publication divides its contents into Forewords and introductory papers, followed by four main parts. Part one is dedicated to general issues relating to intangible cultural heritage and good practices vis-à-vis its safeguarding; Part two to the examination and documentation of selected phenomena; Part three to the creation of the system of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding and the contemporary challenges that intangible heritage is currently facing; and finally Part four concerns intangible heritage and sustainable development.

Despite the supplementary nature of the Forewords, they contain a number of important reflections and thoughts on intangible cultural heritage. They highlight the revolutionary character of acceptance of the 2003 Convention in the process of comprehending and appreciating the role of this type of heritage (Tim Curtis), and also note the threats stemming from accelerated modernization processes (Chen Fafen) as well as the specific, sensitive, and volatile character of intangible

⁵ See A. Tomaszewski, *Materialne i niematerialne wartości dóbr kultury [Tangible and Intangible Values of Cultural Goods]*, in: *Ku nowej filozofii dziedzictwa [Towards a New Philosophy of Heritage]*, International Cultural Centre, Kraków 2012, pp. 68-69.

⁶ 15 November 1989, available at http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13141&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html [accessed: 15.11.2017].

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cultural heritage, which makes it difficult to precisely define what is covered by this term (Małgorzata Rozbicka).

The abundance of intangible cultural heritage is revealed to us through three important Forewords: one by Magdalena Gawin, who highlights its position in the legacy of mankind; the second by Leszek Zegzda, who demonstrates the wealth of intangible heritage based on the example of the Małopolska region; and the third by Jacek Purchla, who describes the cultural heritage of Kraków, a city that hosted the I Expert-Level Forum on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.⁷ At the same time, the 2003 Convention receives a harsh assessment from An Deming, professor of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who highlights the weaknesses of the mechanisms of intangible cultural heritage, at the same time drawing attention to the fact that

the project of ICH safeguarding was founded on the principles of equality and diversity of human culture, but unfortunately it in fact produced a new hierarchy among cultures, and within a unique culture. The experts and UNESCO have the privilege to determine what item is suitable to be inscribed on the Representative List, which in the public mind means a certificate that it is more valuable; whereas the actual bearers of a particular cultural item do not have a voice on it (p. 64).

He also proposes that it is necessary for scholars to raise alarm bells in response to ambiguous aspects in both the theory and practice of the programme, in order to nurture it and ensure its healthy development (p. 67).

The first and second Parts of the publication relate to the politics and practices of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding and the research and documentation in this area in both Central and Eastern Europe as well as in China. These seemingly formal, report-like documents in fact constitute a valuable resource, helping build an intercultural dialogue on the understanding of the essence of the functioning of intangible heritage in various communities, and thus in raising the awareness of and respect for different attitudes and lifestyles. Furthermore, they make it possible to compare different research and documentation practices employed in connection with the protection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage (Hungary – a network of experts) as well as the methods of sustaining this heritage through inter-generational transmission (Croatia).

Thus, by learning about different practices and activities we can formulate certain principles for governing intangible cultural heritage, which can be helpful when confronting the social phenomena of the contemporary, post-industrial society. The articles also signal problems that require close attention, for example: Do we not overtly associate intangible cultural heritage with folklore (e.g. in the Czech Republic and Slovakia)? Also, to what extent should NGOs be engaged in the 2003 Convention implementation processes (Latvia)?

⁷ A short report on this Forum is included in this issue of the SAACLR volume, p. 370.

Marju Kõivupuu, in her description of the Estonian register of intangible cultural heritage points to the case of the so-called *cross-trees*, namely, the tradition of carving crosses on trees on the sides of the roads that lead to cemeteries, performed by the male relatives of the deceased. It is a profoundly symbolic element of the funerary tradition, practised since the 17th century. It has survived in south-east Estonia. Despite the fact that the forests (including the trees that the symbols were carved on) were State-owned during the period of the Soviet Republic, the custom was not interfered with. However, since regaining independence the practice of monitoring forest areas was disrupted and, as a result, many trees marked with crosses were cut down, which in a few cases met with resistance from the local communities. The influence of political and social conditions on various aspects of intangible heritage is also particularly visible in the Republic of Macedonia and Albania.

One of the issues that sparks a debate regarding the definition of the scope of intangible cultural heritage is the problem of the relationship between traditional knowledge or skills – intangible by their very nature – and their tangible result in the form of a material object (for example, between the knowledge and skill of pottery-making and the object that comes into being as a result of that knowledge). This problem, raised in the third Part of the publication, occurs in its purest form in the museum environment. This issue, among others, is addressed in the article by Katarzyna Zalasieńska, who cites the Polish Museum Act as an example, wherein the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is inscribed as an element of the mission statement of museums. Zalasieńska writes that

particular attention should be paid to the task of dissemination of culture, which enables the museum to go beyond its classical framework and become an institution of remembrance that actively engages in social processes, thus strengthening the protection of heritage, especially its intangible manifestations. Thus, rather than remaining mere guardians of collections that record the identity of past generations, the museums have begun to play an important role in the field of education, as well as in promoting and pursuing artistic activity and facilitating the spread of culture. This is partly due to the fact that they have started filling the gaps in areas where the activities of other institutions (e.g. schools, cultural centres) have weakened or in some places disappeared (p. 296).

The role of museums in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in Bulgaria is also described in the article by Igljka Mishkova.

Part four presents specific problems and case studies related to intangible cultural heritage. It is undoubtedly the most interesting section of the publication, mainly because of the questions posed in the papers. As Eva Románková-Kuminová writes in her article, entitled “Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Beginning or the End of Sustainability?”: “The extreme complexity of the whole concept of intangible cultural heritage makes many aspects of the Convention problematic” (p. 353). Románková also poses an important question: “How should we decide

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which element is representative?" (p. 357). Also, how does the inscription on the list affect the social functioning of the inscribed element? The Czech museologist also critically assesses the identification of intangible cultural heritage with "folk culture", aptly arguing that folk culture certainly does not include such traditional skills as calligraphy, beer-making culture, coffee-drinking culture, martial arts, or even – I would add – as popular falconry.

Equally important questions are raised by the Polish scholar Katarzyna Smyk in her article titled "Vernacular Religion as an Element of Intangible Heritage in Terms of Sustainable Development". She asks: "What are the provisions of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage concerning the phenomena which comprise vernacular religion?" (p. 412). She concludes by positing that one can easily see a renewed interest in the nature of things, with religion and religious practices regaining their potential to organize the world around us and once again considered as a factor that legitimizes the prevailing order, and as a *sine qua non* condition to achieve balance and harmony in the development of society (p. 394). This theme is also addressed earlier by Vida Šatkauskienė, who writes that the core viewpoint of traditional cultures is the dimension of sacredness in phenomena which constitute the world and existence (p. 307).

These deliberations imply yet another set of questions concerning *who* decides about the inscription on the list, as there is a serious concern that the inscription can be ideologically manipulated.

Mirela Hrovatin, in turn, conducts her interesting deliberations using the example of the traditional technique of so-called "dry stone wall building", which protects the agricultural soil from being washed out and against the damage from wind and animals. She uses it to show the problem of the reconciliation of new agricultural and economic demands with the preservation of landscapes and traditional ways of land use that would ensure the adjustments to new social needs (p. 403). A similar problem in relation to intangible heritage in Romania is described by Adina Hulubaş, based on the example of the tradition called "the sleeves of the midwife". According to this custom, the woman that gives birth is obliged to present a gift of a two-metre-long hand-woven cloth to the midwife eight days after giving birth, so that the midwife can sew herself a pair of new sleeves in order to replace the old ones, which are following childbirth considered impure. Although giving birth at home has been prohibited for 70 years, the custom of "the sleeves of the midwife" is still practised in hospitals and clinics, as there is a fear that the mother, by ignoring the traditional custom, will bring bad luck on herself and her child. Thus, the author of the article draws attention to the incredibly important and characteristic feature of many traditional customs, namely, their apotropaic function.

Another equally precious article is written by the Macedonian scholar Velika Stojkova Serafimovska. It is devoted to the example of traditional music called *Glasechko*, and the inter-generational gap in transmitting intangible heritage caused by the migration of the young generation after the 2001 war in Macedonia. As a re-

sult of this, writes Serafimovska, “the younger generation has few opportunities to hear this kind of singing, and the older generation believes there is not enough interest, and thus does not even attempt to pass this cultural heritage on further” (p. 426).

An equally important or perhaps even fundamental question is raised in the article by another scholar from Macedonia, Ivona Opetčeska Tatarčevska: “What Do We Mean When We Say *Intangible Cultural Heritage*?” Thus, she returns to the fundamental accusation against the 2003 Convention, which is that it has not been adapted, in terms of terminology and definitions, to the reality and real practices, both of which undergo “festivalization”, professionalization, and commercialization, similarly to the Galičnik wedding.

In sum, the publication contains multiple examples (cases) of intangible cultural heritage, thus constituting an excellent handbook of practices in the fields of both the safeguarding and functioning of intangible cultural heritage. One can readily assert that it will aid in the exchange of experiences and consequently in the process of hammering out a model of cooperation between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and China in the field of intangible cultural heritage safeguarding, as well as assist in finding answers to the numerous compelling questions raised about the essence of intangible cultural heritage.