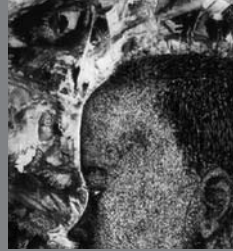# What is intangible heritage?

Heritage is often defined as 'what we value', or 'what we wish to pass on to future generations'. Heritage resources provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations. They are important to cultural identity as well as to the conservation of the cultural diversity and creativity of humanity. Intangible heritage has been defined as those aspects of heritage that, unlike places or objects, are ephemeral: these include oral traditions, languages, traditional performing arts, knowledge systems, values and know-how.

Cultural identities relate to the present and future as well as to the past and are always changing. Thus, UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura suggests that 'intangible cultural heritage is not just the memory of past cultures, but is also a laboratory for inventing the future' (UNESCO 2002a). As the Cultural Policy for Botswana states,

> Cultural development must encompass the preservation of traditions, of history and of the moral, spiritual values and norms handed down by past generations, as well as address issues related to the present, contemporary creativity and the ultimate purposes and values suggested by the future. (Botswana 2001: 5)

During the twentieth century, built heritage (especially in Europe) dominated international heritage lists as an icon of civilisation, permanence and modernity. Traditional Western assessments of heritage value have emphasised high culture and monumental forms (eg. cathedrals) over other heritage forms. The current interest in intangible heritage is rooted in a late-twentieth century tendency to re-evaluate the benefits of modernity, express a fear of the effects of globalisation and search for smaller-scale local identities. Globalisation is feared as a cultural bulldozer capable of flattening marginal cultural forms in the same way that Hollywood or Bollywood floods the local film market. The Stockholm 'Power of Culture' Conference of 1998 summarised this view:

> Even more markedly than for the built heritage, the immaterial rural-based heritage of yesterday has become, for the mass of urban dwellers that the world population is increasingly becoming, a kind of puzzle that needs to be reconstituted, a mass of fragmented knowledge whose strands need to be brought together. The weaving together of a new fabric of meaning for the cultural heritage is itself a challenge to our creativity. (Stockholm 1998: point 28)

The growing concern to explore a pre-modern or rural heritage was coupled with postcolonial political emphases on democracy and cultural diversity (UNESCO 2001a; López 2002). Traditional, often marginalised, rural communities thus became a new focus of attention both politically and culturally in a search for new identities. The Stockholm Conference also underlined the relationship between culture and development. Developing nations in East Asia and in Africa gained more of a voice on international bodies like UNESCO, and there was an attempt to broaden the definition of heritage. Non-monumental, or intangible, heritage forms that often dominate in developing countries became a focus of attention (UNESCO 1999).

The way in which intangible heritage relates to national cultural identity and politics can be illustrated by giving examples of how different forms of intangible heritage are celebrated and identified in different parts of the world. In East Asia, traditional building, craft techniques and performance are the foci of intangible heritage listings.

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> As of April 1, 2000, there were 104 individuals and 24 groups designated as 'Living National Treasures' in Japan, that included eight performing arts (Kabuki, Noh, Music, Dance, etc.) and eight applied arts (ceramic, textile weaving, stencilling, dyeing, lacquerwork, metalwork, wood and bamboo work, doll making, stained ivory engraving and paper making). In countries such as Japan, where almost all the traditional building materials are organic, built heritage requires constant maintenance including regular replacement of rotten wood. The preservation of authentic carpentry, plastering workmanship, and other traditional building techniques is therefore as important as the preservation of original building materials. (Nishimura in Campean 2001: Japan, pages 5, 8)

In northern Europe, what is identified as intangible heritage includes oral tradition (stories, fairy tales and folklore), wooden vernacular architecture and the skills and knowledge of groups like the Sámi.

> The Sámi were traditionally nomads, following the seasonal cycles from reindeer herding areas to specific fishing locations and hunting grounds. The craft of building is another intangible aspect of Scandinavian heritage. For around a thousand years most houses in Scandinavia were wooden constructions using the same horizontal log-house technique or corner timbering (blockbau) because of the abundance of building material available from the forests. This building tradition, based on the skills of corner timbering, was so strong that no one ever worried about its continuing existence. Most of today's buildings were, however, built in the last few decades, and this trend continues. People continue to move from the rural areas to the major cities. The old traditional red-painted log buildings, typical of the Finnish landscape, now often lie empty. In 20 years they may have disappeared altogether. (Nurmi-Nielsen 2000)

In North America, the traditional focus in heritage discourse has been on natural places rather than on buildings. It is therefore not surprising that in discussing intangible heritage many of the issues have related to a reappraisal of landscapes in the light of First Nations' cultural traditions. In Australia, sacred Indigenous[3] places and belief systems have been an important focus in work on intangible heritage. The places and oral histories associated with resistance by Indigenous people to colonialism in Australia have also been recognised and celebrated (Truscott 2003). In developing countries, the intangible heritage that tends to be emphasised is the pre-colonial, indigenous and ethnic heritage. In this regard, South Africa is something of an exception in foregrounding the oral history of experiences of oppression under and resistance to apartheid.

> Even before the end of apartheid in 1994, a number of oral history projects (including the History Workshop and the Western Cape Oral History project – now the Centre for Popular Memory) were undertaken in an attempt to resist the process by which the state and its collaborators sought to forget the history of oppression. After 1994, South Africans' common experiences under apartheid have become a focus for the

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3 In Australia, indigenous communities are referred to as Indigenous communities or as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. A distinction is made between 'Indigenous' and 'historic' heritage, the latter referring to heritage related to European settlement. In this research report, this format for the terminology is not used except when referring to Australian examples.

> creation of national unity under the new democratic government. Oral history is central to the telling of the story of resistance to apartheid because of widespread censorship and repression before 1994, existing traditions of orality and a high rate of illiteracy. Oral history has been recognised as a heritage resource in the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA, South Africa 1999) and the National Archives Act (1996, amended 2000).[4] The Department of Arts and Culture has spearheaded a National Oral History Programme, in close collaboration with the National Archives. The National Archives also maintains a National Register of Oral Sources and a Directory of Oral History Projects (Harris in Deacon et al. 2003). Museums like the apartheid Museum, District Six Museum and Robben Island Museum have structured whole collections or exhibitions around audiovisual material and oral histories. (Deacon et al. 2003: 13–14)

The value of heritage is something assigned in the present because heritage represents what we have almost lost and what we wish to call on as proof of who we are and where we wish to go in the future. Identifying what constitutes heritage and assigning heritage value is thus a deeply subjective process. It happens in the context of current national and international social trends and politics, and often favours certain groups over others (Lowenthal 1998: ix–x). This does not mean we can or should try to 'get the politics out' of heritage policy and practice. But we do have to make sure that in seeking solutions to political and heritage issues, we think clearly about rationales and underlying assumptions.

Definitions of intangible heritage have been deeply influenced by international, national and regional politics, the specific nature of regional histories and cultural forms, and concerns about the threat of globalisation and about the maintenance of cultural diversity. Discussions on intangible heritage have emerged from a critique of the bias towards grand buildings as representatives of world heritage. This bias had its roots in the anthropological dichotomy between 'primitive' and 'civilised' culture that became popular in the West during the Enlightenment (Foucault in Seleti 2003). We should be careful not to perpetuate this dichotomy in our attempt to redress the monumentalist bias. Cultural heritage cannot be compartmentalised into 'civilised' tangibles and 'primitive' intangibles, and intangible heritage forms do not exist only in the non-Western world. Concerns about the maintenance of cultural diversity in the face of globalisation (or the expansion of Western multinational companies) are very real. It is important to create the conditions in which people have a choice of various cultural 'citizenships' (Chidester et al. 2002) that are given recognition and support by government. However, we should remember that the world has long been a cosmopolitan one, and cultural traditions have not been maintained in isolation from outside influence. Although it has value in promoting the contribution of all cultural forms to a common humanity, the notion of cultural diversity, especially in the developing world, can also deepen perceptions of difference and create new opportunities for conflict (Joffe et al. 2002).

In Stockholm in 1998, the Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development suggested that the world's intangible heritage was at risk and needed to be properly managed and safeguarded as part of a development agenda. The conference noted that there had been a lag in policy-making for intangible heritage management. The Stockholm Conference suggested that UNESCO's programmes and the drafting and

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4 All South African legislation is available on http://www.polity.org.za/

implementation of national cultural policies could help safeguard intangible heritage (Stockholm 1998). UNESCO has recently developed a new Convention to safeguard intangible heritage. UNESCO Director-General Mr Matsuura says of the new Convention: 'I hope [it] will lead to a set of principles and measures that are universally acceptable ... with a view not to constraining and immobilizing but rather to facilitating the invention of new forms of national and international solidarity' (UNESCO 2002a).

The definition and management of intangible heritage is a complex matter that needs both careful analysis and the development of appropriate mechanisms. We do not yet have a strong historical understanding of how intangible cultural forms change over time and why they sometimes disappear or show such resilience over time. The loss of intangible knowledge and skills in a community has not been a recent phenomenon, as this example shows:

> During a period of total isolation for a few hundred years before 1818, when the polar Inuit met the European explorer John Ross in what is now northern Canada, this group of Inuit had lost three important technologies that were in use throughout the rest of the Inuit world: the bow, the kayak and the pronged fish harpoon. They retained the words for the lost technologies and retained the concepts in their legends but they could no longer make a bow to hunt caribou, hunt sea mammals from a kayak or harpoon fish in the rivers. This made their survival very marginal. Anthropologists suggest that the technologies could have disappeared because of a number of circumstantial events such as the sudden death of a few key toolmakers, the relative scarcity of materials or a period of bad weather that made kayaks impractical. (Turk 1998: 210)

It is not easy to understand the disappearance of survival technologies in marginal environments such as these. It may be even more difficult to understand how other forms of intangible heritage are passed down through communities and changed over time. If we wish to identify and manage our intangible heritage with the help of legal and financial instruments, we will need to ensure that existing mechanisms for its transmission are supported rather than undermined. Intervention by government or other agencies may not be desirable or practical in all cases, and some interventions may be damaging, so instruments for safeguarding intangible heritage need to be carefully designed and assessed.

## Why do we categorise some heritage as intangible?

Something intangible is something one cannot touch, something ephemeral. All meanings associated with objects and places are by definition intangible, as are the performing arts, sound, language, know-how and spirituality. Jean-Louis Luxen, then Secretary General of ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites),[5] suggested that 'the distinction between physical heritage and intangible heritage is ... artificial' (UNESCO 2000: 4). Intangible heritage gives meaning to the tangible: to places, musical instruments, ritual objects, and so on. Dawson Munjeri argues that tangibility is thus secondary: 'the tangible can only be interpreted through the intangible' (Munjeri 2000). The tangible acts

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5 The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) is an international non-governmental organiszation of professionals dedicated to the conservation of the world's historic monuments and sites. It evaluates cultural properties and makes recommendations to the World Heritage Committee for inscription.

as a mnemonic of memory (Beazley 2002), although the relationship between place or object and the meanings associated with it is, of course, very complex (Truscott 2003).

All tangible heritages therefore have intangible values associated with them, but not all intangible heritages have a tangible form (Prosalendis 2003). Most heritage carries meaning in a number of different media (eg. in the musical instruments, dialect, written words, symbols and dress of a particular ritual form) (Hofmeyr 2003). If the medium carrying most of the significance of the heritage is not primarily expressed in a material form (eg. oral poetry), the heritage resource is designated as 'intangible'. The heritage landscape thus produces a continuum of portability, with intangible heritage with few tangible traces at one end (eg. nursery rhymes, which are not associated with specific places or instruments), and heritage in which much of the significance lies in an immovable tangible form (eg. a specific building significant for its architecture) at the other (Morris 2003). Most of the mechanisms for managing intangible heritage will also therefore apply to the management of tangible heritage and may be of great benefit in revising our approach to managing places and objects (as has been seen in the revision of the Australian Burra Charter of 1999: Truscott 2003).

So, if most heritages have both tangible and intangible traces and there is a continuum of tangibility within heritage, why do we wish to work with a category of heritage that we term 'intangible'?

- *The category of intangible heritage encourages the recognition of formerly marginalised forms of heritage.* In the heritage field, 'monumentalism', or a focus on Western buildings and great men, has traditionally dominated the field. The idea of intangible heritage has provided an opportunity to include new forms of heritage and democratise the process by which value is assigned to heritage – local people, often in the developing world, begin to play a larger role. This will be a positive influence on heritage listings in the West and create opportunities for more non-Western heritage listings. Much of the heritage in East Asia, Africa and Oceania has been inscribed on the World Heritage List as heritage sites with intangible values, or is recognised under UNESCO's intangible heritage projects (Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage and Living Human Treasures: UNESCO 1999). In 1999, the special role of women in transmitting intangible heritage was also acknowledged (UNESCO 2001b).

- *Investigating intangible heritage as a concept helps us to review and expand the notion of heritage as a whole.* Intangible heritage (and its tangible forms) need not be tied to a specific place. This can allow the recognition of routes, practices, ideas, knowledge and other forms of heritage that can and do cross national boundaries. Discussion about intangible heritage also raises the question of whether cultural products or practices need to be generally highly valued outside the community where they are practised or produced, in order to be defined as heritage. Also, it raises the question of whether our understanding of 'heritage' should be restricted to what is old, traditional, indigenous, tied to ethnic identities, and so on.

- *We need to develop new ways of safeguarding intangible resources, which may improve existing management practices for tangible heritage.* Intangible heritage is transmitted largely by crafts of memory such as mnemonic devices in poetry or ritual, or institutionalised systems like apprenticeship (Hofmeyr 2003). Management of intangible heritage accordingly needs to include ways of making the heritage tangible (through documentation, in writing, by video, etc.) as well as encouraging

its reproduction in the traditional form (through performance, apprenticeship, etc.) (Blake 2001: vi–vii). Communities' rights over intangible heritage (especially knowledge, secret rituals, etc.) also need to be established and protected.

As we noted above, UNESCO developed a new Convention (UNESCO 2002b; UNESCO 2003e) to safeguard intangible heritage along the lines of the World Heritage Convention for places (WHC (1972); see World Heritage Centre 2003). They chose to develop a separate Convention for various legal and historical reasons. These include the difficulty of redrafting the narrow definition of cultural heritage in the WHC, which refers only to monuments, buildings and places, and of revising the criterion of outstanding universal value for inscription on the World Heritage List (Blake 2001: 72–73). Other international organisations, including the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), are working to give communities certain rights associated with intangible heritage. A number of countries have already drafted, or are engaged in drafting, legislation to identify and safeguard intangible heritage. These instruments will be discussed in greater detail below.

The drafting of these legal and financial instruments to safeguard intangible heritage can pose certain challenges, however:
- *We need to move beyond the old dichotomy between 'civilised' Western (tangible) heritage and 'primitive' non-Western (intangible) heritage.* The built heritage of 'the West' (covered by the WHC) and the heritage of 'the rest' (covered by the Intangible Heritage Convention) could parallel older distinctions made in the anthropological tradition between civilised and primitive cultures (Seleti 2003; Mbembe 2003). This could mean that (a) the intangible cultural forms of the Western world or dominant groups are not fully recognised and (b) the tangible cultural forms of the developing world (however rare) are not sufficiently protected and valued. Many dominant or mainstream Western knowledge forms, for example, would be classed as science rather than culture, a definition that loses sight of their historical development and social construction. Traditional medical knowledge about the use of a specific plant would be classed as 'intangible heritage', while Western medical knowledge systems that use commercially prepared pills from the same plant would be classed as 'science' (Mndende 2003).
- *All heritage of value to communities should be respected.* Using 'exceptional universal value' as a criterion for listing intangible heritage on national or international registers can be subjective and elitist. Much intangible heritage is important at a community level, and all of this heritage, not just that with broader appeal, should be appropriately safeguarded (Grenada et al. 2003).
- *Intangible heritage listings should be as inclusive and diverse as possible.* The definition of intangible heritage as relating only to indigenous or traditional forms is dangerous in that it encourages a tendency:
  a. to acknowledge resources relating to certain ethnic identities and not to others. Listing of resources by national governments will limit and influence the kinds of resources deemed valuable; minority groups not identified by national government as 'indigenous' will not receive priority;
  b. not to list resources that do not relate to ethnic or national identities. South Africa, for example, has just emerged from a history of apartheid segregation based on 'ethnic' categories and the dominance of 'white' cultural forms on national heritage listings. Attempts to redress this situation must result in the declaration of more heritages relating to other communities (Mndende 2003), but they should

also encourage the listing of heritage that speaks to other identities and across ethnic boundaries (Kolbe, Hofmeyr & Witz 2003).

- *Intangible heritage consists of vibrant cultural practices that will require creative approaches to safeguarding that are driven by the practising community.* The concept of intangible heritage presupposes what we have called in this research report a 'practising community' – a community that has created and/or practised an intangible cultural form. This could be a community of gay men, chess players, Sami people, scientists, trained African herbalists, etc. Practising communities need to ensure the use, enjoyment and continued transmission of intangible heritage. Careful attention should therefore be given to developing appropriate legal and financial mechanisms for identifying intangible heritage and assisting practising communities in its management.

- *Techniques for safeguarding intangible heritage should be applied to the intangible values associated with places and objects, and heritage should be understood as holistically as possible.* The conservation of objects and places does not always preserve their significance if it does not take account of intangible values. Should there be, for example, an important ritual associated with a boat, it is no good just putting the boat in a museum in order to protect the significance of that ritual. Guidelines on managing intangible heritage should therefore form part of the WHC guidelines as well as national place and collections management guidelines (Smith 2002).

- *Communities can and should benefit from profits generated from the use of intangible heritage.* However, it can be difficult and sometimes unfair to assign rights to benefits on the basis of community ownership of intangible heritage. Ownership of an intangible heritage resource is not the same as ownership of a thing or a place. Sometimes it is a series of individuals who pass down the skills, rather than the community as a whole (Truscott 2003), and it is often difficult to define the community or prove their ownership (Handler in press). This means that the concept of community ownership and the relationship between development and heritage should be carefully considered in the drafting of legal and financial instruments to manage intangible heritage.