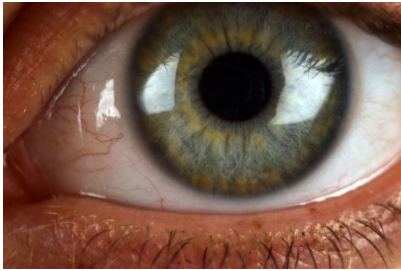


Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage

The term 'cultural heritage' has changed content considerably in recent decades, partially owing to the instruments developed by UNESCO. Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.



While fragile, intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.

The importance of intangible cultural heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a State, and is as important for developing States as for developed ones.

To be kept alive, intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to its community, continuously recreated and transmitted from one generation to another. There is a risk that certain elements of intangible cultural heritage could die out or disappear without help, but safeguarding does not mean fixing or freezing intangible cultural heritage in some pure or primordial form. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is about the transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. Transmission – or communicating heritage from generation to generation – is emphasized in the UNESCO Convention rather than the production of concrete manifestations such as dances, songs, musical instruments or crafts. Therefore, to a large extent, any safeguarding measure refers to strengthening and reinforcing the diverse and varied circumstances, tangible and intangible, that are necessary for the continuous evolution and interpretation of intangible cultural heritage, as well as for its transmission to future generations.



Does this mean that intangible heritage should always be safeguarded, or be revitalized at any cost? As any living body, it follows a life cycle and therefore some elements are likely to disappear, after having given birth to new forms of expressions. It might be that certain forms of intangible cultural heritage, despite their economic value, are no longer considered relevant or meaningful for the community itself. As indicated in the Convention, only intangible cultural heritage that is recognized by the communities as theirs and that provides them with a sense of identity and continuity is to be safeguarded. By 'recognition', the Convention means a formal or, more often, informal process by which communities acknowledge that specific practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills and, if appropriate, associated instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces, form part of their cultural heritage.

Safeguarding measures must always be developed and applied with the consent and involvement of the community itself. In certain cases, public intervention to safeguard a community's heritage may be undesirable, since it may distort the value such heritage has for its community. Moreover, safeguarding measures must always respect the customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage, for example, sacred intangible cultural heritage manifestations or those that are considered secret.



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