Challenges and Perspectives in Safeguarding Endangered Intangible Cultural Heritage in Developing Countries

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Summary

This presentation basically focuses on two themes: (1) the meaning of loss and risk in the context of cultural dynamics and (2) the possible articulation between cultural safeguarding and social development projects.

I argue that the loss or abandonment of ICH elements by cultural communities does not simply point out at the impoverishment of cultural repertories, but often makes manifest social conflicts and changes which may sometimes be desired by some social agents, yet seen as undesirable by others within the same social formation. Furthermore, I believe that the safeguarding of ICH, particularly endangered social practices and traditional knowledge, can be a crucial component of social development programmes, above all in relation to education, in raising family income, as well as in strengthening senses of identity and self-esteem of minority groups.

My reflection is based on experience and direct observation carried out in various socio-cultural contexts; however, given the limits of time and format set for this Conference, these issues will have to be treated here in abstract terms.

I. Preliminaries

My argument is built up around the following themes:

Considering the dynamic and mutable character of any social practice, including that of intangible cultural heritage, as well as taking in consideration the fluidity of the meanings attributed to them by social agents, it can be asked: in what circumstances can changes signify, in the wording adopted by the ICH Convention, "great threat or risk to the viability of ICH"[1]

Accepting the premise that the safeguarding of ICH can be an ally in the fight against poverty and social exclusion, which is an absolute priority in developing countries, it can be asked: what parameters and limits should support their inclusion in development programs, to what extent and under what conditions is it possible to keep a balance between safeguard and use?

From this perspective, what contributions can be offered by organizations outside the heritage communities – government agencies or not – to confront the risks faced by the continuity of ICH in developing countries?

II. Loss and Cultural Change

It is known that economic, political and social changes are inseparable from the transformation of values and worldviews that give meaning to human experience

Everything that is transformed is potentially disappearing. If loss or destruction are necessary ingredients for constructing the future in any society, safeguarding policies must distinguish between changes that signify the impoverishment of the cultural repertoire on which depends the viability of an established way of life, from those that arise from historical development and cultural dynamics and are consistent with the futures desired by cultural communities.

ICH inventories can – and in my opinion must – investigate threats to the continuity of the cultural elements "that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage"[2]. But if we adopt the emic distinction suggested here between desired and undesirable changes, it becomes equally relevant to know (1) who, among the social agents, has awareness of this loss; (2) what values are attributed to the elements considered as being "at risk" and (3) what expectations exist among the ICH holders about the future of these cultural elements.

Let's reflect a bit about these questions. I have observed that ICH holders frequently attribute risks to the continuity of their heritage to the depletion of the material resources needed for their production. Indeed, traditional knowledge and cultural expressions often become endangered for socio-environmental reasons. Another commonly declared risk is the lack of interest among young people in giving continuity to heritage practices, due to the hegemonic force of the values professed by the mass media and social networks.

But a closer look to the matter can also point out to quite complex problems of a different nature. It is not rare that certain ICH practices are subject to prejudice and intolerance. At more than one occasion impediments – at times explicit and formal – to the performance of rites related to ancestral cults and harassment against the public exhibit of ethnic symbols were emphatically pointed out to me in workshops on inventory making as practices that placed the continuity of ICH at risk.

I have also witnessed contradictory situations, in which safeguarding actions that were considered quite successful by ICH holders were seen as undesirable by other community members because the effectiveness of these actions contributed to the destabilization of hierarchies and power relations based on gender or age differences. In at least two projects carried out by Artesol[3] in Northeast Brazil, I have encountered dramatic situations in which husbands sought to impede their wives – even through physical aggression – from participating in safeguarding actions. These men, unemployed or very poorly paid, felt their traditional position

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1) Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. Chapter I.1Criteria for inscription on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, Criterion U.2.

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2) Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. Art.2, Para.1.

3) Artesol – Solidary Crafts is a Brazilian NGO that has developed since 1998 more than one hundred projects aiming at safeguarding traditional crafts as well as increasing family income, social inclusion and gender equity. See www.artesol.org.br.

of dominance in the domestic realm threatened by the success of their wives at work, their growing public visibility, prestige (inside and outside the community) and – above all - financial independence.

Observing concrete situations, over the mid to long term, has also led me to realize that the loss or abandonment of ICH does not always take place in a definitive character. As there have been demands for repatriation of objects conserved in museum collections to their places of origin, the revival or reinvention of traditional practices and knowledge has been quite frequent in the (re)construction of nations, and empowerment of ethnic and social groups.

Yet, once heritage practices have been interrupted - even if temporarily - serious problems arise for its transmission. The cultural competence demanded for the practice of traditional crafts and for the performance of oral genres, music, dance, etc is found, to a large degree, inscribed in the body of their executors. They are manifested through the execution itself, absorbed by mimicry and refined through repeated and technically supervised practice. In addition, their transmission is guided by custom, which usually implies a moral contract between masters and apprentices, and often assumes the form of ritual initiation.

It cannot be overemphasized that transmission does not mean the pure and simple transfer of information from individual to individual or from generation to generation. It directly involves deep sociological levels and processes, like the social construction of hierarchies, genders and age, the inheritance of material goods and formal succession in positions of prestige and power. In short, the transmission of ICH is an activity whose significance is historically produced and transformed as part of the projects and aspirations of its holders.

For the same reason, the loss of a certain element of ICH does not simply bring about the impoverishment of the cultural repertoire available to a certain generation, but indicates social conflicts and changes, which may be desired by some social agents yet seen as undesirable by others. It can also signify a clash of values and competition within stratified, heterogeneous or splintered social groups, as is the case of most contemporary societies. Consequently, it is essential to identify, not just the causes, but also the agents and the significance of any impediments confronted by the ICH holders in furthering their ways of life.

In taking into account issues related to the production of heritage value, it is worthwhile noticing that, as I have argued elsewhere, (ARANTES, A. 2007, 2009)

this value is a double faced reality in the sense that it is attributed by the practicing communities and must necessarily be recognized by safeguarding institutions on a local, regional or international scale. As a consequence, patrimonialization encapsulates quite relevant political and ethical problems, particularly when there are significant social and cultural differences between the parties involved (ARANTES, A. 2012). This being said, one should agree that independently from the political base of the dialogic aspect of patrimonialization (built on the basis of inter-cultural dialogues, negotiations and, not rarely, misunderstandings), the bottom line is that it is the dominant groups, represented in the safeguarding institutions and by them, that give to selected aspects of cultural realities their legitimacy as heritage goods, providing access for communities, groups and individuals to the possible benefits derived from this condition.

Expanding a bit more on the topic of communities' participation in safeguarding , it is important to highlight the fact that interventions that seek to control or mitigate the circumstances that produce the loss of cultural elements depend not only on the agreement of the practitioners, but on their political decision to effectively incorporate these practices in their plans for the future, probably developing them on new bases, as well as of their disposition in engaging in mid to long term projects, given that the results of these interventions are unlikely to be immediate.

In discussing the safeguarding of endangered intangible cultural heritage in developing countries, one must also take into account risks provoked by processes that do not concern internal conflicts and tensions. I am referring here to movements caused by war, by large agribusiness or infrastructure projects, or to prolonged droughts or floods. In these situations, populations are forced to abandon settlements and territories that they have occupied for time immemorial. These are events in which are destroyed material goods and instruments of labor; in which the social fabric that provides the bases of sociability and of solidarity becomes unraveled. These are situations of crisis in which the abilities and knowledge that have been created, transmitted and improved over the generations become relatively obsolete and inefficient, yet the continuity of the cultural communities' ways of life often depends on these threatened traditions.

In my understanding, the production of new conditions needed for the continuity of ICH in such situations depends on attributing a broader meaning

to the work boosted by the Convention of 2003, which will very probably involve other agents in the situation as I shall argue in the next session.

III. Cultural Safeguarding and Development

It would be simplistic to analyze social development looking only at the poverty and exclusion confronted by the large majority of the populations involved. As the name itself indicates, "development" means the overcoming of needs through making progressively effective potentially existing resources. This is the route by which changes can be sustainable, that is, compatible with the ways in which societies organize themselves in view of their futures and beneficial, both from a material point of view and from a perspective of the dignity of the people involved.

ICH elements correspond to what people know and can do best, in the places and social environments where they live. They are, it can be said, the accumulators of resources (both material and symbolic) with which its bearers construct – or could construct – their insertion in a globalized world, where everything communicates with everything else through IT channels and social networks mediated by the market. However, the theme of diversification and expansion of the uses of ICH (understood as inherited wealth) bring to the debate the sense of risk and concern for the depletion of the psycho-social and symbolic meanings that are enrooted in its practice, providing the ICH holders "with a sense of identity and continuity".[4] Consequently, the demands for sustainability come to be a conditio sine qua non of all politics that is considered socially responsible in this field and, with it, the need for studies about the impact of these actions on the social and natural environments which they affect.

These impacts can be clearly illustrated in the case of traditional crafts, where an increase in the scale of production can signify pressure on natural raw materials and on the usually very small capital accumulated by individuals or groups. It can also lead to an increase or restructuring of the productive units, as

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4) Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. Art.2, Para.1.

well as an overloading of the routines of daily life, which are changes not easily absorbed by small scale communities. In addition, it is known that marketing can contribute to making uninspiring and lifeless, cultural elements whose symbolic power is frequently based on the excellence of their execution.

Another essential aspect of the matter focused in this presentation is the scope of the group that can come to benefit from the strengthening of the ICH elements in situations of risk. The various forms of knowledge needed to maintain the practice of ICH are socially regulated and often restricted to specialists, families or to small groups of producers. As a consequence, the benefits stemming from any increase in their market value may only be within the grasp of these social agents, or may be controlled by them. The reservation must be made, however, that even in these situations there may be indirect beneficiaries, depending on the way that the social division of labor and exchange systems are structured.

In developing countries, it is clear that there is a need to contribute to having ICH elements gain value (both material and symbolic) in the realm of culture and of the market. But in this sphere, one cannot be too cautious. Consumer goods in capitalist economy are by definition reproducible and standardized. Consequently one important risk concerning heritage production for the market (be it handicrafts, performances or services of any kind) is that they risk to become mechanically reproduced empty forms. As is known, much of the traditional intangible wealth collapses as a direct or indirect consequence of aggressive development projects. Therefore, I think that in addition to mapping ICH elements, inventories must identify the conditions and limits in which the creative potential of ICH can be sustainably explored and maintained available for future generations.

It is certain that traditions survive precisely because they are flexible and able to respond creatively to changing living conditions. But the accommodation of traditions to new circumstances has limits, and an essential limiting factor is the need to safeguard their historicity (ARANTES, A. 2011) from that perspective, it is crucial that local agents and their associative organizations participate effectively – and not only formally – in the identification of the heritage, and in the development and evaluation of the policies that aim at safeguarding it.

The implementation of effective ways of community participation in cultural policies, particularly in countries in which the ICH holders have been maintained

– or remained – at the margin of the transformations of the contemporary world, the need is also imposed to create adequate mediations and mediators. To effectuate the safeguarding of ICH or the salvation of what is considered to be in a situation of risk, it is essential to count on partnerships and establish synergies among internal efforts and external initiatives, whether these synergies and partnerships are of a national, regional or international scope.

In this sphere, anthropologists have a role and a responsibility which they cannot evade: to make local life understandable for those on the outside, and to make the exterior, urban and globalized world, with its legal and administrative instruments, intelligible to the ICH holders. (ARANTES, A. 2009)

IV. Closing Remarks

Identities and frontiers are constantly constructed, abandoned and re-encountered. Within this dynamic process, above all in situations of crisis and rapid social change, maybe what is most important for ICH holders are not the things made, the dramas performed or the stories told. What in fact seems to matter is something more abstract that substantiates these cultural manifestations as a legacy enrooted in social experience, namely, their competence on know-how and technologies, on graphic, scenic, choreographic and musical codes and on language itself.

In each object produced, in each performance, and in the memory that the ICH holders have of them, a testimony is found of that which they are capable of making and which they have the gift of executing to perfection. As the Wajãpi Indians who live on the border between Brazil and French Guiana once taught me, to be the holder of a certain cultural good is to be capable of executing it correctly and creatively. To nurture the ability to produce new realities on the basis of tradition, to create the new out of the old, seems to be what matters most in terms of transmitting ICH. In terms of our academic jargon, this means that it is in the spoken statements and in the things made, that language and knowledge are perpetuated and constantly recreated. The intangible truly appears to be the core of all cultural heritage.

Therefore, the challenge that is raised for the communities that are holders of

ICH is the defense of their rights to self-determination, creation and authorship, as well as the conservation and improvement of the conditions, knowledge and materials needed for their practices. As to outside agents – whether government or civil society institutions – it is up to them to contribute to the sustainable development of these practices, giving culture its rightful place in human and social development programmes.

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