UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Management on the Web

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INTRODUCTION

According to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO, the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) – or living heritage – is defined as the practices, representations, expressions, as well as the knowledge and skills, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as a part of their cultural heritage. The Convention states that the ICH is manifested in the domains of oral traditions (including languages), performing arts, social practices, knowledge, and traditional craftsmanship (Unesco, 2003)

Intangible assets include traditions, customs, stories, and manifestations of past and continuing cultural practices and collective knowledge. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, provides communities with a sense of identity and continuity.

The process of inventorying intangible cultural heritage and making those inventories accessible is one of the specific obligations outlined in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO and in the Operational Directives for its implementation.

Cataloging intangible cultural heritage is a rather complex activity, involving different skills and competences. Ethnographers, social history experts, etc. detect cultural heritage to be inserted in the catalog as their data. On the one hand, the structure of the catalog card has to be defined by experts, who, starting from the comparison among the different methods of inventorying in the various Countries, identify the best practices and define what kind of information to keep track of (Aspaci, 2011). On the other hand, in order to diffuse this intangible cultural heritage in the world, images, videos and other multimedia should be easily available to users through the web (Baghli, 2004).

The aim of the article is to critically discuss the characteristics of on line inventories.

We will focus on technological aspects related to availability of digital resources online. We will omit aspects related to semantics of the card catalog, which are the responsibility of experienced ethnographers. After discussing the obligation (by UNESCO Convention) that the States create inventories of the intangible heritage present in their territory, we present the principal Intangible Heritage Online inventories, pointing out the characteristic features of the data and of the online system. Then, we conclude with a discussion of the systems presented and future developments.

BACKGROUND

"Intangible cultural heritage is the precious possession of communities, groups and individuals, only they can safeguard it and pass it on to generations to come" (Bokova, 2012).

The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO focuses on the role of communities and groups in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Safeguarding is about the transferring – or communicating heritage from generation to generation – of knowledge, skills and meaning, as emphasized in the Convention, and does not mean fixing or freezing intangible cultural heritage in some pure or primordial form.

Safeguarding concerns heritage that communities themselves consider important, placing emphasis on living heritage that is performed by people, often collectively, and communicated through living experience.

It strives to contribute to the promotion of creativity and diversity, and to the well-being of communities, groups, and society at large. Communities therefore should be involved when their intangible cultural heritage is to be identified through inventorying.

In particular, the UNESCO Convention demands that "to ensure identification with a view to safeguarding, each State Party shall draw up, in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory...." in Article III Article 12 (ACCU, 2004). UNESCO allows enough flexibility for a State Party to determine how it will prepare its inventories. However, intangible heritage elements should be well defined in the inventories to help put safeguarding measures into practice.

From a technological point of view, the request of safeguarding intangible assets can be satisfied by:

- Identifying the heritage, also pointing out the ones in danger of disappearing,
- Cataloging them in local or national inventories,
- Spreading the knowledge on the web.

The inventories of the intangible heritage present in their territory, created by following the Convention, have to be updated regularly, as intangible heritage are continuously recreated by the communities in which they are born or transmitted.

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE MANAGEMENT

In this article we deal with the creation of digital inventories, mainly created for safeguarding purposes, involving different skills and competences. In designing the database, the various States may decide some features both of data and of the tools used to store or retrieve them.

Main features are:

- **Information stored:** Some States limit themselves to inventorying indigenous or native intangible cultural heritage while others – Scotland for instance – also take into account the intangible cultural heritage of immigrant communities. Many multicultural States in-

clude, in addition to expressions and cultural practices of the most widespread culture, from the start, the intangible cultural heritage of minority groups.

- **Update:** Inventories must be regularly updated, as stated in Article 12 of the Convention. This is vital due to the fact that intangible cultural heritage constantly evolves and threats to its viability can emerge very rapidly.

- **Type of inventories:** Some take the form of catalogs or registers, while others present information as a series of encyclopedia-like entries.

- **Deepness of information:** The UNESCO Convention of Cultural Heritage is not prescriptive about the data structure underlying the inventories. Although some intangible asset may require additional information, each entry should have the same level of detail in the database, according to the same template and possibly refer to detailed information available elsewhere rather than include it within the inventory. About half of the systems in use today present extensive documentation, while others are less exhaustive in providing information about the listed elements.

- **Structure of information:** States are free to create their inventories in their own way. However, intangible heritage elements should be well defined in the inventories to help put safeguarding measures into practice. UNESCO provides a structure to store information, which includes general information on cultural heritage, features, people that know and can transmit the knowledge, sustainability, data related to the inventory and references. The proposed structure is presented in Table 1 (Unesco, 2011).

Intangible Heritage Online Inventories

The process of inventorying intangible cultural heritage and making those inventories accessible is one of the specific obligations outlined in the 2003 Convention, and is required to include a cultural heritage site in the

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