

Intangible Heritage Approach of Safeguarding Underwater Heritage: A Trans-disciplinary Perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents the advantages of incorporating Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) disciplines in the protection of underwater sites. The integrated safeguarding approaches can enhance professional capacity and can lead to a knowledge pool that involves more peoples and gives greater meanings to underwater heritage. The paper critically investigates contemporary policies that redefine “cultural heritage” and raises examples of local and international initiatives that link traditional knowledge to the conservation of heritage sites. Good case studies exist not only in the Pacific and the Mediterranean, but also in the continents. These successful examples imply that intangible aspects of heritage can provide more profound interpretations of value and integrity of tangible heritage, including maritime sites. Despite that, there have been very few works directly addressing intangible heritage among UCH professionals. Main works on underwater heritage protection today are still archaeology-heavy and technology-heavy, as the concern has been to keep pace with looters, environmental change and industrial threats. Managerial professionals have overlooked that understanding the existing community’s cultures can gain them stronger supports for conservation against exploitation. It is time that underwater heritage professionals explore more seriously cross-disciplinary efforts to upscale safeguarding capacity by involving bigger, grassroots communities of heritage stakeholders.

Key words: Interdisciplinary approach, Intangible cultural heritage, Underwater Cultural Heritage, Community participation, Public awareness

Introduction

Public negligence has been determined as one of the main factors to the very real threat of deterioration of heritage sites worldwide. Working with communities is an essential praxis included in capacity-building trainings for underwater archaeologists. There is no doubt of its importance; however, it has not been prioritised in practice. Site conservation that lacks the community involvement can become inefficient and problematic. In the developing world, with the scarcity of public funds for site maintenance, and grassroots communities being prone to commercial exploitation, it is

vital to ensure that public understanding of archaeological works will lead to the better protection of non-renewable cultural resources. It is incumbent on the heritage workers to not only protect the findings, but also to make their intellectual value accessible to average locals. This is indeed easier said than done. It has been perceived that maritime archaeology is a distant realm of the academia only, with little benefit filtering down to the public sector (UNESCO Bangkok, 2009). Information of archaeological projects has been limitedly shared to the public, in fear that they would be “incapable of understanding archaeological principles” (UNESCO, 2013). Low public awareness seems to lie simply within a lack of interest in benefits of conservation. For instance, while experts agree that *in situ* preservation is the first option to protect underwater sites for future investigations, the public view this as a loss of opportunities to enjoy the site’s legacy. Among various stakeholders concerned, local communities are affected first-hand by activities directed at heritage sites, yet rarely profited from protection schemes. On many occasions, the protection of heritage sites is considered more effective if local inhabitants are involved from the beginning of the project (UNESCO, 2013). Sites are often discovered by fishermen or offshore operators, who may also view authorities and professionals as obstacles to their benefits. By enabling these local communities to be an active part of the site’s protection, they could help monitor risks to the site, which eases the demand of professional human resource. Involving community’s local customs and culture in the communication of heritage value can relay a strong sense of stewardship to the site. This is where Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) principles come into the picture, as a tool to approach and empower communities, whilst expanding the potential to advance heritage protection. This paper explores an approach that may change the perspective of heritage professionals and managers, and enhance their capacity to work with communities. Such approach should not only contribute to better site conservation, but is also in line with the ever-expanding concept of heritage.

Paradigm Shifts: From Preservation to Safeguarding, from Teaching to Exchanging

Intangible Cultural Heritage encompasses oral traditions, performing arts, norms, rituals, festivals, craftsmanship and beliefs. It is what community group or, in some cases, individual, recognises as a part of their culture. In other words, these activities give them

a sense of identity and continuity, thus have been transmitted for generations, continuously recreated in response to the changing socio-cultural environment (UNESCO, 2003). Seen as 'living heritage', ICH forms a closer relationship with the community, more so than other types of heritage. Indeed, the community can also be referred to as a landscape, in which ICH holds an important place within every individual's life, instilling in their daily routines and influencing their rites of passage. Therefore, it is believed that by valorising the role of local knowledge holders to represent communication, the heritage professionals stand more chance to convince the community to be more open to foreign ideas (Rai, 2013). This also means local people's perception of heritage must first be recognised. A case study in American Samoa posts an interesting question of whether "cultural properties" by the definition of indigenous people – which extends to some animal species and natural locations associated to local myths – be included in the inventory of their Underwater Cultural Heritage (Van Tilburg, 2011). Presenting animals and places as integral components that constitute and maintain cultural heritage is not a new idea. The mountainous range of Ifugao in the Philippines is seen as a cultural landscape not only for the fact that it cradles the Rice Terraces of the Cordilleras World Heritage site, but also because it keeps alive the episodic Hudhud chants of Ifugao farmers. Falconry has been inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage element, in which a falconer's way of life and the raptor species have been given high status in society. In protecting cultural places and animals, we can perpetuate valuable arts and traditions, and vice versa.

Since the start of the millennium, international discourses have been moving towards a direction that expands the scope of heritage. This was substantiated in forums that resulted in regionally-specific procedural documents. At the ICOMOS 14th General Assembly and Scientific Symposium titled "Place - Memory - Meaning: Preserving Intangible Values in Monuments and Sites", in Zimbabwe, 2003, Mounir Bouchenaki, UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Culture at the time, said that traditional legal frameworks and administrative measures for heritage protection were no longer appropriate to safeguard the heritage in the contemporary context. Many countries had long realised this, and revised related laws to recognise the intangible heritage. The fact that there are separate UNESCO Conventions to deal with tangible and intangible

heritage may give an outward impression that heritage is divided into clear-cut subcategories with self-ruling principles to protect them. However, through fieldwork there has been a proven and consistent reflection that the archaeological conservation principles alone cannot ensure the protection of all aspects of human's culture. Integrity and authenticity, in the context of World Heritage, do not guarantee the survival of cultural expressions that always change. Likewise, the procedures of intangible heritage usually require the preservation of instruments and places of activities in order to conduct the practices in their original socio-cultural contexts. Despite criticism that the Conventions' impacts are heavily State-centric (Cheng, 2010), these international mechanisms at least validate that the heritage is not an evidence of a past civilisation, but a civilisation itself. Heritage protection cannot simply end with preservation of physical state of objects or places; it must involve the provision of a conducive environment for people to continue their cultural activities, despite the change of time (Lenzerini, 2011). This process has been coined "safeguarding", as different from "preservation". It also means that present works on heritage involve not only specialists in social and human sciences, but also the actual cultural bearers and practitioners.

Bringing these stakeholders together, *Shanghai Charter*, convened at ICOM's 7th Asia-Pacific Regional Assembly in 2002, emboldens "interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral approaches that incorporate movable and immovable, tangible and intangible, natural and cultural heritage" (Bouchenaki, 2003). The Charter called for the activities that support transmission of traditional knowledge, as well as the translation of ICH elements into referential forms, such as records, inventories, museums, to maintain safeguarding capacity. This implies that the human resource lies within the community. Cultural practitioners, not scholars and professionals, are to determine how the heritage should be perceived, valued and used. This changes the role of the local people from the ignorant to the experts whose experiences are lifelong. Public archaeology has become much more than simply exposing the public to products of archaeological research. The management, communication and decisions should respect and benefit the locals. The core safeguarding approach is to present community-based value of cultural properties. It promotes a rights-based approach, encouraging the documentation of cultural

elements from “multidimensional perspectives” (O’Brien and Marakas, 2009) of varying groups of peoples concerned.

A relevant example is the use of narratives from witnesses of historical events, or possessors of traditional skills. Until 2001, exhibitions by the New Jersey Historical Society presented native dances, jargons, jokes, culinary practices, folklores, songs and memories along with artefacts to a wide range of crowds. They altered conventional presentation of history, diversified the audiences, as well as changed collection and staffing structures. More importantly, this method helped create an “identity repository” that does not simply inform distinctiveness of an ethnic group, but also fits the individuality of the New Jerseyan to the United States’ collective history (Yerkovich, 2006). Narratives and demonstration of cultural activities and skills have become effective ways to learning, and have been applied substantially by many museums. It underscores the credence that peoples do not need permission from authorities to speak about their heritage; they fundamentally have the right and expertise to do so. The inclusion of related intangible components of a heritage increases the capacity for peoples to exercise this right.

Nara Document on Authenticity (2007) addresses the need for a broader understanding of community’s role. It advances that custodianship of heritage sites should, so far as possible, stay in the hands of the community who has generated it, and whom should be empowered to carry out conservation. The document underscores the importance of respect for other cultures, other values, and tangible and intangible dimensions that form the heritage. There are, as a result, no fixed criteria to judge value and authenticity of a cultural property; rather it must be evaluated within the cultural context(s) to which it belongs. Developed at the regional workshops in Australia and French Polynesia (2008-09), *Pacific World Heritage Action Plan* (2005-15) affirms that the interconnection of tangible and intangible heritage must be realised to achieve true heritage protection. The schemes for protection “must be based on respect, understanding and maintenance of the traditional cultural practices, indigenous knowledge and systems of land and sea tenure”(UNESCO, 2009). Before the start of their permanent settlements, for example, Pacific migrants survived long inter-island journey by canoes and navigating sagacity. The pride and knowledge have been transmitted to young native

generations who share ambition of their ancestors in sailing the world with simple canoes (Gardner, 1999; UNESCO, 2004; Genzand Finney, 2006). The action plan also points out a common attribute of the Pacific sub-region that their marine biodiversity and cultural heritage wealth have been managed with traditional practices. It illustrates that there is an inseparable relationship between communities, cultures and environment that underpins sustainable livelihood in these islands.

Bearing in mind the community's original capacity and mechanism to safeguard their heritage, UNESCO developed the community-based inventorying workshop that aims to bring local people into the working group to create national ICH inventories. Local people, together with governmental staffs, are trained to use recording technology, to be knowledgeable of the viability and significance of ICH in different areas and to gain consents from cultural custodians. The workshop's focus is not simply to teach how to document cultures, but essentially to establish a platform for people of different backgrounds to exchange their experiences and devise locally appropriate approaches to assist in the identification of cultural elements to the inventory. Enforcing this working environment at the national stage will ensure that the ICH elements safeguarded and promoted by international instruments will always reflect the priorities of a civilization. This workshop has also been implemented since 2012 in various countries, in both mainlands and islands, where the issue is discussed under notion of cultural diversity.

UCH beyond a Site: Adding Value through Cultural Revitalisation

On many occasions, archaeologists are faced with the problem of possessing limited relevant information about a site. The criteria used for determining significance, such as physical conditions, types of found artefacts and their social or historical importance, usually remains partial, hence the reason why most professionals choose to keep it preserved *in situ*. Meanwhile, many archaeologists turn their attention to the relationship between cultural properties and local traditions of immediate communities, when assessing intrinsic significance, and considering the site's interpretative value against the present cultures. *The Annexes of the 2001 Convention* do not specify how to integrate living cultures to underwater heritage protection. *The Hoi An Protocols for Best Conservation Practice in Asia*, written a few years later, does mention this particular point, suggesting a possible interconnection between approaches under ICH disciplines

and the attempt to extend safeguarding ability for underwater sites. Adopted in 2005 at the ICOMOS General Assembly as an Asia-Oceania regional guideline for public, the protocol pinpoints that artifacts from underwater sites often have significant intangible aspects which should be taken into account in the conservation and interpretation. Cultural and historical values, especially in sites associated with important events, can add layers of meaning to these physical objects, and may also convey a sense of identity or continuity with current seafaring and maritime practices. Studying *in situ* sites that are connected to a community's living culture or records of cultural practices can also give strong cultural interpretation and presentation of the heritage, and in doing so, can reduce the need for excavation (Engelhardt and Rogers, 2009). In other words, ICH can add dimensions to the understanding of material culture. By studying living traditions with ethnographic data collection, researchers can better understand boats and artifacts, and reveal unfamiliar aspects of the community under study (Wylie, 1985; Pham, 2012).

For thousands of years, the ancient art of manufacturing traditional Iranian vessel, called Lenj, has remained relatively unchanged in terms of techniques. The wooden Lenjes were once known as the fastest ships to sail the seas, and even now can still compete with contemporary rivals. Historically used by Iranian sailors, the vessels are used today in the northern coasts of the Persian Gulf for trading, fishing and pearl diving. The sailing knowledge has traditionally been passed on from father to son. Before the arrivals of compasses, Iranian helmsmen could locate ships according to water depth and positions of the sun, the moon and the stars, using special formulae to figure latitudes and longitudes. Winds, tones of water and heights of waves could forecast weather. Music, rhythms, games and seaside New Year festival are inseparable to the Lenj sailors' communities. However, these wisdoms and rituals are unfortunately dying away with the disappearance of the Lenjes and their builders. Due to the downtrend of long distance travelling, the need for fast, big ships is a declining truth. Moreover, the wooden materials are continually being replaced by fiberglass substitutes, proving to be cheaper and faster to work with. This has resulted in a mass reduction of wooden Lenj workshops, which can only be found on the island of Qeshm. Few skilled wooden Lenj builders mainly consist of elderly people.

In 2011, the skills of Lenj building and sailing was inscribed in *UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*. To fulfill the requirements to be an inscribed element, a national-level safeguarding plan was developed. Financial supports from multinational sources were secured to assist in sustaining all the contributors to the ingenuity of the tradition, including the continuation of the ship-crafting community, the protection of surviving Lenjes and profound documentation of related knowledge. The safeguarding of the Iranian Lenj craft is an example of the positive State's commitment to international ministrations guarantees. But in the wider reality, what must be achieved to gain the recognition of the State and other nations to realize the heritage's importance?

An even more complicated case study presents an attempt that aims to save both the rebuilding of ancient boats and the religious worship that destroyed them. In the coastal town of Komiža, on the Croatian island of Vis, the craft skills and incineration rituals of the ancient wooden sailboats were once under threat of extinction. Komiža people have a long-standing tradition of burning dilapidated traditional boats as an annual offering to St. Nicholas, the protector of seamen. After the burning, the boat owners build new boats to replace the old ones. Nevertheless, when development came to Komiža, the demand for commercially viable boats increased. Modern-designed plastic boats have become a new replacement of the ones burnt in the ceremony, and due to their material, they cannot be practically burnt.

It took a long time for people to realize that a Croatian cultural heritage was being sacrificed in vain, confirmed by the cease of new wooden boats (Božanić and Buljubašić, 2012). Soon after *Cicibela*, the last *falkuša* boat, was sunk in 1986, local enthusiasts set up a non-profit foundation called *ArsHalieutica*, dedicated to multidisciplinary research of Croatian boats. The foundation also raised awareness to local people, showing that protecting the old traditions could contribute to the community's economics. The young *Cicibela* wreck was excavated for study. Different types of Komiža's fishing and trading boats were recorded. Historians, ethnographers and linguists were brought in to enhance various aspects of the tradition, including the ancient fishing culture; the relation of Komiža's incineration ritual to those of Ancient Egypt, Vikings and Portugal; and the interpretative value of the anthropomorphic life

cycle of boats to the social identity of the fisherman. 10 years later, a sacrificial *falkuša* was set on fire at the Expo in Lisbon on St. Nicholas' Day. It was called the success of *ArsHalieutica* in reviving both the material and nonmaterial aspects of this heritage. These examples prove that folk traditions, which are not by meaning the underwater heritage, should nonetheless be included in the safeguarding plan. This approach can reduce dependence on scientific investigations and lower the strain on financial and human resources. It enables the locals to share their experience with the professionals, and possibly result in the revitalization of practices that sustain the heritage in long term.

Conclusion

When registering the concept of interconnection between tangible and intangible heritage safeguarding principles in the context of underwater heritage, let us think outside the box of the Conventions and their Operational Guidelines. In actual practice, especially when a line separating science from culture is lacking, there is no limitation to indicate that the link between a cultural expression and a site is only physical. A site can bear social and spiritual influence to the deep-rooted worldview of a society, while sunk a thousand miles from its origin. A site may not exist in its original state at all, but instead a precise remake that possesses the emotional, spiritual or intellectual value of its predecessor. The effort in Croatia to safeguard both historical boat-building and the town's quintessential ritual and livelihood is an obvious example. One may ask why these approaches have not been recognised well enough to form a discipline. Were the results of past undertakings not worth future investments? Or, has it simply been the lack of organisational awareness to create inter-sectoral programmes? The salutation of being included in the UNESCO Lists happens after the safeguarding has already been achieved, or once it has been under the politics-induced attention of the concerned governments. Thus, the actual start point is that the locals and the professionals agree in what is important to their society and take actions. Underwater cultural sites, from island settlers' canoes to submerged settlements were born from the needs – religious or utilitarian – of the founding peoples. Thus, they bear socio-cultural values before they became historical or archaeological. Archaeological investigation, therefore, should not end at revealing its past functions or filling the gap in history, but should show how its

presence today still answers to the current community's needs. While we can celebrate discoveries of large imperial vessels that hold expensive masterpieces, we should not forget that there are still 'treasures' that exist yet have been neglected – treasures of bigger group of peoples, which can earn one not only a knowledge of the past but also how we can progress our world sustainably.

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Biography

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