

Intangible cultural Heritage and museums

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During the UNESCO international meeting held in March 2001 in the Region Piedmont (Italy) the following definition of intangible cultural heritage has been suggested: "peoples' learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create, and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability; these processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of the humanity".

I believe that it could be possible to discuss on some aspects of this definition and that we could start by identifying at least three categories of intangible heritage. These three categories help to create, although in different ways, what has been defined as intangible cultural heritage. Anyway, I am well aware that the boundaries separating these categories are very difficult to identify and to define precisely.

1) the first category should include social actions belonging to the habits of a certain community and that can be represented by a physical expression (for example religious rites, traditional economies, common ways of life, folklore etc. etc...). To this first category also belong some forms listed by UNESCO under the name of "Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity" (the Kunqu Opera, , Sicilian Puppets, Marrakech Jemaa el-Fna Square, etc.). These are expressions of cultures or traditional ways of life that can keep their value as long as they stay spontaneously alive in the culture (or in the economy) of the community they belong. If we try to preserve these forms of expression artificially, from the outside, they crystallize and fossilize in time and space; they lose any point of contact with the community of origin and they automatically get out of the definition of heritage. This should lead to reflect on how much it is really worthy to identify and preserve a "world intangible heritage" - which is UNESCO action.

As for what relates to the relationship between this first category of intangible heritage and museums, we could say that museums can contribute to its conservation; this would however lead to move this kind of heritage out of its context and to transform it from living cultural expressions into dead objects.

2) In the second category I would put all those forms of individual or collective expression which do not have a physical status: language, memory, oral traditions, songs and non-written traditional music, etc. Some of them also belong to the "Monuments" of UNESCO (i.e. oral heritage of Zagara).

Museums can play an important role in the conservation of this kind of intangible heritage: they can collect and file oral traditions on digital supports, they can record and rewrite songs and traditional music, etc. Museums can then transform this kind of intangible cultural heritage into a tangible heritage and they can preserve it in a physical form, as historical and cultural evidences. Also in this case however, intangible heritage is crystallized and the original relationship with the individual or with the community is

lost.

3) And finally, the third category of intangible heritage includes the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of objects constituting tangible heritage. Every object bears in itself two parts: its physical part (shape, beauty, size, etc etc...) and its meaning (deriving from its history, from the interpretation others give of it, from the relationships with the individuals who get in touch with it, from its power to link past and present, etc etc...).

Museums have a very important function in relation to this last category of intangible heritage, as all the actions related to "museum processes" (selection in acquisition and conservation, historical and scientific interpretation of the object, exhibition, etc etc...) tend to create a symbolic meaning of the objects and to communicate it outside museums. The actions of museums on the meaning of the objects is however relative: museums are not almighty because the symbolic meaning of an object comes not only from the museum's interpretation of it but also from the interpretation that each individual gives of the object, interpretation which is based on the individual's personal background.

Nevertheless I believe there is a fundamental quality which is common ground to all the three categories and which makes intangible heritage very different from tangible heritage: each expression and each action representing part of intangible cultural heritage will unrestrainedly change in time as long as future generations go by (just think of language for example). That is to say that a fundamental quality of intangible cultural heritage is its vitality. Every action envisaged to stop change will produce dead objects which have nothing to share with the "real and vital" intangible heritage both of communities and of individuals.

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