

WHAT SHOULD WE DO FOR THE SAFEGUARDING OF THE ROMANIAN INTANGIBLE HERITAGE?

Dan MATEI

1. The definition of "intangible cultural heritage" revisited

The well-known UNESCO definition of the intangible cultural heritage (art. 2/1 of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, Paris, 17 October 2003, at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>) reads:

The "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

Further, art. 2/2 lists some domains where the intangible heritage is manifested:

*oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
performing arts;
social practices, rituals and festive events;
knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
traditional craftsmanship.*

And art. 2/3 reads:

"Safeguarding" means measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and nonformal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.

First (minor) remark: the definition includes also some tangible items: "... the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith ...". Second remark: in order to "safeguard" the intangible heritage, I can detect two major lines of action:

keeping alive, i.e. transmitting the "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills", which is indeed a matter of "formal and nonformal education" and of actual practising.

recording and documenting manifestations of intangible heritage, that is, to preserve "relics" of intangible heritage.

Recording manifestations of intangible heritage on tangible, physical support do we "produce" tangible cultural heritage? In other words, the physical object on which an intangible cultural heritage manifestation is recorded becomes itself an item of tangible cultural heritage? Not necessarily. In order to explain this position, I will suggest an "operational definition" of "intangible manifestation": a manifestation which has no (or is not bound to its) physical support.

Then I will identify five classes of such intangible manifestations:

- language material (written and spoken);
- music (written and performed);
- behaviours, actions, e.g. rituals, performances, corporate cultures;
- skills;
- digital material.

Romeo and Juliet and *The Ninth Symphony* are pieces of cultural heritage transcending the support they are recorded on (or the quality of their performing, for that matter).

The digital material (being it text, image, sound) is special: it has the “technical quality” that it is not degraded through copying. So it is “support independent”. This is not the case with the analogical material. The perfect copying of an analogical recording is not possible: some quality is lost in the process, e.g. copying film. So, the analogical manifestation and its physical support are — together — candidate to preservation.

Thus, when a manifestation is digital (either obtained by digitisation of some analogical material or it is “born digital”), it can be transferred from one support to another, without degradation. This is why — I think — the recording of a manifestation of intangible heritage is not necessarily a piece of tangible heritage.

If defined like this, the intangible heritage do not includes the “documentary heritage”, which groups the documents, i.e. the information-bearing objects. It is true that, usually, the physical part of the document, i.e. the support, is not important, that is, only the “content” matters. However, often the document as such has a memorial (i.e. sentimental) value. A copy of *The Guttenberg Bible* is not valuable for the text it contains.

2. Intangible heritage: the division of labour among the memory institutions

What is the “ideal” division of labour among the memory institutions (museums, libraries, archives, schools, universities, etc.) in the preservation and public exposure of the intangible heritage? In particular, which is the role of the museums in the stewardship of the intangible heritage?

Traditionally, the documentary heritage is the concern of the libraries. But the digital material stored in digital libraries is more and more their concern too. The archives are preserving and preparing for access documents, i.e. physical, information-bearing items, so they are less concerned with intangible heritage. This will probably change, as the archives will store more and more digital material. Schools and universities have the crucial role of transmitting the “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills”; they are the “formal” part of “formal and nonformal education” (as the UNESCO Convention puts it).

What about the museums? Giovanni Pinna (in ICOM NEWS, no. 4, 2003) states:

... intangible heritage includes the symbolic and metaphorical meanings of the objects which constitute tangible heritage. Every object has two dimensions: its physical aspect, for example its shape and size, and its meaning, which derives from its history, from the interpretation it receives from others, from its capacity to link past and present, and so forth.

Museums have a very important function with respect to this last category of intangible heritage, since museum processes such as the selection of objects for acquisition and

conservation, the historical and scientific interpretations of an object, the mounting of exhibitions, etc., tend to create symbolic meanings for objects and to impart these to a wide audience. The museum creates a culture of its own through these processes and helps to fashion a body of knowledge and hence a cultural heritage.

and I will add only two things:

beside the “knowledge aura” of each object in its collection, i.e. an intangible heritage manifestation the museum is concerned with, the museum is also the keeper of some specific skills — and should be responsible with their safeguarding — namely the skills of conserving, restoring, interpreting, documenting, and presenting the tangible heritage;

some ethnographic museums take pride in organising fairs, exhibitions, courses in which traditional skills are exposed and transmitted.

Fortunately, in Romania there are also dedicated public institutions for the safeguarding of (a part of) the intangible heritage: the county centres for the conservation and promotion of the folk traditions. As their names imply, they are concerned only with the ethnographic part of the intangible heritage (but what a significant part!).

3. What should the Romanian memory institutions do?

In his editorial (*MUSEUM International* N°221-222), Mounir Bouchenaki states clearly:

Taking into account the different needs for conservation of monuments, cities or landscapes on the one hand and for safeguarding and transmission of cultural practices and traditional knowledge on the other hand, it will therefore be necessary to develop a

threefold approach which will (i) put tangible heritage into its wider context, (ii) translate intangible heritage into “materiality” and (iii) support practitioners and the transmission of knowledge and skills.

Aside his point (i), i.e. putting tangible heritage into its wider context — which should be the implicit job of each and every memory institution — we should reflect on which are the priorities in the stewardship of the Romanian intangible heritage.

For the “support practitioners and the transmission of knowledge and skills” part, the county centres for the conservation and promotion of the folk traditions and the ethnographic museums are doing — I believe — a good job. My only small suggestion for them is to strengthen their informal network, in order to spread the good practices and to co-ordinate trans-country actions. Using the Internet for this is a must.

For the “translate intangible heritage into ‘materiality’” part, I dare to suggest some action lines.

The UNESCO Convention, in art. 12.1. states:

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. These inventories shall be regularly updated.

Romania, being a State Party to the Convention has to set-up an inventory of the intangible cultural heritage on the Romanian territory. This, I think, is a priority. And CIMEC – the Institute for Cultural Memory could be the right organisation to do it.

The Convention also states in art. 16.1:

In order to ensure better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and awareness of its significance, and to encourage dialogue which respects cultural diversity, the Committee, upon the proposal of the States Parties concerned, shall establish, keep up to date and publish a Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

and UNESCO already did so — via art. 31.1:

The Committee shall incorporate in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity the items proclaimed “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” before the entry into force of this Convention.

see
<http://www.unesco.org/culture/intangible-heritage/masterpiece.php?lg=en>

We can use as a model the UNESCO's “Guide for the Presentation of Candidature Files”, in order to prepare the candidature files for the manifestations of intangible heritage to be included in the national inventory.

On the other hand, we are still lacking sizeable digital libraries with the most important textual works of the Romanian culture. That is, another important priority is to initiate “The Romanian National Corpus”.

An equally important resource to be initiated is the “Romanian Language Digital Dictionary”, which could be done via the digitisation of the Great Dictionary of the Romanian Language (initiated at the beginning of the 20th century and still in the works) and the digitisation of the Romanian Technical Lexicon (19 vols. 1949-1968).

However, the first priority for the Romanian memory institutions is — I think — to realise the importance and value of the intangible cultural heritage. Being done that, I trust them for finding imaginative ways to safeguard it.