

Heritage-Making in Finland: Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Introduction

In March 2019, press agencies declared that Finnish sauna culture had been nominated for inscription on the UNESCO Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This would be the first Finnish practice enlisted in this register. This paper sheds a light on how the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has been implemented into Finnish national legislation and how the heritage comes into being. This article examines how the participation of groups and communities is applied within the Finnish model of identification intangible heritage.

1. The conceptualisation of intangible cultural heritage

For millennia, a mix of social and cultural elements that provided a foundation for creating and developing

the identities of individuals and communities have been passed on to future generations as respective cultures. Culture is a process that changes constantly over time. The question of which cultural elements will be kept alive by future generations depends largely on the degree to which cultural aspects are alive and valued within a community.

However, cultural heritage is a recent concept that evolved in the 20th century, mainly after the Second World War, as a response to the unimaginable damage to cultural artefacts and cultural memory¹. Established in 1945, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is a specialised agency that has been primarily responsible for setting a framework for the protection of cultural heritage on an international level. UNESCO adopted two international conventions from 1972 and 2003, which give a legal foundation for the protection of cultural heritage. The first convention, the World Heritage Convention, regulates the preservation of tangible heritage, which is understood as cultural and natural heritage. The convention conceptualises cultural heritage as including monuments, groups of buildings and sites that have outstanding value for all of humankind². The material artefacts that fulfil the

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¹ Blake, J. 2015. *International Cultural Heritage Law*, Oxford University Press, p. 10.

² UNESCO. 1972. *Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, article 1.

formal requirements listed in the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention are eligible for inscription on the World Heritage List, maintained by UNESCO³.

More recently, the notion of cultural heritage in international law has become more significantly developed, and now it also includes intangible heritage, often described as 'living'⁴. As a consequence, in 2003, UNESCO adopted the guidelines of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This convention recognises intangible heritage as including practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills, as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith⁵. Intangible heritage can be manifested through 'oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts'⁶.

In contrast to the World Heritage Convention, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003 put a special emphasis on the participation of individuals,

groups and communities in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation of intangible heritage. Article 11 of the Convention stipulates precisely that each State that is a party to the Convention shall 'identify and define the various elements of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory, with the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations'. This has been an important change since the World Heritage Convention exclusively legitimised the role of states in identifying and managing their respective heritage.

2. The sauna tradition in Finland

A sauna is a type of a wooden bath, taking the form of a room or a separate log cottage, especially in rural areas. A sauna is heated up with a stove that is covered with a special type of stones. Historically, the bath was usually warmed up with wood, but electric stoves are currently widespread. At times, during sessions, water is thrown onto the stones to produce more moisture. The sauna tradition is comprised of several different practices. Traditionally, after showering and

³ UNESCO website. <http://whc.unesco.org/en/criteria/> (Accessed on 23.11.2019)

⁴ Logan, W. 2007. *Closing Pandora's box: Human Rights Conundrums in Cultural Heritage Protection in Cultural Heritage and Human Rights*, edited by H. Silverman, D. F. Ruggles, Springer, p. 50.

⁵ UNESCO. 2003. Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003, article 2.1

⁶ UNESCO website. What is Intangible Cultural Heritage? <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (Access on 23.11.2019)

sweating, people in saunas would whisk themselves with bath broom made from a bunch of birch branches with leaves (Finnish: *vihta*) and apply possible healing treatments, such as cupping and bloodletting⁷. Afterwards, when the heat becomes unbearable, they would cool down their bodies by jumping into a lake or river or simply showering. During winter, ice swimming or rolling in the snow is also popular. The procedure is typically repeated a few times.

Historically, when people moved from one place to another, the sauna was the first building to be built, before the main house⁸. This was because many different practices took place in the sauna. People would sleep there, take a shower, do laundry or clean corpses before a funeral. Since a sauna provides strongly hygienic conditions, women also gave birth to children in the bath. In the smoke sauna, when smoke was not coming out of the chamber, people were mainly smoking meat as well as other types of food products.

Sauna culture in Finland has a long and continuous tradition. It is a relevant part

of everyday life, and it is treated as a panacea for all ailments. The sauna also has an outstanding social role as a neutral meeting place where no differences in age or social status exist⁹. Moreover, the sauna is a non-sexual space, and men and women tend to use saunas separately, but mixed saunas are not uncommon¹⁰.

3. The implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Finland

Finland ratified the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013. The Ministry of Education and Culture delegated the task of implementing the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) Convention into the Finnish national legislation to the government's Finnish Heritage Agency (*Museovirasto*). The Heritage Agency published two crucial documents in this regard: Plan for National Implementation¹¹ and the Action Plan for Intangible Cultural Heritage (drafted

⁷ The Regional Museum of Lapland in Arktikum Science Centre and Museum. Permanent exhibition: 'Northern Ways'.

⁸ Roy, R. 2009. "The Sauna: A Complete Guide to the Construction, Use, and Benefits of the Finnish Bath, 2nd Edition". Chelsea Green Publishing. p. 10.

⁹ Taylor, K. and V. Williams. 2017. "Etiquette and Taboos around the World: A Geographic Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Customs". Greenwood. p. 265.

¹⁰ Edelsward, L. 1991. "Sauna as Symbol: Society and Culture in Finland". International Academic Publishers. p. 146

¹¹ Museovirasto. 2015. UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Plan for national implementation. Available at: <https://www.aineetonkulttuuriperinto.fi/assets/national-plan-2015.pdf>

by the expert group and updated every 4 years)¹².

The Plan for National Implementation (hereafter 'the National Plan') provides guidelines for the implementation and follows the general spirit of the ICH Convention concerning the participation of individuals, groups and communities in the heritage-making process. The main actors responsible for the implementation of the Convention are the Ministry of Culture and Education, the Finnish Heritage Agency, an expert group on intangible cultural heritage and circles of intangible cultural heritage (multidisciplinary networks of actors working within respective areas of ICH). Due to the multiplicity of actors, the National Plan describes the implementation process as a 'networking activity'¹³.

3.1 Inventorying

The ICH Convention leaves freedom of choice to State-parties to decide on the details of the implementation of the Convention. One exception is Article 12 of the Convention, which precisely

stipulates that the State-party to the Convention shall draw up national inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory. Inventorying is a process of creating catalogues or registers of elements to identify, document and transmit existing ICH¹⁴. To ensure the identification and, hence, safeguarding of ICH, the participation of communities, groups and relevant nongovernmental organizations is crucial (art. 11). Moreover, the inventories shall be regularly updated.



¹² Intangible Cultural Heritage website. Available at:

<https://www.aineetonkulttuuriperinto.fi/en/article/enkat-atgardsprogrammet-for-det-immateriella-kulturarvet-2019-2022> (Accessed on 22.11.2019)

¹³ Museovirasto. 2015. UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Plan for national implementation. p.4.

¹⁴ UNESCO. 2013. *Methodology for inventorying intangible cultural heritage in biosphere reserves: the experience of Montseny*. p. 8. Available at:

https://parcs.diba.cat/documents/29193465/29468345/Montseny_Metodologia_EN.pdf/13e06d7e-eccc-492d-bf35-85b52cab57ff

The Finnish model of inventorying involves two levels, the community level and the national level.

The main tool at the community level is 'Wiki-inventory for Living Heritage'¹⁵. It is a platform that enables communities and groups to submit proposals of ICH elements as suggestions for the National Inventory. The submitted aspect of ICH should fall within one of nine categories¹⁶. The platform is maintained by the Finnish Heritage Agency.

Creating a National Inventory of Living Heritage is much more formalised. Its criteria are drafted by an expert group appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture¹⁷. The Finnish Heritage Agency recommends aspects of ICH for nomination to the National Inventory, and the final decision is made by the Ministry of Education and Culture. In this process, the Finnish Heritage Agency takes into consideration suggestions from communities and networks of circles of ICH.

Elements listed in the national inventory can be nominated for inscription in the UNESCO List of intangible cultural heritage. A nomination is made by the

Ministry of Education and Culture in cooperation with the Finnish Heritage Agency and the expert group on ICH.

3.2 Incentives for the inscription of sauna tradition on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List

Sauna culture in Finland is widely practised by all generations in both urban and rural areas. This raises the question of whether the protection of the practice, which as a rule should be natural and alive, is needed.

The process of transformation of certain cultural patterns is a natural phenomenon. Yet, every external influence on this process impacts the meaning that cultural element has in a community. Therefore, who are the communities behind the submission of sauna tradition to the inventory? Mainly, they are private saunas associations, sauna clubs and business entrepreneurs, like restaurants and hotels¹⁸.

Studies show that sites and practices that are formally listed in the UNESCO register trigger a bigger interest in international tourism¹⁹. In some cases,

¹⁵ Elävän perinnön wikiluettelo. <https://wiki.aineetonkulttuuriperinto.fi/> (Accessed on 25.11.2019)

¹⁶ The categories are as follows: Festivities and practices, Music and dance, Performing arts, Oral traditions, Crafts, Food traditions, Games and playing, Nature and the universe, Good practices

¹⁷ Museovirasto. 2015. UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Plan for national implementation. p. 12.

¹⁸ Elävän perinnön wikiluettelo. Available at:

https://wiki.aineetonkulttuuriperinto.fi/wiki/Sauna_bathing (Accessed on 25.11.2019)

¹⁹ Kaminski, J., A.M. Benson, D. Arnoldp. 2013. 'Contemporary Issues in Cultural Heritage Tourism'. Routledge. p. 181.

protection of heritage and sustainable tourism go hand in hand. The publicity guaranteed by the UNESCO brand can contribute to the preservation of dying traditions. However, this is not the case of sauna culture in Finland. In terms of tourism capacities, Finland is a seasonal destination. The country is well known for its winter activities; what is missing in the tourism industry is a year-round attraction. Already, some of the tour operators offer the sauna experience as the main summer activity in Finland. The formal inscription of sauna tradition on the UNESCO list may lead to an increase in the interest of foreign visitors during summer months, which would provide a more stable situation for Finland in the tourism market.

Conclusions

Besides the formal consequences, ratification of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage leads to increased knowledge about this aspect of cultural heritage.

Inclusion in the UNESCO list of intangible heritage is a prestigious matter. UNESCO is one of the most recognisable brands in the world, and the formal UNESCO stamp encourages tourists to visit a place and experience related practices. Hence, inclusion has a positive impact on politics and the economy. Yet, a real threat is the transformation of the sauna tradition

into a commercialised product, sold to mass tourism.

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