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A digital platform to (re)link heritage of Malaysia: Co-producing information concerning ICH

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Abstract.

Since its implementation, the UNESCO's Convention for the Protection and safeguarding of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) remains a field of co-operation in what concerns its application in community and nation-wide strategies for the countries that approved the document. One of its the tangible influences has been the consciousness that new creativities must take place to recognise and document the living tradition of each region. Consequently, identifying Intangible Cultural Heritage is a keyword for the expansion of safeguarding and protection strategies, as it remains a dominant issue when it comes to pleasing to action any plan in this arena. The "Repository of Penang Cultural Diversity" is a working process project designed as a digital platform to enhance the broadcasting of knowledge and information about ICH in the Penang region (West Malaysia). It imagines a comprehensive approach to cultural heritage: material (buildings, objects, museum collections), intangible (know-how, cultural practices) and natural (cultural landscapes). Also, highlights a historical perception as well a modern view of how folk practices are taking place these days and highlights the active and developing nature of ICH. This short paper deliberates the concepts that guide the project, objectives and methodologies.

Keywords: inventory, memory institutions, museums, George Town, Penang, cultural heritage, the digital platform, UNESCO, cultural diversity, archives, 2003 Convention

Introduction

The need to identify and inventory cultural heritage accompanies the idea and evolution of cultural heritage itself its origin can be traced to the nineteenth century in France, while at the time the word applied would be “monuments” not cultural heritage. To ensure protection lies the need to identify and listing cultural heritage, accordingly to certain criteria and attribute values, which have varied from time to time. That was the case of the first government inventory of historic sites in 1837 lead by the French Commission des Monuments Historiques to identify the nation’s historic buildings (Harrison 2013). In Malaysia, one the first inventories (or in this a case a pre-inventory) is characterized by individual initiative and is attributed to the Location: Melaka, in the State of Melaka, and George Town, in the State of Penang (2001-2007) that identified the monuments that were considered “relevant”, a task he conducted between 2001 and 2007, followed by an inventory draft of the monuments to be classified by the government (Khan et. Al. 2017; Ullah 2018).

From the nineteenth century to the present there were major developments in many countries in what concerns the politics of heritage, where UNESCO (and other agencies associated), through the production of conventions, recommendations, declarations, charters, among other documents, has had great agency and influence in government decisions on managing and promoting certain aspects of cultural heritage. Accompanying this change, cultural heritage concept has evolved and expanded, embracing many dimensions: from monuments to historic and archaeological sites, to landscape, industrial and intangible, to name just a few. This expansion has occurred in a rapid way and mainly in the last 40 years, bringing a new challenging framework of heritage objects, practitioners and industries, and creating the basis for the development of heritage studies as a new interdisciplinary field of critical reflection (Harrison 2013).

Inventories have changed in format, criteria and focus, nevertheless, one can observe that the identification, inventory, the organization and systematization of information about cultural heritage in all its dimensions remain at the core of many official initiatives led by governments. It can be understood as an instrument of public national management that falls under the realm of “Authorised Heritage Discourse” (AHD), which means a framework of texts and practices that set guidelines about the definition of heritage and how it should be managed. The notion of AHD is also linked with the creation of lists that represent what is “heritage” and consequently what is not. In this regard, the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage be one of the most influential texts of the AHD (Harrison 2010) by setting a global framework that dictates recommendations in this field. The same analogy could be presented in the case of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This Convention recognized the need of giving awareness on a living heritage, in the constant modification, which is part of the identity of groups and communities and is transmitted from generation to generation. Significant emphasis is put on the importance of inventories (art. 12), while recommended no to be the only measure, and, again, lists are at the core of international recognition echoing the previous experience of the 1972 UNESCO Convention (Smith and Campbell 2018).

Another feature in the 2003 Convention is the agency placed on communities and groups in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. However, the participation and involvement of communities are not to be understood as a dismissing role of governments and “heritage communities” concerning safeguarding processes. In this context, Jacobs, underline the importance and contribution of heritage communities as brokers, facilitators and mediators in such processes. While the notion of participation is not new in the field of cultural heritage as well in museums and cultural organizations at large, it points out a challenging growing field of experimentation (Antos, Fromm, and Golding 2017; Ullah 2018).

The 2003 Convention has improved awareness of intangible culture heritage with wide-ranging implications for many countries, reinforcing the construction of the AHD. One of the most visible impacts has been the launch of many “participative” processes of inventory of ICH in the last ten years. There are no fixed formulas or ready-made solutions, and the process of identifying ICH is taking many ways and formats, from official lists to national registrars, to geographic and thematic inventories, databases, PDF format, websites, etc., which may also vary in terms of depth (among other aspects). A recent study (Sousa 2017) identified 158 inventories available on the web on unrestricted access, from a sample of 198 countries that ratified the Convention, including 24 countries that haven’t. These numbers can resonate some of the impacts of the Convention 2003 since most of the inventories identified were launched after the process of ratification of each country. Furthermore, this study points out that 75% of these inventories are carried out by national governmental agencies (Sousa 2017). Another trend identified was the geographic origin of the inventories, where a majority of 53% are in European countries, followed by 22% from Latin America and Caribbean countries (Sousa 2017).

Inventorying intangible heritage in Penang, Malaysia

Similarly, to other countries, in Malaysia, a stronger focus on ICH policymaking was followed with the ratification of the Convention 2003 in 2008. New legislative documents were produced to incorporate the Convention 2003 recommendations from 2009 onwards that shed light on new institutional mechanisms and procedures. In this context, a national register/database dedicated to ICH Inventory of Intangible Heritage was launched in 2012 (figure 1). Since then nine elements of ICH were inscribed in the database, two are inscribed in the category “urgent safeguard” and 20 elements are under process, waiting for approval to enter the database. The inscriptions follow a procedure online based on a voluntary submission proposal. Although conceptually the underlined idea of this national database was to promote participation through an online format, its limited use in terms of the number of elements inscribed has not been able to demonstrate so far, the country’s rich cultural diversity. One of the hypotheses that might explain the situation could be the level of bureaucracies involved in the process, and a reduced availability of human resources to respond and handle the process flow of submission proposals with more agility (Ullah and Saidin 2018).



Figure 1 Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Historic City of George Town, Penang (Source: <http://www.gtwhi.com.my/educate/inventory-of-intangible-heritage.html> 2012).

Additionally, to the national register mentioned, 20 practitioners Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Historic City of George Town has identified in Penang six inventories about ICH in the form of databases on the web. Three of them have been organized as a result and to support Malaysia applications to the UNESCO Intangible Heritage Lists: The Documentation the 20 practitioners Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Historic City of George Town a thematic database under the broad theme of landscape, including several dimensions (ecologic, cultural and socioeconomic and sensorial), which is supported by several municipalities and organizations in the Penang region (Samadi and Yunus 2018; Ullah 2018).

This brief panorama around inventories available online clearly states the growing interest in recent years in organizing knowledge and disseminating information about ICH, recognizing that despite the development of anthropology and ethnology studies in this field, many cultural practices remain invisible and unknown for the public. However, several questions remain open to reflection, especially from the point of view of users. Besides a better dissemination of these information resources available through databases online: what is their impact? Who is using them? How, and for what purposes? Are they an end or are they catalysing other initiatives? While I am not trying to address these questions in this short paper, they are a reminder of the challenges of accessing the impact and follow-up of these initiatives.

Role of a new digital Repository

Like Malaysia as in many other countries, one should note the emerging role of digital humanities and the rising of modern technologies to support these developments in last decades, which be a shared interest by researchers and professionals of many fields, institutions, and public policies. While there are some available databases, inventories, itineraries, etc. about specific domains of cultural heritage, including ICH as abovementioned, generally they are often scattered between different organisations and are not easily accessed unless you are already knowledgeable of their existence or you have a specific purpose as an expert or researcher; furthermore, they rarely interconnect. The information produced also tends to compartmentalise cultural heritage into categories: landscape, tangible heritage, intangible heritage, religious heritage, industrial heritage, cultural landscape, rural heritage, etc. Another difficulty identified is the

little attention given to the user's perspective, prevailing rigid formats of inventory, and technical jargon. Although the information is reliable, generally conveys a communication peers to peers and, therefore, don't usually address a larger community of users. In what respects ICH, and despite a growing awareness at national and regional levels, and some emerging initiatives towards inventorying, in general, knowledge about ICH lacks visibility and dissemination. Finally, one can observe also the need of a regional focus in approaching cultural heritage (tangible and intangible) in a more integrated and holistic view (Dagnino et. Al 2017; Ullah 2018).

The justification for the Digital Repository

The above-mentioned state of the art had a strong influence on the decision of creating a new platform and its design. The "Repository of Penang Cultural Diversity" is, therefore, a working project designed as a digital platform to enhance the dissemination of knowledge about ICH in a Penang region piloted by the Chair UNESCO Chair in Intangible Heritage and Traditional Know-How. The idea of creating this platform was also informed by the example of the Encyclopaedia du Patrimoines Cultural de l'Amérique Française, online since 2008 and developed by Laval University (Quebec, Canada). This Encyclopédie model was chosen in terms of its form and main principles. Therefore, the Repository envisages an inclusive approach to cultural heritage: material (buildings, objects, museum collections), intangible (know-how, cultural practices) and natural (cultural landscapes). While centred in cultural practices as focus, the project foresees the interconnection of various aspects of this heritage, in its tangible and intangible dimension, aiming to reflect the region's cultural diversity. Furthermore, another goal is to emphasise a historical perspective as well a contemporary view of how cultural practices are taking place nowadays and highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of living heritage. In this sense, the approach adopted follows the 2003 Convention main ideas about the notion of ICH and domains. Nevertheless, the Repository will also include disappeared practices for purposes of shared memory and knowledge transmission. Another focus privileged by the Repository will be about memory institutions, namely museums and their collections and their role and contribution to the comprehension of cultural practices and identity framing. In this regard, one will look at cultural biographies (Kopytoff 1986) from the point of view of institutions itself, the formation and development of collections, and collectors. This focus is also relevant since many Malaysia museums, despite some developments, still, struggle to increase awareness of their collections and knowledge in the digital setting (Aziz 2017; Ullah 2018).

Determining the format

The Repository is organized around short articles (1800 to 2400 words) inaccessible and appealing writing to address larger audiences of readers (especially people interested in cultural heritage, local history and stories; but also, students, heritage and museum professionals, and researchers). The content structure is not fixed as it happens in conventional inventory format, but should follow and answer some guideline questions: what (the presentation of the theme either a cultural practice, a site, a building, a landscape, a collection, an object or people); how is being valued by communities in present time, and its uses; what is

the historical background; which changes have occurred how and why; which actions were implemented concerning patrimonialization.

While a written format is privileged to provide context and the framework of the subject, articles should be accompanied by a variety of multimedia resources (image, sound, texts, maps, videos, sounds), bibliographic references and complementary documents as much as possible. Regarding multimedia resources its encouraged to use License Creative Commons in a more flexible and less restricted way as possible.

All articles are given credit of authorship in opposition to an anonymous corpus of knowledge. The rationale is that the Repository gives evidence to different angles and a plurality of views about cultural heritage (multidisciplinary gaze) in a more inclusive and above all fostering a systemic approach. From articles that set a broader context to others more specific in scope, the idea is to link knowledge by exploring the interconnection between elements and distinct categories of heritage, organizing them, for example, in thematic collections of articles, using for that purpose available tools of information technologies and digital humanities expertise (Samadi and Yunus 2018). The Repository is, therefore, a compilation of short articles accessible on a website to be designed by the Interdisciplinary Centre for History, Cultures and Societies that hosts the Chair UNESCO Chair in Intangible Heritage and Traditional Know-How: Linking Heritage. The Repository will be created within a larger digital framework (gtwhi) Digital: the past digitally present, that already gathers direct access digital materials and databases around cultural heritage organised by researchers from since 2012 For the moment the Repository is at a conceptual phase, is expected to be fully functional with a set of examples in Spring 2018 (Samadi and Yunus 2018).

Co-producing knowledge about ICH and networking

The goal of this platform is to co-produce knowledge about ICH, engaging with heritage communities, meaning people, organisations, and other social actors in the field of cultural heritage (both tangible and intangible). This process is intended to be participatory in the sense it gives an opportunity to different actors to present their contribution and knowledge through an open platform. The feed of contributions is reinforced by an open call for submissions launched on a regular basis to update the Repository in a continuous way with new articles and materials.

The workflow of submissions is to be managed by an executive committee, responsible for the edition and to foresee the quality guidelines of the articles writing and format, and a scientific committee, composed by members of (gtwhi) and other research centres of the Universities, Government provincial and state agencies that supervises the project implementation and adequacy by providing a digital platform, its rationale, and managing the workflow of a publishing process, the UNESCO Chair in Intangible Heritage and traditional Know-How: Linking Heritage objective is to act as a facilitator. Nevertheless, the implementation of this project relies also in fostering cooperation between different professionals, organisations and social actors in the region by building a consortium of partners already engaged with the safeguarding of ICH at national level, but more specifically at the regional level (i.e. ONG, UNESCO commission and centres, regional public institutions related to culture and tourism, and memory institutions such as museums, archives, and associations, etc.). In this

way, the consortium can help to feed the Repository with articles and collaborate in disseminating the project by activating their agency in awareness-raising of ICH in the region.

Conclusion

In Malaysia, one more element of ICH has been added to the international listing of UNESCO, increasing and enhancing attention towards ICH in the media and public awareness. Nevertheless, beyond the realm of these nominations and global/national promotion apparatus, the fact is that the diversity of cultural practices remains invisible either at the national or regional level, as we demonstrated in this short paper. Therefore, the Repository aims to contribute to the increasing visibility of a body of knowledge about ICH, focusing on a specific region of the country the George Town Penang. In this perspective, the dissemination of this body of knowledge may stimulate awareness about the importance of ICH, activate interest and recognition, but also set discussions among heritage communities about the meanings of cultural practices nowadays in terms of identity and sense of place.

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