Intangible Cultural Heritage and Climate Change

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Intangible Cultural Heritage and Climate Change
Sustainability and Adaptability in a Time of Crisis?

Philip McDermott and Mairéad Nic Craith

Abstract

It has now been two decades since UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted. A ground-breaking treaty, the Convention brought recognition of heritage as a living, breathing element of human existence, but has it reached its full potential? This article acts as an introduction to our forum edition on the connection between climate change and intangible cultural heritage (ICH). We consider how debates on heritage, and in particular ICH, have increasingly focussed on intersections between tradition and present-day social concerns, including those around the environment. Throughout our introduction, we identify themes discussed by each of the authors in the forum. In doing so, we illustrate how ICH acts as an important method through which to illuminate and potentially tackle challenges around climate change and its impact on society and human culture.

Keywords

adaptability, climate change, community, Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, intangible cultural heritage, sustainability, UNESCO

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The year 2023 marked the twentieth anniversary of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003). In the past two decades, this ground-breaking intervention has profiled the notion of heritage as a living, breathing element of human existence. However, has it reached its full potential? What is its relevance (if any) to climate change? The debates on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) have taken place in parallel with those on environmental crises globally. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), drafted in 1992 (United Nations 1992a), and the subsequent Kyoto Protocol (1992–2020) and Doha Amendment (2020), have placed emphasis on the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (United Nations 1992b,

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AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 1 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

2020). In some quarters, however, critics have argued that these long-term goals and targets have often failed to acknowledge the ongoing impact that global warming is having on the diversity of human culture (Kim 2011). As an example, floods, erosion and drought have led to the dispersal of people through processes of forced migration, again impacting on the sustainability of ICH as living traditions. Moreover, warmer temperatures have influenced the environments in which ICH takes place. Climate change may also have altered the behaviour of animal species which has consequences on some living traditions. This forum edition considers how the social dynamics of ICH render it an important means through which to illuminate and potentially tackle climate change and its impact on society and human culture.

The Social Role of Heritage

Heritage engenders considerable discussion in contemporary society. For many, especially in European and North American contexts, its interpretation is aligned with castles, manor houses, monuments and museums – the 'built' or 'tangible' elements. The term 'heritage' in many Indo-European languages suggests this is a passive as opposed to an 'active form of inheritance' or 'a resource that is handed down untainted' (Nic Craith 2008: 54). Such perspectives have primarily drawn from a worldview which is channelled through an authorised heritage discourse (AHD). In other words, heritage is defined 'from above' and legitimised through power structures, such as that of the state, that were developed and normalised during the age of modernity (Smith 2006).

Such interpretations have, however, been increasingly challenged by those coming from non-European perspectives, which view heritage as equally channelled 'from below' and through community-based knowledge (Akagawa 2015). Capturing these complexities of different worldviews, Nic Craith explains that 'one can hardly assume that a single English-language word "heritage" captures all the nuances, and the meaning varies in different languages reflecting local perspectives and attitudes to the notion of heritage' (2008: 54). In deconstructing the concept further, Laurajane Smith asserts that heritage should be considered 'not so much a "thing" as a set of values and meanings' (2006: 11). 'Heritage' is ultimately a cultural practice and one that is 'involved in the construction and regulation of a range of values and

AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 2 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

understandings' (2006: 11). The academic debates have also placed emphasis on the role of heritage within wider social processes and especially the interconnection with spatial and temporal dynamics (Ashworth and Graham 2005: 7; MacDonald 2013; McDowell 2008). For example, heritage at the grassroots level has become more prevalent as a form of activism which resists 'top-down' definitions. These have often been framed within a decolonial context amidst a wider reaction against globalisation and challenging supposed given 'norms' across space and time.

Therefore, the significance of heritage lies in its contemporary value as a social tool of the present (and future) rather than in its preservation of the past (Kockel et al. 2020a; McDermott and McDowell 2021). Rather, the resources of the past are useful tools for unravelling and understanding current and looming challenges. If one of our greatest contemporary quandaries relates to climate change, then surely issues of heritage can help us to understand, adapt and potentially mitigate against this? While there is undeniably a need to protect built heritage from the impact of environmental change, living traditions such as mythologies, performances, rituals or cultural practices may provide important mechanisms that communities can use to adapt, understand, cope with or offset these crises. Therefore, the connection between ICH and climate change needs a more pronounced visibility in these debates.

Intangible Cultural Heritage

In recent decades, there has emerged a wider legal recognition of the social role of heritage as 'living tradition'. In particular, the establishment of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2003) broadened the recognition of heritage beyond physical buildings, monuments and landscapes. The Convention highlighted intangible or 'living' practices of heritage such as song, dance, traditional ecological knowledge, ritual and performance (see Kockel and McFadyen 2019; Nic Craith et al. 2019). As Rodney Harrison (2010: 9) notes ICH relates to the 'customs and habits which, although intangible, inform who we are as collectives, and help create our collective social memory'. These interpretations focus on heritage as an interconnected system of meanings and relationships that locate us in particular places, landscapes and environments (Kockel et al. 2020b).

AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 3 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

The term ICH includes a collective of knowledge, worldviews, skills, actions, habits and practices. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines the concept as '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 recognise as part of their cultural heritage' (UNESCO 2003). Indeed, several scholars have noted that the definition for this legal text derives from discussions that have been taking place within the field of folklore studies for decades (see Noyes 2015; West 2012).

The Convention is notable in the context of this forum for drawing attention to the ways in which ICH is connected to nature and ecological wisdom. UNESCO (2003) cites ecological wisdom associated with ICH as 'knowledge about local fauna and flora, traditional healing systems, rituals, beliefs, initiatory rites, cosmologies, shamanism, possession rites, social organisations, festivals, languages and visual arts'. An associated term Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is sometimes posited by others as opposed to ICH. TEK is, like ICH, a rather flexible term with no single agreed-upon universal definition (Berkes 1993). Instead, it incorporates the tacit knowledge of fishermen, farmers, craft workers and many others as it relates to the environment. Taking these definitions further, Fulvio Mazzocchi defines TEK as 'a cumulative body of knowledge, practices and representations that describes the relationships of living beings with one another and with their physical environment, which evolved by adaptive processes and has been handed down through generations by cultural transmission' (2006: 463). Undeniably though, ICH is underpinned by this TEK. The two concepts are thus inseparable.

Unlike typical Western reliance on a perception of objectivity or 'scientific' truths, TEK can cope with variation from one location to another, reflecting a multitude of beliefs in different locations. In many instances, this knowledge has been passed on through the spoken word and transmitted through habits and practices over multiple generations (Mazzocchi 2006). Many of these practices have come from belief systems which had aided people and communities to live harmoniously with nature and indeed to nurture and care for their environment (Iaccarino 2003). This knowledge had derived from long-term empirical observations in local contexts by people and communities. However, as the articles in this forum show, the issue of climate change is unsettling the relationship between communities and their landscapes, and disrupting established traditions and practices.

AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 4 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

The resilience of ICH to adaptability and its existence as a form of sustainable response to climate change are also addressed in several of the articles, adding to a growing concern within the literature on cultural heritage generally (Orr et al. 2021). A focus of some of the authors is that those at the grassroots level have a key role in observing and adapting traditions in order to cope with these environmental changes, thus aligning with Hee-Eun Kim's (2011) observations made over a decade ago.

Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Impact of Climate Change: Differing Perspectives

This forum, therefore, considers the contribution to and impact of ICH on the question of climate change. The six articles which follow consider how debates on ICH can illuminate the challenges and threats posed to the environment. They also explore how cultural knowledge provides pathways in opening new debate on the wider impact of climate change and how we should respond to it. The authors deal with interlinking issues such as aspects of European folklore / traditional knowledge that can be harnessed to alleviate climate change and how these traditions adapt in such circumstance. In addition, the articles explore how ICH can serve as a catalyst for building resilient communities and in the process promote sustainability through education and activism.

A core theme of this issue considers the impact of climate change directly on ICH itself. A case study from Poland by Karolina Dziubata-Smykowska explores the implications of declining snow resources, alterations in the vegetation cycle and hydrological drought on the traditions of winter horse-drawn carriage racing and wickerwork. The Polish cultural landscape contains multiple cultural practices grounded in the human–environment relationship. The article presents early results of ongoing research on the relationship between ICH in Poland and changes to the climate. Based on notions of ethnoclimatology and the anthropology of weather, this article draws attention to local perceptions of environmental change, potential methods of safeguarding tradition, and the need to harness heritage into resilient action.

A further case study from Latvia by Kitija Balcare and colleagues investigates the impact of warming seas on the lamprey fishing tradition in the village of Carnikava, Latvia. This example shows how

AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 5 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

climate change affects both biological species and has a subsequent impact on centuries-old fishing traditions specialised in harvesting these species. In these circumstances, sustainable solutions are necessary to safeguard both values and customs. The authors further evidence how global warming is occurring worldwide, affecting everyday life and cultural heritage cherished for centuries. These include craftmanship, local knowledge and food traditions, which are all areas of growing concern for heritage scholars (Dembedza et al. 2022). ICH is vulnerable to climate change, as it depends on local resources and on the skills and knowledge of living in a particular environment. Both Balcare and colleagues and Dziubata-Smykowska's articles draw on observations and perspectives from a range of actors including tradition-bearers, local communities, governments, scientists and state bodies.

A major emphasis in the ICH agenda is the notion of local communities and grassroots roles. In contrast to the recognition of World Heritage, which is identified by the state, recognition of ICH is defined at local community level. Several articles in this edition investigate how community and grassroots populations use ICH in response to environmental risk. Eleni Kotsira's article draws on original ethnographic material gathered in 2017 during and in the wake of an environmental disaster on Samothráki, a small and remote Greek island in the northeastern Aegean Sea. She revisits three aspects of (seemingly forgotten) traditional knowledge that the islanders reflected upon following the disaster. Kotsira explores how the islanders used this knowledge to reframe their relationship with their environment, and she discusses how ICH provided a pathway to interpreting the climate crisis on the island.

Another community response is explored in Anjuli Grantham's article on the colonial climate imaginary as a means of experimenting with alternative approaches to heritage in Ireland. The approach of this article aligns with Sara McDowell's assertions that 'heritage can be seen as an aggregation of myths, values and inheritances determined and defined by the needs of societies in the present' (2008: 37). Grantham specifically refers to the Save the Boyne campaign and contrasts the scientistic-materialist basis of the AHD with the relational heritage ontology centred on myths which activists in Ireland deployed. A coalition including the Fairy Council of Ireland objected to a treated wastewater pipeline in County Meath that, if constructed, would reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of a slaughterhouse yet discharge treated water waste into the River Boyne. In

AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 6 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

adopting a decolonial climate imaginary to experiment with alternative approaches to heritage scholarship, Grantham analyses the uses of ICH within an environmental activist campaign. She considers how a relational ontology might provoke a broadening of heritage conceptualisation and purpose in this time of planetary crisis. In their contributions to the forum, both Kotsira and Grantham also illustrate the tensions between questions of sustainability and wider economic factors, which have rendered environmental debates as challenging.

In some instances, it is helpful when those from 'above', such as a state, directly intervene in promoting ICH as a framework for mitigating against climate crisis, although this is rarely straightforward. Dealing with a Greek education initiative, Panas Karampampas examines the challenges in designing and implementing schools' initiatives to generate awareness around environmental issues. Such policy and practice initiatives are important factors in offsetting future risk. The author examines the implementation of educational programmes relating to ICH and identifies the importance of more structured approaches. The article demonstrates how such programmes have the potential to reframe human–environment relationships, and makes practical suggestions for this revised context. Although the ethnographic examples are from Greece, the findings are arguably relevant to other places and educational contexts.

The final article, written by Geoffrey Gowlland, reflects on the adaptability of the age-old practice of dry stone walling to address the loss of biodiversity precipitated by locally changing agricultural practices and a globally changing climate. The 'art of dry stone walling', inscribed in 2018 on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, involves building walls with locally sourced stones without the use of mortar. On relatively homogeneous agricultural land, these walls offer precious surfaces, nooks and crannies for plants and animals to grow on, nest in or move along from one patch of woods to the next. With a focus on practices in Switzerland, the article explores how a new awareness of the ecological potential of dry stone walls is shaping the craft and the composition of the community of practice that is developing around it.

Conclusion

To conclude, the authors in this forum illustrate the relevance of ICH in navigating the debates around climate change at different levels

AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 7 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

from local heritage communities and beyond. At the beginning of this introduction, we highlighted the dynamic and fluid nature of heritage itself. Like living culture, heritage 'is constantly re-worked, re-negotiated and re-defined' (Nic Craith 2004: 280). In a similar vein, the context of both climate debates and ICH is constantly evolving. As recently as December 2023, the British government announced its intention to ratify the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in the future. States which have already ratified the document are constantly updating their lists. As an example of this, the Irish government along with Austria, Andorra, Belgium and Luxembourg applied in March 2023 to UNESCO to add the practice of dry stone walling in their countries to the Representative List. UNESCO's decision on this application is expected in December 2024.

However, there is a need for greater integration of the two debates – an issue which this *AJEC* forum attempts to address. At an international level, recent Conferences of the Parties of the UNFCC (COP) have given insufficient attention to the potential impact of ICH to understand how communities adapt to, deal with and address global warming. Neither is there adequate recognition of the role that cultural behaviour can play in reversing global warming. Climate change is a scientific challenge, but cultural traditions and ICH have an important humanities-based function in facilitating a dialogue on how we can adapt to and mitigate its effects. ICH is as much about the present and future as it is about the past. If the future of the planet is in crisis, then ICH can help bring forward some sustainable contributions in responding to these challenges.

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AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 8 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM

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AJEC 33-1_Summer_2024.indb 10 5/30/2024 11:33:48 AM