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Experimenting with Tight-fitting Safeguards of Tangible and Intangible Heritage in the South of Belgium

Abstract

In order to empower the symposium participants to discuss the way of helping the practitioners to safeguard their own heritage without distort neither fossilize it, I'll introduce some specific actions tested in Wallonia (the South of Belgium). This paper will successively focus on heritage awareness and management – especially skills transmission – and will question heritage bearers, the media and institutions.

During the Chengdu International Conference on Intangible Heritage in celebration of the tenth anniversary of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, last June, a round-table was held to discuss the "Parallel universes" to this Convention, such as Intellectual property, World heritage and Cultural goods and services. The participants considered the mutual influences brought to bear on both texts, *Convention WH concerning the Protection on the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972)* and *Convention ICH for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)*¹ the last ten years.

Convention's history reveals that, before 2003, a thorough analysis of the World Heritage Convention content and implementation (Blake 2002, pp. 72-78) was made regarding the choice to write a new text or to include a protocol about intangible cultural heritage within the framework of UNESCO's 1972. This idea still had some attractions in view of the formal mechanism for protection that already existed under the Convention. Listing World Heritage properties and duty placed on Parties to ensure the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the heritage protected covers many of the obligations that are needed in relation to intangible cultural heritage. However, the existing nomination and evaluation criteria of items for inclusion in the World Heritage List – authenticity, integrity and requirement of 'outstanding universal value' – and the WH Convention definition of 'cultural heritage' were considered as unenforceable to intangible cultural heritage. So, it has been decided to write a new convention, specifically dedicated to intangible heritage. Debates were bitter: writing the text lasted as much as thirty thousand hours (Smeets 2004; p. 198).

The new Convention focuses on the stakeholders' responsibility for choosing and managing the safeguarding activities. It emphasizes how that intangible cultural

¹ http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?meeting_id=00328

heritage is constantly recreated, so that the term “authenticity” is not relevant when identifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage². When, the WH Convention uses “heritage protection,” the ICH one uses “safeguarding” to mean that heritage must keep alive, opposite to the prime caretaking approach regarding to monuments and sites.

Consequently, the Committee for World Heritage and ICOMOS henceforth focus on the role of communities and social networks in the preservation of World Heritage “to promote the long term impacts of heritage on economic development and social cohesion“(Paris Declaration 2011), thus widely opened to intangible consideration. For the celebration of 40th anniversary, the Convention decided “to explore how its mechanisms can continue to adapt and stay in tune with a changing world“ and “how to integrate sustainable local community projects into World Heritage planning.”³ The “change” and “sustainable” significances look like an antinomy. Yet, they exactly translate the moving side of heritage, ideally linked to the local communities' ways of life, ideas, behaviors and beliefs and with the environmental basis needed for their survival.

Today, the huge use of expertise in the examination of nomination files under the World Heritage Convention is called into question (Deacon & Smeets 2013). The Committees of the two conventions are gradually requiring more community involvement in the management of natural, tangible and intangible heritage and and in the development of nomination files, while suggesting to assist their members on awareness process and files documentation and presentation. I would like that our present symposium leads us to think about the best cultural and scientific mediations possible and about the technical and financial means to promote citizen initiative.

In order to start a discussion about these mediations and these means, I'll give a few examples of recent good practices in tangible and intangible heritage chosen from my native region, Wallonia. I do not want to mention my involvement in the approach that I shall mention here as a demonstration of arrogance but rather as a guarantee of a deep vision of a phenomenon which overshoots the journalistic or ethnological experience.

Participating observation is generally frowned upon by researchers but here, I claim the right of using it as the best way to go beyond the simple reflective method by approaching social and cultural reality through social relationship. Of course, in most of the mentioned experiences, my analysis is not neutral: it reflects my own involvement in shared heritage safeguarding. I feel that an assumed subjectivity can improve the discussion.

² *Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Nara, 2004, § 8. See: http://www.bunka.go.jp/kokusaibunka/bunkazaihogo/pdf/nara_YAMATO_e.pdf

³ <http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-664-1.pdf>

My heritage awareness

I was first concerned by built heritage in 1983. Then, in February, fire destroyed the ancient monks' dormitory of the Cistercian Val Saint-Lambert Abbey, in Seraing (Liege), deconsecrated in 1795 and bought by a glassworks industry in 1836 which used it to store raw materials. Its huge chestnut lumber work (50 m. long, 15 m wide and 18 m. high) was dated back to 1234 by dendrochronology and was, before arson, the oldest well preserved one in Wallonia.

At that time, I was a journalist at the public Belgian TV, I made a report on the arson consequences. I do not know if the most deeply moving thing was the neighbors' sorrow or the burned timbers vision. A few weeks later, some heritage lovers created a non-profit association and I broadcasted another TV sequence to make their need known: they wanted to find money to buy the ruins and they were looking for voluntaries to restore the building. Among them, we found an architect, an engineer, a doctor, a lawyer, an art historian, and also glass-workers and inhabitants without any peculiar skill but ready to roll up their sleeves to handle a pick, a spade or a trowel. Quickly, I joined the group and every Saturday, we met together in good spirits to clear out and improve the site.



Fig. 1 External and internal sights of the 13th century abbey

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The working group was so enthusiastic that quite a few politicians sided with the project and that the Heritage Department of Culture Administration gave 60% of the necessary amount. The association secured a bank loan, the neighbor steel plant gave steel and various financial aids helped to finish the restoration in 1995. For twenty years long, numerous cultural activities –concerts, exhibitions, any kinds of shows – and family or institutional events took place in the ancient abbey... until a

crook deprived the association which was compelled to sell the building, with a heavy heart. Despite this cruel end, the result is positive. As time goes by, a true heritage awareness had motivated many voluntaries to spend time and give money and physical efforts to create a place full of history, weave there social links and cultural projects.



Fig. 2 The restoration architects, Moreau & Coyette, designed a new steel frame in accordance of 13th century barrel vault shape and measurements
© Flamenc 2008 (under GFDL)

The Val Saint-Lambert abbey example shows how the emotional and meaningful relationship between heritage and its bearers is very important. As long as this relationship exists, heritage is protected against any kind of denaturation. Heritage has value, one which can change with times but always goes through current developments of groups or communities who bring them “in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity”, to quote the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. On the other hand, we observe that, as soon as a change interrupts that relationship – for instance, when representation prevails over meaning in the transformation of a ritual into a show, or, when an unexpected event disrupts groups' good running –, a feeling of helplessness and discouragement will be felt sooner or later. Social links become lax and heritage ownership feeling is not more understood.

A question arises then: how can an emotional and meaningful relationship between heritage and its bearers exists with 1972 Convention requirement of 'outstanding

universal value' for natural and cultural properties? In other words: as soon as heritage attains exemplary and international fame worth, who decides its future and regarding which values? In addition to the change in cultural production and reproduction foundation due to heritage intervention (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004), we may wonder over the relevance of drawing up representative lists and, according to that, over the creation of metacultural values.

Importance of the media

For the European media, the first true interest in cultural heritage took place in 1984, when France successfully organized the first "historical monuments open-door day." The idea immediately germinated inside the ten (at that time) EU countries to set a yearly simultaneous Heritage Day. The media supported this initiative and increased the (critical or laudatory) reports about hundreds of monuments and sites which were not yet considered by the citizens.

In Wallonia, the first Heritage Day drew 70,000 visitors, on 1989, May 21 that is to say much less than the number of TV viewers in 1987 and 1988 who were used to discovering on screen the public TV programs dedicated to heritage and its craftsmen, especially familiar heritage – fountains, washbasins, chapels, schools, railway stations –, more important for them than famous castles or impressive cathedrals.

The program I directed in 1987 was called *La Mémoire des Pierres* or *The Stones Memory*. The idea was simple: to show to a large diversified audience the importance of keeping alive and reassign the built heritage by linking them to daily life, providing thus a feeling of responsibility shared by the audience and carrying along his active involvement. Each program lasted 13 minutes and focused on a specific theme: ruins, towers, churches and chapels, castles, farms and abbeys, rural development, fountains and washbasins, schools, railway stations, houses and industrial archeology. Each theme was divided into three parts: ruins, current restoration and reassigned and living examples. The following year, another program, *La Mémoire des Bâisseurs* or *The Builders Memory*, dedicated to the quarrying and the implementation of local natural materials (stone, wood, metal) and the most important techniques of decoration and completion used by traditional builders (roofer, stained-glassworker, stucco worker, slate worker, zinc worker, ...) was broadcasted.

A videotape and two big books were published to enable interested people to go deeper and get involved in heritage safeguarding. At that time, only tangible heritage was concerned but, like for the Val Saint-Lambert project, hundreds of persons rose up in arms in support of heritage restoration or improvement: they cleaned a fountain, repainted a chapel, cleared out a cemetery or suggested to their local administration a new assignment for an abandoned building. A washhouse became a school of music, a railway station became a museum and

someone lives now in an old deconsecrated chapel... The experience also permitted the creation of social links.

This importance of the media in order to raise awareness at tangible or intangible heritage brings up some issues: which role does the observer or the journalist play towards the practices or the sites he photographs or films? Is there a risk for him to fix them in a due representation impossible to break by the stakeholders? Is mediatization a damaging blow to the natural transmission within the communities? When a community wants to uncover or bring out its tangible or intangible heritage, the leaders begin to choose investigators and give them a recorder and a camera as if such tools will guarantee the assignment success.

Is this resort to an artificial memory justified in sight of a heritage transmission? I think that we have to pay attention to the impact of such an approach. We must avoid associating it with the need to preserve testimonies from forgetting. Keeping a trace to manage a potential updating is the only aim of such a way of doing. We also must avoid that the recorded trace should be considered as a standard for the tradition: heritage transmission is a diachronic process and not a succession of historical states. A Korean ethnologist observes that it is more important to transmit heritage to future generations than to record it. Photographing or filming with complex technological means is not a guarantee of protection and perpetuation (Jongsung 2004, p. 182).

The European Heritage Days includes now fifty countries and regions. Every year, some millions of visitors (between 300,000 and 500,000 in Wallonia) attend the activities which mix more and more tangible and intangible heritage. Are they really interested in heritage or do they find an opportunity to cheaply entertain themselves? This question cannot be answered with certainty as this concerns the difficult problem of the connection between heritage and tourism, a too big subject to be dealt with here.

The citizen involvement in cultural spaces management

On the 17th ICOMOS General Assembly Symposium in Paris, 2011, my paper concerned the role of the local communities, tourism and external consultants in the transmission of landscapes and cultural spaces' heritage values. I would like to come back to this subject but only focus on the citizen involvement in the management of this heritage.

In the mind of the ICH Convention, "cultural space" means a place bound to social practices, beliefs, expressions, knowledge or skills that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Our field studies show that the cultural spaces bound to festive or religious practices tightly rooted in local cultural identity have a real adaptability against technical, geographical or economic constraints, new social needs or tourism.

Let us check a case study: the *Grand Feu*, huge wood-fire lighted every first Lent Sunday in many rural places of Wallonia. In Treignes, a village in the South of the Namur Province, the *Grand Feu*, rebuilt every spring in a meadow at the top of a specific hill, had to move, a few years ago, when people decided to build there little houses. Despite this forced move to an unusual place, the practice has kept its rituals and its vitality because the village inhabitants implicitly recognize the social importance of this special time of the year when people meet together to celebrate the end of winter (Lempereur 2007).



Fig. 3 Construction of the *Grand Feu* in Treignes © Françoise Lempereur

Anywhere else, if the practice were no longer held by a majority of the village community's members, such an uprooting would have hastened its disappearance. So, the cultural space depends on heritage values, recognized and transmitted from a generation to generation. In Treignes, young people are directly involved in the heritage management. On Sunday morning, they built the wood-fire with bundles made during the end-of-winter-cleaning of slopes and railway embankments and with firewood collected from door to door in the village to respect the tradition which said that the one who doesn't give wood for the *Grand Feu*, should be victim of an accidental fire during the next year. Moreover, when the *Grand Feu* burns, the boys "heat the girls up:" each one tries to maintain, as long and as close to the fire as possible, a girl who – of course – cries and struggles. This practice, long ago known in other villages, seems coming from an ancient fertility ritual but today, it is understood as an opportunity to laugh together.

Landscape management

The last few years, mentalities have changed when it concerns landscape, in former times, gazed at for its “wild beauty” where no human redesigning was allowed, and now, progressively associated to intangible heritage to become life environment, ecological framework for human activities or experimentation field in order to preserve natural resources and biodiversity. Today, numerous initiatives arise. They combine a real reflection on environment and biotopes sustainable development with an approach targeting town and country in order to plan actions of landscape conservation, improving and restoration. Actions are run together by scientists or institutions and by voluntaries coming from very different social and cultural strata of local communities. On the first hand, for example, a collection called *Atlas des Paysages de Wallonie* was published by The Permanent Conference for Walloon Territorial Development and the Tourism Federation of Belgian Luxemburg set up a yearly week-end of the landscape. For the voluntaries, we can observe that the projects spring generally up when a citizen becomes aware of the degradation of his daily environment or of the threats upon it. As he is unable to react alone, he talks to his neighbors and, together, they create an association which develops a project with or without the local institutions.

My example concerns two rural districts and their citizens, it is to say around 23,000 inhabitants. In 2005, Esneux Tourism Office and Neupré Local Development Agency asked the Region for funding a project in the *Grand Site de la Boucle de l'Ourthe*: providing a network of pedestrian and cycling roads or paths to connect all the villages and hamlets and all the schools, the administrative, sportive and leisure buildings and the public transport. The *Grand Site de la Boucle de l'Ourthe* is a landscape unity formed by a meander of the Ourthe River at the bottom of a big rock cliff called the *Roche-aux-Faucons*, a beautiful site shared by the two administrative districts.



Fig. 4 Welcome sign in the *Roche-aux-Faucons* © ADL Neupré

As soon as the project took shape, numerous citizens, speleologists, geologists, geographers, botanists, ornithologists, trailers, history-, built heritage- and regional literature-lovers offered their services as volunteers. In no time, combined skills go beyond the framework of the site valorization, as all of them are neighbors ...sometimes without even knowing each other. New initiatives are created and instead of recommending favored routes to discover the main points of interest, they decide to structure a network of little roads, paths and tracks, duly indexed, identified through a name and a number and market out. Welcome signs with a general map are put at every gate of the network and didactical signs are settled for every local specificity: geological landscape development with karstic phenomenon and underground passages; information about flora and fauna, inland navigation and fords, Mesolithic and Neolithic occupancies, sandstone quarrying to make millstones, iron mines, lime kilns, and even writers who celebrated the place.



Fig. 5 Part of the landscape from the cliff

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When the network was inaugurated, nearly 1,500 of the 23,000 citizens walked through it and asked for information to the volunteers who were posted all around the site. Such a success shows how important is their Community Heritage to them, this through an intrinsic, visceral and emotional bond as it was shown there, a bond which is desired to be transmitted to the future generations. Indeed, a lot of them were parents and grandparents. They brought along the children to whom a place

full of emotion and history was shown, one which was sometimes their formal playground.



Fig. 6 For the inauguration, a scientist explaining the formation of meander, on the orientation table placed on the top of the cliff ©ADL Neupré

The touristic feature in this reclaim by the local community cannot be denied, one which is as well for the regional visitors and strangers. Indeed, the tool introduced and constantly reshaped allows an enhancement of the cultural diversity and the biodiversity. In this case, welcoming people can only be good for the heritage cause for visitors will never be overflowing on one hand, and because there is no desire here to use the heritage for profit on the other. Both the landscape and the cultural space are a social and cultural structure which places the human being in his own environment, creating thus a unique feeling of belonging, of pleasure within values which are shared and individual at the same time. Once the pressure from tourism is too high or when the perspective of economic development is swallowing these values, there is a great risk of enslaving the heritage to prejudicial contingencies.

The main danger of the actual "omni-heritage" is its place in a modern perspective of economic development which escaped its own causes. All around the world, the defense of lifestyle based on crafts and on the exploitation of local resources is not gainful. However, the touristic valorization of representations -in which the victims are the landscapes and the cultural heritage spaces- can bring some gain. Therefore, it is tempting to substitute some kind of exploitation of the heritage with a mechanical and industrial production of objects said to be "unauthentic" and with "spectaculated" representations of ancestral rituals to the genuine heritage. Such uses of traditional art and culture is a real worry for many researchers (such as:

Martin-Granel 1999; Clifort 1988) because they corrupt the meaning of heritage within the communities.

The know-how transmission

Over time, the heritage know-how has often lost its practical use, replaced by new technologies which use more ergonomic and lighter tools, often using electricity. Those enable to shape less expensive, healthier, more comfortable, more effective in a matter of thermodynamic and better for those who desire some innovation materials. Thus, should we regret their lost? Is modernization a kind of progress? Or is it a regress? Opinions are divided and I think there cannot be a main answer to this question for each case is different.

In a specific field, the *Institut du Patrimoine wallon (IPW)* has noticed that both the restoration of architectural heritage and the progressive loss of the bearers of this intangible heritage are to be damaged. In 1999, the IPW has acquired a *Training Center in heritage skills* to counter this in an old abbey called *Paix-Dieu*. This Center trains craftsmen, laborers, architects, builders, engineers, architectural historians, archaeologists, work supervisors) to the old skills of building. It also gives scholarships to allow some of them to attend to specialized classes in a European control center.



Fig. 7 The old abbey of la Paix-Dieu, *Training Center in heritage skills*
G.Focant © SPW-Patrimoine

Since 2011, the Center has hosted more than 10,000 students aged 12 to 15. Those have attended to *Awareness Classes of heritage and its trade* for four days, an experience which was a real discovery of the old abbey site, the restoration project and the archeological excavations. The aim of those classes is to create a vocation among the teenagers who experience the restoration techniques with the use of real tools and materials in order to produce a collective “work of art”, all of this with the help of professional craftsmen.

At *La Paix-Dieu*, classes are also given to the youth aged over 16 who are registered in artistic department and in construction trades trainings. These classes are also given to the future teachers and to the colleges and universities students. However, there are shorter activities which last from one to three days and are offered to children aged 9 to 12 in order to allow them to discover in a funny way the different aspects of heritage trades. Finally, a documentation center aims for the awareness of people to the different traditional Walloon know-how; a center which is mainly concerned by the old restoration techniques, exhibitions, lectures and other animations.



Fig. 8 Discovering heritage skills in La Paix-Dieu © IPW Paix-Dieu

In 2001, I worked for the *Training Center in heritage skills* during a wide operation called *Retrouvez la mémoire* (Back to Memory) (Lempereur 2003). This operation involved the recording on a digital video tape of the testimony of old –and very old- craftsmen who accepted to share with the camera all their heritage know-how in order to bequeath them to those who will face sensitive issues in buildings restoration which uses bygone techniques; an operation which was within a real race against the clock. Depending on their state of health and the available tools, the 55 recorded telltales tried as much as they could to show the ancestral movements, to focus on the processes, tricks, their know-how particularities, sharing anecdotes, memories and commenting pictures, documents, plans, drawings, all of them useful so as to share knowledge. The director-cameraman and I were alone with each telltale in his own workshop, site, a building he had constructed or in his house at the fireside, showing thus our desire to focus on the testimonial aspect. No cinematic artifice was used and aesthetic pursuit was forbidden. All that has been recorded was kept in 32 three hours digital video tapes. It was not about producing cut, assembled and condensed documentaries which explain in a few minutes the exclusive know-how but about creating archives. Thus, when the legitimate holder will disappear, this know-how will still exist through the craftsman's chisel, hammer or scissors who will master the technique and be able to create then new ones which will restore the heritage.

Today, twelve years later, most of the telltales are dead. Nothing will ever replace their memory but the pictures still exist, "hints of a possible revitalization," as said earlier, one within the promotion process of the "respect for cultural diversity and human creativity."⁴

Conclusion

Despite the many questions lying within my statement, I would like to reassert that cultural heritage is a common good which is not worth its emotional bond felt by the ones who own it –as shown previously. Moreover, its safeguarding is linked to the perpetual reappropriations by the members of the concerned communities. Heritage matter has to evolve in a matter of content and form by adapting its structures and formal values to the successive socioeconomic and sociocultural contexts. Otherwise, it will artificially reproduce cultural practices of a bygone past, being thus negatively considered as "folklore." In order to secure effective reappropriations of the natural heritage and the cultural heritage, it seems important to use social practices rooted within the local economy and meeting the inhabitants' choices. Indeed, they are the ones the scientist and experts should listen to in order to help them... and not otherwise.

⁴ *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, UNESCO, 2003.

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