Intangible Cultural Heritage in Mexico

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Introduction

In this seminal volume a multiplicity of dialogues are established and several borders are crossed: the past is studied to understand the present and imagine the future. Here, discourse is constructed through photographs and words manage to paint images. Reflecting upon the intangible heritage requires all the tangibility of concrete cases, which is why Lourdes Arizpe offers the analysis of seven cultural manifestations that are the heritage and patrimony of the people of northeastern Morelos. Through them, their identity is built, recreated and strengthened; through them they recognise each other, meet anew and reunite. All these cultural expressions are areas of co-existence and
creativity, of expression and action, through which collective meanings are created that give cohesion and a sense of belonging.

In this book we can both read, and see through texts and photographs, anthropological accounts of (1) the day of the dead - the first Mexican manifestation to be inscribed in UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list, as it happens every year at local level; (2) the trueque, an ancestral form of exchanging goods where no currency is involved; (3) the conviviality ever present in all family gatherings, and festivities, (4) the mexicanidad, or the Mexican way of being together, of celebrating our unity through civic parades and festivities held on the commemorative days of national history; (5) the religious processions and celebrations organised in Mexican villages to honour the patron saint of their churches; (6) the Temazcal, or ancestral steam bath through which it is possible to achieve healing, balance and contact with nature and Mother Earth; (7) and finally, the Yautepec Carnival with its colourful and artistic explosion of Chinelo1 outfits.

This is a book dealing with synergies, with collective and co-ordinated work. In its production, the creativity and enthusiasm of the practitioners merge with the talent of the witnesses-photographers and anthropologists. It is a book built upon co-existence, the pleasure of working together and sharing.

Decades of Mexican anthropological studies show that tradition is not opposed to innovation. Mexican anthropology in the 20th century led to the construction of theories and methodologies that are fundamental to any research on cultures. Nonetheless, today it faces the challenge of reflecting an ever-changing reality, so new concepts, offering other possibilities for analysis, are urgently required.

Intangible heritage is a concept derived from numerous meetings between artists, intellectuals, academics, undergraduates and political representatives.
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Its development was based on two decades of deep discussion between the most distinguished thinkers from all corners of the planet. It is a concept that incorporates an enormous diversity of perspectives. Among them, firm and strong, is the Mexican perspective, promoted by Lourdes Arizpe, who, besides being a Mexican and a Mexican scholar, knows Mexico thoroughly, and constantly experiences and reflects upon its flavours, tastes, smells and sounds.

From an infinite thirst for knowledge, from an impetuous need for understanding, from a profound capacity to see and listen, to question herself and simply to ask questions, to discover and to marvel, to allow herself to be amazed, Lourdes constructs knowledge. This is why the concept of intangible heritage is closely related to that Mexican anthropological tradition to which Lourdes Arizpe is an heiress as much as she is both its creator and transmitter.

The book illustrates the intangible in the manifestations, expressions and cultural practices of north east Morelos, but there is another dimension, also intangible, on which one may build: this is not only a book which tells stories, it also creates them. The intangible lies in the book but also behind it.

From its origins, this research on intangible heritage was enriched by various perspectives, first by those of students of the Diploma Course Cultural interactivity and Global Processes and later by those of students at the National School of Anthropology and History who Lourdes invited to participate in several of her field trips. Thus a multiplicity of small stories was built which cannot be found in this book, but which is an important part of it.

Thus, Martha, a strong and determined anthropologist, told us on the third day of registering the festivities of the Day of the Dead: Next year, I shall spend this day with my dead ones. At first, our purpose was merely to record, but we ended up assessing the value of our own heritage; in the same manner, by means of our perception, perhaps a few others came to appreciate the value of their own.

We were able to share the experiences of the people living in Amilcingo, Zacualpan, Tlacotepec, Huazulco, Popotlán, Hueyapan and Tetela. We attended the wedding of Julia and Obed, Bersai’s, Yamileth’s, Wendy’s and Jessica’s baptisms, Don Lupe’s birthday and the burials of Elfego and Don Gero, enjoyed afternoon coffee with members of the Barreto family and festivities with Carlos at the celebration of Nabe’s departure and those held...
upon Dayni’s return... In the warm mornings of Amilcingo and the cool Zacualpan afternoons we spoke about our beliefs and theirs’, we listened to their wisdom and we spoke about what we knew.

Certainly, intangible heritage is for sharing, it only holds meaning in its collective dimension. Certainly the core of safeguarding rests within the communities, in the practitioners and stakeholders, in the strength of their will and their desire to continue keeping living practices alive.

Beyond the aesthetic dimension of intangible heritage manifestations, which is undoubtedly a fundamental dimension, it is important to value intangible heritage as the multiple strings with which the bonds of solidarity and friendship are daily strengthened, with which the social weave is created and maintained, with which that canvas which today we call ‘humanity’ is woven.

This book is a sample of the manner in which the various manifestations and expressions of intangible heritage operate in everyday contexts in all corners of Mexico today. This book offers new avenues to explore, suggests roads to follow and invites us to share what we consider to be ours and to receive that which others consider belongs to them. It is a book which leaves open multiple questions which Arizpe invites us to consider and act upon.
NOTE

1. The Chinelo dance is a traditional cultural expression in Morelos (a southern state of Mexico) in which people dressed to mock the Spaniards, in very colourful, highly decorated dresses and masks with long black mustaches and beards. They dance to the rhythm of band music down the streets of the villages. During the Carnaval de Yautepoc, there is a competition for the best Chinelo disguise. Traditionally, Chinelos were always men although that is beginning to change.