Intangible Cultural Heritage in Times of ‘Superdiversity’: Exploring Ways of Transformation

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ABSTRACT
The author reflects on policy and practice development concerning intangible cultural heritage (ICH), from the perspective of cultural diversity as a part of the framework of appreciation and objectives relating to the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH (2003). The author explains the current evolution towards a superdiverse society, and determines that ICH is identified in the preambles of the UNESCO 2003 Convention as a source of enrichment for cultural diversity, of mutual human understanding and exchange. The Convention has existed for over a decade, making it possible to reflect on its international implementation with respect to the aspect of cultural diversity: i.e. what do we learn from the realisation and interaction with the Lists and Register in the context of the Convention, and surrounding debates? The author examines how the choices and implementation of the ICH Convention, developments in the field and the effects on the practice can be evaluated in the intervening years with an approach of diversity. Finally, the author wishes to formulate a vision and to foster reflections on ICH and diversity (policy) with this. A plea follows to open up the thinking around ICH and diversity, and thus to approach it as diversely as possible; since a focus on an (often) ethnic-cultural approach potentially creates the contrary effect from the intention of the entire ICH discourse and ICH policy development: a striving towards a more shared understanding and exchange, and enrichment of cultural diversity and human creativity.

Keywords
cultural diversity, super-diversity, cultural policy, cultural mediation, cultural brokerage, Representative List, sustainable development, communities, commons, transformation, multiculturalism, inventorying
Introduction: thoughts on intangible cultural heritage and diversity

At the beginning of this century, the protection of cultural diversity in the world was one of the incentives for the creation of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) as an international policy instrument. In the preamble to the Convention, the importance of ICH is positioned as a mainspring of cultural diversity and as a guarantee for sustainable development. The Convention also came about after UNESCO had made the analysis that globalisation and social transformation often create situations in which ICH declines or disappears, given that there is a lack of resistance and means of help that can protect and strengthen ICH in these circumstances. Conversely, globalisation can also offer opportunities to fully experience the diversity of cultures. ICH and cultural diversity were in the forefront of UNESCO’s goals from an ideological, normative standpoint, for positive appreciation and as an objective for protecting, strengthening and preservation.

I have been familiar with ICH policy in Western Europe from early on, particularly in the region of Flanders (Belgium) where I live, and in neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands, France and Germany. In the Netherlands, with the beginning of the ICH policy in 2012, goals regarding cultural diversity were connected to the conception of the policy. One of the priorities of the National Inventory of ICH was that it should reflect the cultural diversity of communities in the Netherlands. One of the principal goals of the Inventory of ICH in Flanders that has been developing since 2008, is to provide visibility for ICH and to offer support to communities that wish to safeguard their ICH. The realisation of a diverse inventory was not an explicit goal. Diversity is nevertheless also a key concept in the policy for ICH in Flanders. In the Policy for Intangible Cultural Heritage in Flanders Statement, which appeared in 2010, cultural diversity was indeed one of the goals, analogous with those of the Convention.

From the very beginning, I was involved with ICH policy in Flanders as a heritage worker. In the summer of 2008 I was asked to chair the emerging ad hoc Committee for ICH. The Operational Directives for the implementation of the 2003 Convention had recently been adopted during the second General Assembly of the Convention, and the Flemish government wanted to act promptly and take on a pioneering role internationally through the implementation of the policy at national level. A regulation for the Inventory for ICH in Flanders was swiftly drawn up. A set of basic principles was drawn from the Convention and supplemented with elements from the Flemish cultural heritage policy (incorporating quality monitoring through coaching by professional heritage organisations). Since that time I have been deeply involved with the various phases of the development of policy and practice regarding ICH in Flanders.

When a few years later, in 2012, the Netherlands engaged in policy-making for ICH, there was another phone call, this time asking if I would be interested in participating as a foreign expert on the Advisory Commission on the National Inventory of ICH in the Netherlands. The Netherlands waited a while before signing the Convention, but was now anxious to begin in earnest. On the one hand, learning from the experiences from other neighbouring countries—including Flanders—and on the other hand, establishing their own policy goals, such as striving to reflect the cultural diversity of the country.

After about a three-year period of parallel development of the ICH inventories and policy in the field, I observed a pronounced contrast between the two neighbouring regions. In 2012, in Flanders, after five years of inventory work, it was judged that the Inventory so far remained too narrow, limited to a modest number of the ‘usual suspects’, primarily rural traditions and social events and festivals. Moreover, these were already, in one way or another, acknowledged within the cultural heritage sector as folk culture. In contrast, in the Netherlands, after a similar development in 2012-2013, the influx of requests for inclusion in the Inventory was rapidly accelerating and differentiating. Both in number and type, and in the geographical distribution of requests, the growth and diversification was pronounced. The Dutch Centre for ICH could barely keep up with the number of applications. The requests came from diverse, and sometimes surprising, corners of society. The social and media attention to ICH exhibited a similar evolution of interest. This was recently explicitly voiced during a coffee break of the Advisory Committee: ... that it indeed seems
as if ICH in the Netherlands is suddenly pushed from the margins into the centre of attention, and from the niche of ‘old folk-cultural traditions’ to the horizon of a ‘contemporary super-diverse society’.

Where or when then is such a turning point to be located? To which social developments and policy initiatives might divergent evolutions regarding diversity, identification and image-forming processes be linked? By introducing a new paradigm of ICH, the objective of the UNESCO 2003 Convention was to create a transition from previous approaches that included concepts such as traditional culture, folk culture and folklore. The question is actually whether the Convention itself has been successful in this objective in its first ten years of implementation on an international scale? The answer to the question is not entirely positive. Various stakeholders, experts, NGOs and authors within the international community are placing terse question marks and exclamation marks beside the development of the Convention in relation to cultural diversity in the world today. In this article, we hope to explore how this came about, which keys are lacking or misused, and which developmental paths can be further cultivated.

In order to consider a multi-faceted and complex theme such as fostering ICH and diversity, we wish to relate it to the evolution of societies. We shall cross-reference various disciplines such as political, sociological and heritage studies, and make links to UNESCO texts. We shall reflect on literature from home and abroad. At the end of this essay, we anticipate possible perspectives for the further development of policy and praxis regarding ICH in relation to cultural diversity.

Globalisation: from a ‘cultural shift’ to a movement for sustainability

A negative attitude to globalisation is noticeable in the text of the UNESCO 2003 Convention and the accompanying Operational Directives. Globalisation is viewed as one of the most important threats to safeguarding ICH. It is associated with degeneration, a threatening homogenisation, sometimes referred to in a pejorative sense as ‘McDonaldisation’. However, at the same time, globalisation is presented as offering the opportunity to experience the diversity of cultures in all their richness.

The negative attitude to globalisation is associated with developments in the last quarter of the 20th century. Within a few years, a number of events and developments occurred on the world stage which could all, to a certain extent, be considered as aspects of globalisation. In fact it was an interaction of disparate evolutions and tendencies, which in a variety of ways interfered with and/or mutually strengthened each other. Consider the fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War, the migrations that followed, the rise of a global free-market economy, the emergence and acceleration of the Internet and other new communication technologies, increased mobility, and so forth.

Globalisation confronts us with a continuously changing interpretation of the reality around us. Existing or previous polarities, such as poor versus rich, north versus south, east versus west, and other important social divisions could be expected to be possibly abridged due to growing global knowledge, contacts and communication. However, paradoxically enough, the tendency towards polarisation seems at least as great, or even greater, and more visible than before. Consider the global gap in income and the discourse in the 1990s about the so-called ‘clash of civilisations’.

During this period, meanwhile, there was a growing group of people who were increasingly vocal about the need for social reform. It is in this globalising context, with all its tensions and accompanying upheaval, that culture gradually became positioned as a new geo-strategic instrument. While these diverse processes of globalisation were occurring, politics and policy did not evolve at a proportional rate in terms of speed and understanding, either internationally or trans-nationally. As such, a vacuum emerged in the political global organisation, in which culture could and did begin to become more and more reified, thus becoming extremely ideological.

This so called ‘cultural shift’ and the rise of culture-based logistics are found in a number of tendencies around us. In the region where I live, for example, we can think about the rise of the extreme right (political parties such as Vlaams Blok in Flanders, the movement around Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, Front National in France, etc.), which stand for ‘own people and culture’ and develop a hateful discourse against other ‘cultures’ (for example, Islamophobia) - and this within the context of increasing
migration and growing diversity. However, the cultural shift is just as apparent in general policy and social developments with a progressive, ideological character. Consider the rising range of ideas about multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s, or the objectives of the UNESCO 2003 Convention. Where cultural decline becomes the prevailing experience, culture ranks high in the political stakes.

It is important to note that within the general trend of ‘culturalisation’, very different processes are at play. Since the 1980s, moreover, these trends have persisted at a growing rate. There are cultural groups that therefore consciously try to remain outside of modern developments. They invoke cultural arguments and appeal for ‘cultural particularity’ and ‘tradition’ to bring about cultural autonomy or cultural exception. Other cultural groups become politically or socio-economically marginalised and ‘turn inwards’. Furthermore, there are cultural groups that explicitly use culture to further political convictions or ends. Finally, there are also cultural groups who turn culture into an instrument to protect their own national markets. It is clear that all of these groups have differing incentives, motivations and backgrounds, which also implies that they might yield equally diverse ideas, policies and frameworks for action in cultural matters. Such an analysis, however, seems not to have been made—or has perhaps been insufficiently recognised—in the context of the 2003 Convention.

In developing the Convention, little attention was given to the different frames that culture takes in the public domain: the market frame where culture is a consumer product; the domestic space where people learn about their own culture; or somewhat more broadly, the leisure time where informal cultural learning with peers takes place; the civil structure in which culture, seen as a ‘public good’, becomes the subject of policy and political choices and discussion. There was no consideration of these various frames or spaces of culture in the discussions that led to the Convention, so some of them remained simply out of the picture. This also means that they are unaffected by targeted policies and continue to thrive in an unchecked manner (those with, for example, commercial or political motives). In this way, the Convention only offers a shaky basis for sustainable development, yet nonetheless that is an explicit aspiration formulated in the preamble.

In the debates of recent decades, moreover, sustainability and ICH were mostly reduced to separate ‘aspects’, and sustainability in a holistic sense was stifled. Culture (and thus ICH) then becomes impossible to segregate, unless from purely theoretical or policy-related viewpoints. Only recently, a shift or development came to the fore in the wake of the world-wide movement on the UN Agenda for 2030 and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), which were adopted at the end of 2015. Shortly thereafter the UNESCO 2003 Convention added a new chapter, ‘Safeguarding ICH and sustainable development at the national level’ to the Operational Directives, creating a link to the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which proclaims itself to be universal, integrated and transformative in its objectives. The discussions that led to the approval of this new chapter during the General Assembly in 2016 were memorable. Fortunately, there is now the potential to bring in a new chapter regarding sustainable development and ICH. In the near future we shall see whether this will indeed happen.

A negative attitude towards globalisation has few benefits. The challenge appears to be in considering how we can develop meaningful and sustainable evolutions in globalisation for and with ICH. In order to consider this further, we shall first highlight a series of concepts and dimensions that come into the picture when we focus on ICH and diversity.

From cultural essentialism to cultural hybridity and super-diversity

In contrast to the idea that globalisation will lead to cultural homogenisation and the disappearance of diverse cultural practices, we wish to focus on the ability of globalisation to bring about an emergent cultural hybridisation. In the recent volume of Anthropological Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage, the challenges of globalisation and hybridity are openly named as one of the core questions in the ICH sector. Many people think that such a hybridisation will inevitably lead to a loss of local traditions. For example, as the English historian, Peter Burke, formulates in his book on Cultural Hybridity: ‘the price of hybridisation, especially the unusually rapid hybridisation that is characteristic of our time, also includes the loss of regional traditions and of local roots.’ However, according to Burke you can also characterise hybridisation as a process of de-contextualising
followed by a re-contextualising within a new context. Hybridity does not need to be compared with cultural dilution or homogeny because it can just as well be seen as a sign of the evolving dynamics of creativity in plural societies. We encounter a similar vision with UNESCO itself in the context of the tenth anniversary of the Universal Declaration regarding cultural diversity. This aligns with more recent studies and concepts about ‘super-diversity’ which has emerged as a new paradigm in recent years.

In the 2003 Convention, cultural diversity appears to be largely understood from another angle. The 20th century idealism about multiculturalism is pervasive. Multiculturalism emphasises the equality of various cultural groups or communities within a determined, delineated administrative domain, and stands for a positive valuation of that cultural diversity. Behind this lies a political philosophy in which the recognition of minority cultural groups is central. From a scientific point of view, but also politically and from within society itself, the so-called ‘failure of the multicultural society’ and multiculturalism as a paradigm have been heavily criticised in recent years. Just as we have made a distinction above between various types of ‘culturisation’ and cultural appeal, it is also necessary to indicate different variants of multiculturalism. In the first place, there is the ‘celebration’of multiculturalism, whereby cultural diversity is ‘celebrated’ as enriching society. Secondly there is ‘tolerant’ multiculturalism that takes into account the insight that differences can lead to conflict and seeks to formulate an answer from the position of mutual tolerance. Thirdly there is ‘recognition’ multiculturalism in which the question of simply recognising culturally diverse groups comes into play.

The Canadian political philosopher, Will Kymlicka—known for his work and pleas for multiculturalism—also suggests that the valuable dimensions that come from multicultural thinking do not need to be discarded out of hand. Multiculturalism can be understood as a part of the human rights’ revolution since World War II, a fight for decolonisation, against racial segregation and discrimination and consequently for multiculturalism and rights for minority groups. In addition, people strive for forms of social change that allow for cultural recognition, economic redistribution and political participation. In this sense, there can be a present day interpretation of multiculturalism, provided that a number of adjustments are made that can offer answers to the challenges of the super-diverse 21st century society. We are then talking about a ‘multiculturalism mark 2’, as described by Dirk Geldof in his work on super-diversity. The question seems no longer to be whether we want to live in a diverse society, but rather how we wish, and are able, to live together in super-diversity.

Super-diversity, however, presents a new paradigm for thinking about diversity. Steve Vertovec, the initiator of the concept, stated in his study on London in 2007 that an enormous diversification lurks within diversity. The complexity of diversity, rapid changes and increased mobility ensure that the paradigm of the multicultural society falls short in understanding the real social and cultural diversity of modern societies. Diversity, in a manner of speaking, has become much more diverse. Super-diversity offers a multi-dimensional view of diversity. The concept places at the centre the diverse influences that come together in the lives of people and that determine their lives. Diversity then becomes seen as a polyvalent dimension of social life, which not only encompasses cultural differences, but likewise gender, religious, educational and other differences.

Super-diversity has extensive implications for identity formation and experiencing identity. It makes room for a complex concept of diversity. People not only have layered identities, their identities also change according to the context in which they find themselves. Labels that used to serve as identification have today become too reductionist or meaningless. Complex, multi-faceted, ambivalent identity processes are being formed. As such, we are no longer dealing with ‘fragmented’ identities. Paradoxically, such concepts stem from the idea of a singular element, namely a ‘complete’ subject of modernity that would have lost its distinctive markers of identity, straddles two cultures, has blurred moral standards and so forth.

In an essentialist approach, culture is seen as an unchanging and identity-determining, dominant entity. One of the problems with multiculturalism was that people threatened to ‘essentialise’ cultural differences with it. Super-diversity, by contrast, allows for a dynamic view of culture and diversity. Thinking within super-diversity is far away from reducing or glorifying a static image of folkloric culture.

In the 2003 Convention we can still recognise a train of thought similar to 20th century multiculturalism. The Convention hobbles along after the cultural reality or empiricism of our current, super-diverse society. ICH today is
experienced through hybrid and trans-national (in addition: to regional and local) social contexts in which we encounter a high number of multi-faceted cultural identities, international ideas about policy for ICH depart from an antiquated multicultural vision with a number of in-built competing and unsolved tensions.

From communities to ICH communities and networks of practice

An important concept in the Convention is that of ‘community’. There has been much written and much disagreement about what exactly constitute ‘ICH communities’. From the analysis above on culturalising and essentialism, it is already clear how thinking about ‘communities’ can have perverse or undesired side effects. The concept of community is associated with fixed, delineated, homogenous groups of people who share something. There may well be a resonant dynamic in the definition of ICH in the Convention. However, the idea of communities is counterproductive here. It is sensible to go in search of alternatives for conceptualising communities in relation to ICH. We will briefly address this issue here.

Hester Dibbits, for example, suggests speaking of networks, rather than societies, communities, or cultural circuits, to break through discourse about identities. An essentialist view towards groups is no longer of this time, because people rather live in networks than in traditionally defined communities. This is in line with the meaning that Roberto Esposito gives in an etymological analysis of the word ‘community’ as the sharing of a burden or task; the bringing together and bonding of people seems to lie primarily in the communal actions of people; doing things together and being available for designing things together. Also, the concept of ‘hybridity’ offers ways of opening up the fixed and delineated character of the concept of community.

I wish to add here that conceptualising communities as communities of practice, in the sense that Etienne Wenger provides—and perhaps also by extension as networks of practice—could signal a step forward. Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis. Concepts like ‘community of practice’ and ‘networks of practice’ seem more compatible with the notion of dynamic heritage, and they are also compatible with the current super-diverse and trans-national network society. Communities of practice can take on various forms, in short-term to long-lasting configurations. They can originate at one place or within one institution, as well as in different places, possibly even in different areas of the world. The ‘experts’—in this case the ICH practitioners—within a community of practice accumulate a continuously evolving (or ‘mutating’ after the phraseology used in the opening quotation) practical experience. Such a concept in the sense of ‘community of ICH practice’ aligns closely with the concept of heritage community as introduced within the Faro Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (2005) and that has since been developed into policy texts for heritage within Flanders.
As a provisional conclusion, the notion of community should further be scrutinised and developed in the context of the 2003 Convention: there is a need for a more dynamic concept that better encompasses the practice-orientated dimension of ICH.

Thinking about ICH in times of super-diversity

A great deal of time and attention has gone to the various lists, and primarily to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (RL). Despite repeated critical debates and recommendations to develop more attention and energy, and submit nominations in ‘the spirit of the Convention’ for other instruments of the Convention such as Best Safeguarding Practices, international assistance and capacity building, in practice we do not see a lot of change. The Representative List moulds the image that ICH has acquired internationally - and a lot can be deduced and learned from it. Richard Kurin suggests that: ‘... intangible cultural heritage by definition is something used for community self-definition.’ Reflected in the Representative List we see that in an international context these processes of self-definition produce well-determined selections of ‘ICH elements’ that are being promoted as ‘items’. These are easily recognisable elements of heritage that support the self-image of one’s own group, often socially desirable and broadly supported traditional customs and festivals from nation states, or other specific traditions from minority cultural groups.

This selection of elements not only impacts on the general image people have of ICH. It also affects the formation of present-day and future heritage practices. Thus, the Convention has a fossilising effect. This effect originates from the recognition given to the nomination files. It does not happen opportunistically, or at least not from a collective expediency. On the contrary even, this effect seems to come about rather despite the explicit and formal mentions of the importance of cultural diversity or of the dynamic character of ICH in the Convention. The consequence is then that the Convention, viewed on a meta-level, does not fulfil its own objective of supporting cultural diversity in the world, but quite conversely seems to effect processes of cultural demarcation, impoverishment and ossification. The determining of these rather paradoxical and perverse effects of the Convention workings is found among its supporters, as well as among its critics. These effects, moreover, increase under the influence of the constantly dwindling number of nominations that may be considered in the context of the Convention. What results in turn is that States’ Parties give priority to submitting a file with a desired appeal (for the state) and with a high probability of being approved. The influence of various pre-selection mechanisms, of the diplomatic power play and unstated hierarchies, and of the number of consultants, rampantly increases in unseen ways. This is at the cost of an open mind, and it limits the chances for possible alternative, bottom-up proposals or dynamics that could bring to the fore a diversity of active ICH-practising communities.

Meanwhile, there are many ideas expressed about the interaction and approaches to strengthen ICH and to further translate ‘the spirit of the Convention’ to times of super-diversity. Lourdes Arizpe suggests introducing a time dimension, in order to preserve the dynamic character of ICH: ‘... time must be reinstated into the concept of these practices by conceptualizing them as ‘a moment in time’ in a continuous flow of meaning and interaction.’ She further says that the proper scale and plurality of living cultural practices must be further explored. ICH practices are not unique; they are singular performances within the webs of plurality. For years now there have been recurring discussions regarding the formation of lists. The question of bringing together related or similar elements on the List bumps up against invisible walls and territorial demarcations from nation states and ICH communities, under the motto of cultural autonomy and the right to be different. Rather than further focusing on ‘difference’ which the Convention has thus far supported, thereby encouraging competition and polarisation, opportunities become obvious when we focus on ‘connecting’, by which we can pay attention to intersections with other ICH practices in other places and in other contexts. In this manner we can implement various possible forms of international collaboration, strengthen cultural networks and connections, look for points of intersection and stimulate learning from ICH practices.

Opening up the domains of ICH needs to be encouraged globally. Numerous (non-western) products and intangible cultural phenomena appear to be overlooked in the current approach to heritage, or are merely taken into consideration in a truncated form. This echoes the ‘authorised heritage discourse’. In order to make it more concrete, we can take as an example how certain practices in our regions, which
technically speaking would be considered perfect examples of ICH, despite not immediately being recognised as ICH per se, including ballet, for example, or opera, or jazz, or summer music festivals or maybe even graffiti. Similar dance forms, musical genres or annual, large festive gatherings would be identified as ICH if they came from Africa or the Orient. This applies to many other European elements, perhaps because they appear too ‘normal’ or too ‘modern’.

In a super-diverse context, ways of categorising ICH that are as open as possible seem to be at stake. There is more to ICH than ethnic-cultural diversity. It also has to do with developing ideas and categories that can encompass the ambivalence, multi-dimensionality, hybridity and dynamics of contemporary cultural practices with roots in old and new traditions and transmitted customs. The formula of inter alia was built into the Convention at the outset and could easily be mobilised to this end.

When the horizons of care for ICH are widened to contribute to sustainable forms of synergy with our trans-nationally connected world, in balance with the different pillars of sustainable development and with an eye on the importance of the cultural processes of belonging, providing meaning, connecting and identification for the wellbeing of humanity, then the Representative List and inventories will need to look very different. They will need to provide a much better answer to recording the super-diverse, hybrid, ambivalent, rapidly changing and multi-dimensional cultural practices and experiences with which people today engage. Such a super-diverse image can only come about if we begin to construct it ourselves. It will not happen on its own. It must be made, adjusted and constructed, file-by-file, recognition by recognition. Each policy for ICH, at any level (local, national, trans-national, international) must turn proactive policy into practice, to bring different and diverse forms of ICH into view, taking the transition forward.

Beyond the nation state and towards a global ethic

A subsequent dimension that is of importance when reflecting upon ICH and diversity is governance. The UNESCO Convention is an international policy instrument—the name speaks for itself—in which nation states work together. However, it is characteristic of developments in the 21st century that the nation state has lost strength and relevance as a level of governance. With the rise of trans-national connections, networks, identities and practices, the effectiveness of the national policy level—and thus also its credibility and validation—has declined. We are world citizens living in a time of trans-nationalism. The relevance of the local and supra-national levels thus becomes more important.

At the local level, it is important for people to give shape to a diverse society on a manageable scale, while at the international level, it is important to foresee sustainable solutions for shared challenges that we will only be able to address on a global scale. In the 2003 Convention, it is indeed the nation states themselves that realise the internationally organised mechanisms (such as the Representative List) for ICH and thereby often have a national interest in mind. It would be better if the initiatives came from (locally or networked) citizen initiatives or from mixed stakeholder groups for ICH practices, and when possible they should be promoted on a trans-national level. This would probably lead to very different realisations of the praxis of the Convention.

At the beginning of the Convention there is a short, general reference to Human Rights: Referring to existing international human rights instruments, in particular to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights of 1948, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966. However, these ethical references have not been defined in relation to the specific questions and challenges that come to the fore when safeguarding ICH. Indeed, it is only very recently (2015-2016) that a set of 12 ethical principles was established. It was not a simple exercise to reach a consensus about what such an ethical code or principles should include.

When reflecting upon ICH and diversity within a globalising world, it is important to see how we live in a world of increasing and global ‘mutual dependency’ or interdependency. Such a global perspective of an intertwined and even interdependent life is completely lacking in the Convention. This interdependency should be a primary value, lest there be an intensification of mutual strife. On that level of interdependency, diverse possible principles and themes come to mind: the principles of Human Rights, ‘enlightenment’ principles of freedom, equality and solidarity, and as we discussed above, the steadily increasing number of appeals to recognise the
principles of sustainable development, and the search for a balance between the social, economic and ecological dimensions. In recent times more attention also appears to have been given to animal rights.  

At a second level, the interaction with ICH comes into the picture. Paradoxically, the Convention seems to be at odds and, in practice, even in conflict with the aforementioned primary values. Through its objectives and focus on the safeguarding of ICH ‘elements’ the Convention, to a certain degree, isolates and essentialises these elements as ‘items’ and cuts them off from interdependency and the dialogical and dynamic processes of cultural interaction. But the question actually is whether the goal of the Convention should be the safeguarding of individual ICH elements. Should enhancing cultural heritage processes, empowering them in their relation to the other interacting powers and dynamics (such as the economy, globalisation, and migration) not be a primary, or at least an important, objective of the Convention?  

Therefore, we need a continuous process of identification with the previously named ‘interdependency’ and basic principles regarding freedom, equality and solidarity. We find such a vision of active pluralism (in which the ‘democratic pluralism’ as a global, ethical vision has priority over all forms of ‘cultural pluralism’) with an increasing number of —albeit usually western— authors. It is also related to the European idea of ‘unity in diversity’ in which the right to cultural diversity and identity is inextricably bound up with the equality of cultures. Arizpe adds that this concept also needs to include the equality of (cultural) vulnerability and opportunity. This explains why sometimes policy interventions or corrections (for example, stemming from an ICH policy) are justified: they make sure that we can talk about ‘equal vulnerability and equal opportunity’. Not every cultural practice or tradition, not every ICH practising community has equal power, size, basis or a dynamic from which it can meet the many contemporary challenges.  

We can take this yet another step further. A number of international authors express the belief that simple ‘respect’ for the first level of human rights, enlightenment and sustainability principles is not enough. According to them, it does not suffice to simply ‘tolerate’ the second level of cultural diversity and thus also ICH. In addition to a global ethical framework or foundation with necessary conditions (‘thou shalt / shalt not’), there is also an important need for a shared image of the future that contains a positive dimension: ‘we want / we dream’. In his Geschiedenis van de vooruitgang, Rutger Bregman examines which major lessons he can extract at a particular point in time from three millennia of world empires and their approaches to tolerance and intolerance. He arrives at the conclusion that indifference (that is tolerance) can indeed make nations great, but to keep them together and for them to make progress together, more is necessary: namely an inclusive story of citizenship. Progress is not only built on the basis of appropriate institutions that are open for creative destruction and innovation, but is likewise built on a shared idealism of an image of the future. Arizpe promotes such an ideal with ‘conviviality’: Conviviality is an attainable ideal. Yet we must turn this into a principle that requires purposeful action, in the same way that sustainability does. Define it as the ability to create convivial relations—convivo-ability—a principle of development for a global society inhabiting a finite planet. This brings us to the following theme: what can the role of the Convention be in presenting a shared image of the future (objectives) and of the way towards the realisation of the shared dream or ideal (implementation).  

**On cultural mediators and ICH as a ‘common’**

UNESCO and the 2003 Convention can be considered as a ‘contact zone’ in which many peoples and cultures with different backgrounds come together, and by which they can see their (hybrid and fluid) cultural identities supported in a rapidly changing world as a sort of ‘platform in the world’ from which one can also depart. UNESCO can then be a forum that attempts to preserve such platforms in a non-essentialist form.

Culture and cultural policy were conceptualised in the second half of the twentieth century as ‘sites of contestation’. Consider ‘dominant cultural expressions’ versus forms of ‘counter-culture’; for example, ‘mainstream’ culture and ‘high’ culture versus forms of folk culture—such as rituals of reversal or so-called ‘subversive’ subculture (various types of niche or youth culture and rather clichéd examples like punk, hip-hop, graffiti, etc.). The idea that culture could also be a site of negotiation also developed—which can be in line with the Convention as building on consensus building. Currently, the idea is emerging that culture is a site of arbitration. In such ranges of thought about active pluralism is also the idea of ‘agony’, in which social context is not so much to be located.
in finding a consensus among people, but more so in the will towards ‘dis-sensus’, the will of people—in a peaceable but active manner—to engage in debate with each other.66 David Held sketches out such an autonomous democratic model that stimulates and organises a plurality of singular voices and active citizenship. Such a multi-voiced minority democracy has as a condition that the autonomous economic, social and cultural development of the full array of citizens and minorities is permanently stimulated and facilitated.67 Additionally, policy-related corrections are implemented in order to transform social inequalities into equal vulnerabilities and opportunities for all. This implies, moreover, not only corrections for the empowerment of the weaker in the debate/society, but equally, the handling of the models and systems of governance with which we organise and guide our society. Only in this way—in a two-way process of democratisation (state structures and civil society)—can truly equal contexts be developed for all in order to enable them to participate in the democratic debate that forms our society.68

It is interesting to address the approach of ‘intangible heritage as commons’.69 A ‘common’ is maintained by the continuous interplay of critique and conflict between government and opposition(s). Likewise, a ‘community’ and its ‘culture’ express coherence through their mutually-felt tensions, disputes and discussions. While consensus leads to a homogenisation and thus to a relative stagnation of cultural practices, it is precisely the tensions between tastes, styles, subcultures, political preferences, religious convictions and social and ethnic groups that preserve the ‘common’, as is seen with the dynamic development of ICH practices as ‘commons’.

The possible parallels with a UNESCO context and the work of the 2003 Convention for ICH are not hard to find. This is a plea to see and implement the UNESCO framework of the 2003 Convention as a democratic instrument of active pluralism and social arbitration, a context that makes dis-sensus and agony / strife possible in and amongst the divergent visions and approaches to interaction with ICH practices. However, in line with what we wrote above, each of these visions needs to comply with a prior global-ethical framework. It is an approach that makes difference and discussion possible, though it also requires processes of mutual listening, exchange and learning. The working of the Convention then creates a space in which the exchange of ideas can be carried out trans-nationally. In essence, this debate deals with the question of how there can be interaction with ICH practices. On a second level, an ICH policy (national as well as international) also offers a contact zone between the diversity in and of ICH practices (as commons) in themselves.
Such a vision of culture as a ‘site of arbitration’, and the active pluralism of a minority democracy which creates an environment in which minorities have a place in the debate, and thereby ensures a two-way (state/civil society) empowerment, aligns very well with the content of the 2003 Convention. UNESCO wishes ultimately to empower all the ICH expressions of individuals, groups and communities, however small-scale or large they might be. In an interdependent vision, the perspectives of the ICH elements themselves are shifted toward the reflexive and dialogical processes amongst all of the diverse voices, groups, visions, practice communities and many others involved in a socially embedded cultural practice. The Convention could then no longer continue working in an apparently isolated or isolating ‘domain of culture’, designating elements as items, but would discuss and deal with an interconnected global context, where the shared focus would be to ensure sustainability. Sustainable development calls for a holistic approach and then everything becomes ‘political’; the political—in the sense of ‘that which has to do with the organisation of the power and approach to different needs in society’—precedes and is present within every possible cultural policy. This is a vision which engenders responsibility, and by which the cultural dimension is involved just as much as any other (economic, social or ecological) dimension inherent in these dynamics, processes and debates.

Naturally such a holistic approach cannot depart from the objective or expectation that culture ‘can right the wrongs of the world’. That would be an unrealistic or even contentious expectation as we remember how in a ‘cultural shift’ culture becomes precisely the angle through which to approach social questions—with the risks of ‘essentialising’ and polarisation that come along with that. Meanwhile other—mostly ‘leftist’—visions approach the same social challenges from a socio-economic angle and then tend to pass over the cultural dimension either too lightly or too quickly. However, shouldn’t this be framed as a tension between mutually interacting realities? Or, as Dirk Geldof writes:

The ‘politics of redistribution’ aims to achieve a maximum of socio-economic justice. To make this possible, policy is based on the need to tackle structural inequality as the central issue ... a policy of recognition seeks to positively endorse undervalued differences between groups via a process of cultural-symbolic change, based on a positive appreciation of cultural diversity. In this way, the politics of recognition [such as the current UNESCO ICH policy] is really a kind of politics of identity, since it involves the reassessment and revaluation of the cultural identity of groups that do not belong to the majority culture. In other words, differences between groups are (partially) confirmed and accepted ... at the same time, we must also realize that there are limits to recognition ... this recognition still takes place within the limits set by society, preferably based on a clear human rights perspective. Consequently there are boundaries to recognition, but these boundaries are variable and must be discussible in a world of super-diversity. In other words, we must see the recognition of identity and culture as something changeable, and something that is the result of a continual process of dialogue. It is not simply the one-sided recognition of a fixed identity by the majority culture.

The international instruments are precisely the ones UNESCO developed (the 2003 Convention among them) to offer possible contexts in which to work out such tensions. However, as I have previously elaborated, this calls for important shifts in the Convention’s practices and how they are developed and worked out, analogue with what David Held describes for an autonomous democratic model, or, for the concept of co-production.

In addition to the role and responsibility of governments in developing such multi-perspective (culture / heritage) policies, there is also an important role for many other (heritage) actors: NGO’s, experts, researchers and the media, for example. Here the role of the mediator, or ICH ‘broker’ comes into play.

As mediators they can develop processes and instruments so that they can provide citizens, peoples, groups ... with incentives and offer them help in formulating arguments. Culture as a site of arbitration, after all, begins with a constructivist vision: a perspective that sees ‘dispositions’ or deeply-rooted customs anchored in human acts, which are (temporarily) transformable.

People also interpret their environment within certain contexts or frames that dictate how they should behave in this or that context. By providing people with ‘keys’, these dispositions can be transformed. Such a process of ‘keying’ can then, for example, reduce complexity as well as increase it.
Moreover, ICH can ‘mediate’ such processes of keying. ICH as a sort of action and interpretation framework can alter our image of the present and question or even change it. In our society, however, discussion fades into the background or is limited by setting something apart ‘because it is cultural heritage’. It is precisely this societal discussion that is interesting and is at the core of democracy, but it is also the heart of every living cultural practice that develops within society. In the approaches dealt with here from an active pluralism and a minority democratic angle, we can bring the ‘dismeasure’ (= minority) to the fore, rather than relying on majority democracy that is tantamount to voting. Mediators or heritage brokers help to create spaces for the minority and living cultural practices ‘in dialogue’.

Research is likewise another form of keying. It is of primary relevance then to point out that experts have contributed extensively to the development of the Convention and its concepts, and that they thus have constructed the ‘frames’ and keys. The experts—mainly social scientists who are active within the ‘academic enterprise’—are, however, equally embedded within their own contexts. The German sociologists, Ulrich and Elisabeth Beck, indicate just how much social scientists often depart from ‘methodological nationalism’ for their research and in their analyses, wherein nationality, country borders, economic, social and cultural borders converge, and within which their own academic work environments are often organised. These analyses have just as much a need for adaptation to the empirical, super-diverse reality of the 21st century through managing a cosmopolitan view and by means of a proactive and responsible appeal to the role of experts, researchers and anthropologists. In stark contrast to the majority of researchers who, in the name of critical distance and scientific neutrality—not infrequently under the rubric ‘Critical Heritage Studies’—refrain from all involvement in social or policy-oriented development, we also see how a number of people/researchers/experts have collaborated in and around the formation and development of the Convention with a constructivist application of their personal knowledge and abilities. Thus people like Richard Kurin, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Kristin Kuutma, Lourdes Arizpe, Antonio Arantes, Janet Blake, Chérif Khaznadar and Marc Jacobs have played an unmistakeable role in the development of the Convention. Or, consider Frank Proschan, recently retired, who as the dyed-in-the-wool American anthropologist and folklorist went to work right in the heart of the Convention in the ICH section of the UNESCO Secretariat.

Conclusion: ‘keys’ for a sustainable policy for ICH: multiplicity, connectivity, transformation.

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) stresses the importance of ICH as a source of cultural diversity and as a guarantee for sustainable development. Starting with the valuation of cultural diversity and the role of ICH, ‘heritage lists’ were consequently set up, similar to those from other UNESCO conventions for heritage, with the World Heritage List of the 1972 Convention being the most famous one. ‘ICH elements’ with their ‘communities’ are portrayed on lists as ‘items’. The processes surrounding the making of these international lists, which have become the billboard for ICH and designate cultural diversity as a cornerstone, have as a combined side-effect a pronounced emphasis on ‘difference’ that tends to create ossification, cultural essentialism and polarisation. This contrasts with the Convention’s own definition of ICH and with the challenge it poses of stimulating dynamic living cultural heritage practices that focus on mutual respect and on sustainable development. Today, the practice of the Convention appears not to correspond or offer answers to these challenges. Moreover, the reality and the expectations of the future of rapidly evolving, globalising and super-diverse societies confront us with a wide spectrum of contexts, influences and changes in which cultural practices evolve, become hybrid and diversify. Instead of focusing on difference, the interaction with living cultural heritage practices in the super-diverse world of today and tomorrow should then also be able to be the focus of the Convention. This indeed suggests a need for a shifting of perspective and approach in every ICH policy, at every level, whether locally, nationally, internationally or trans-nationally.

This is then primarily a plea to approach the living culture of ICH as a series of contextual solutions that people from all around the world have formed over time in response to their social environments. In a global world where cultural practices and groups are interacting more than ever before, there are also more possible solutions than ever before, as the many elements can be collated and combined in various ways. We no longer see ICH as protecting the past inheritance of one group, but see it as a potential reservoir of human knowledge and know-how on which we can draw for sustainable development - and thus progress - for all.
With such an approach, the protecting, isolating and preservation-focused perspective shifts towards an open, transformative and development-oriented one. Such a development-oriented perspective brings means of safeguarding—from modernising, to cross-pollinating and intercultural learning and sharing—to the fore. By thinking in terms of connectivity, multiplicity and transformation in the 21st century, we can further realise the value of ICH as a source of cultural diversity and as a guarantee for sustainable development in changing times. Indeed, there is an inherent tension between the heritage approach and the future-orientated concept of safeguarding in a sustainable way. Approaching ICH as dynamic living culture and safeguarding these practices with an eye to the future, means a continuous mutation of ‘previous’ ICH into evolving and transforming cultural practices—which often ‘dissolve’ and replace the earlier forms of expression of that particular ICH. This also means that, above all, a super-diversity of living cultural practices is cultivated, which appears to contradict current experience and practice as well as the image we have of ICH - an image of isolated heritage items that need a form of protection or promotion, usually in the context of identity politics of ethnic cultural minorities, of cultural exceptions or peculiarities (consider socially isolated, ‘exceptional’ or urgently disappearing practices) and for the remainder, primarily from broadly exercised (often national or multinational) and socially desirable events, festivals and rituals. However, coupling a demarcating and protecting reflex to a heritage approach for ICH is disastrous for its sustainable development. ‘We don’t want to be prisoners of a static culture!’ because every ‘border drawn in blood’ around cultures protects from the outside but becomes a prison on the inside; protectionism may lead to infertility.

Was it then a good idea to bring about an ICH policy from a heritage perspective, given the firmly established connotations of heritage discourse - protecting, authenticity, unicity and so forth? Wouldn’t it have been better to frame living culture, with its roots in the past, from the point of view of another policy discourse altogether? Or, would it be better if we continue to strive for total decolonisation, and continue to fight over the custodianship of ICH in order to free it up and let it evolve separately, alongside the dominant heritage discourse that takes material culture and logics, a western historical perspective and its presumed superiority, as a starting point?

Yet, most surprisingly, within international fora such as UNESCO, it is the southern regions that are now situated in a sort of overhaul movement—that strive the hardest for canonical forms of recognition on lists and the like. Reality is complex, full of paradoxes and ambivalences. It is not uncommon for experts, NGO’s, researchers and a handful of bold policy representatives, as ICH brokers, to try to engage in debate with the current discourses and imaging and add reflexivity and keying to these debates. Rodney Harrison writes about ... the potential to reorganise relationships between experts, politicians, bureaucrats and laypersons, which rather than suppressing conflicts, make use of the overflows and controversies that emerge as a result of conflict and uncertainties over heritage in productive and innovative ways.

Our journey is well underway.

In this essay I have sought to indicate where bottlenecks, hindrances, obstacles and pitfalls lie within the existing policy practices, but also which keys and opportunities there are in order to take us further. It is not so much the case that we need to cast overboard what—‘for better or for worse’—has been built up. Perhaps the primary challenge and the task that lies before us now is to ensure that what is now the status quo will mutate into practices that better answer the challenges of our times, and those of the future that lies before us. This task calls for a shift or mutation on various levels. And that shift is doable.
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ENDNOTES

3 Also Finland in its recent ICH policy development has built diversity into its approach; read more, available from: http://www.nba.fi/fi/File/2585/nationalplan.pdf [Accessed 23 November 2016]
6 Ibid, pp. 5–6.
8 The first Cultural-heritage Decree also began in this period (2008) in Flanders. From 1998 there was a separate Decree on Folk Culture.
13 See, inter alia, the passage in the preamble of the Convention - Recognizing that the processes of globalization and social transformation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular owing to a lack of resources for safeguarding such heritage.
15 See also, Arizpe, op cit, p. 8.
16 Ibid, p. 70.
18 Read more at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org [Accessed 23 November 2016]
Superdiversity


23 Ibid, p. 93.

24 Ibid.


31 Geldof, op cit, pp. 148-151.


33 See such authors as Richard Kurin, Laurajane Smith, Chiara Bortolotto, and others.


41 The knowledge of experts is an accumulation of experience that remains a dynamic part of – a kind of ‘residue’ of their actions, thinking, and conversations their ongoing experience. Wenger, op cit., p. 9.


45 Dibbits, De ontwikkeling, op cit. p. 75.

46 The ceiling for the annual number of nomination files that the Convention takes into consideration has systematically declined since the beginning of the Convention’s workings. This is due to, among other things, the administrative burden for the Convention Secretariat versus the shrinking UNESCO budgets in recent years.
An important dimension lacking for the consideration of ICH and communities is the accompanying dimension of time. Lourdes Arizpe states that it is necessary to understand ICH practices and communities ‘in time’: *In a sense ... a living cultural practice is a ‘moment of being’ of a community.* Arizpe, op cit., p. 96.

Ibid. p. 6.


A shift from the existing policy instruments is recommended; with a changing and opening up of the Representative List and (national) inventories in their current form to the idea of ‘one or more broad and open’ ‘wiki’ formulas that make ICH practices visible in their full diversity, multiplicity and mutability; where ICH practices are brought into the picture by people, ICH practice communities and networks such as they are, experience and evolve from their context and time period. It is then up to policy to facilitate that as well as possible into a framework where each of these people and groups can equally arrive at visibility, multiple voices and meeting. In relation to this, see also: Arizpe, op cit., p. 98.

As a buffer for a (multi-)national nomination, the formula of ‘prior and informed consent’ was already built into the formula. It means that the groups, communities or individuals involved with the ICH elements/practices always need to give their consent. This, however, still does not offer a guarantee or enforcement of realising true, bottom-up developed and driven, participative or cooperative initiatives and propositions.

Similarly, State Parties might also form hybrid forums for the drawing up of tentative lists, and UNESCO might involve interested groups directly in their own decision making processes regarding nominations... in Harrison, R., 2013, *Heritage. Critical Approaches*, Abingdon and New York, p. 225


See also the speech of the European Commissioner, Androulla Vassiliou, on 28 February 2014, entitled Cultural Diversity, Global Politics and the Role of Europe, in which she stated, *inter alia:* This is the image that the EU aims to project also on the global scene. The image of a union of diverse countries and people who believe in the power of living and working together in the name of the values that they share and uphold: human dignity, social inclusion, solidarity, tolerance, freedom of expression, respect for human rights and diversity, and dialogue among cultures. Available from: [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-165_en.htm?locale=en](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-14-165_en.htm?locale=en) [Accessed 24 November 2016]

Arizpe, op cit., p. 162.


Arizpe, op cit., pp. 9 and 86.

It is interesting to see that from such a shift or mutation towards a holistic idea of sustainability and a vision of interdependency and connectivity (where culture indissolubly participates) we can also cite the connection with various other international instruments in a policy-minded way: the United Nations Development Programme, the other cultural UNESCO conventions of course, and so forth. From the idea of creating opportunities for new heritage developments in answer to our diversifying and globalising
society, for example, the UNESCO Convention is part of protecting and promoting the diversity of cultural expressions, being an instrument to nurture cultural policy and empowerment and getting groups and peoples creatively going with their ICH practices and valuing concrete realisations and productions. It will be an exciting challenge to further establish the connection between the 2003 and 2005 Conventions in the future.

63 'Eenperron in de wereld', like the Dutch sociologist Bram de Swaan, who once expressed this in his volume Perron Nederland. Amsterdam, 1991.

64 Arizpe, op cit., p. 16.


68 'Commons' are defined by most authors in terms of being a triad: a community 'natural resource', the community itself, and a protocol or practice to administer the community natural resource. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri suggest that the common is not only natural resources, such as light, water, fire, etc., but also cultural resources such as language, traditions, knowledge and information, codes, etc., to which no one can claim copyright because they are common property.


70 Geldof, op cit., pp. 193-197.

71 Neyrinck, *Beyond the Conventional*.


77 See Arizpe, op cit., p. 115; M. Jacobs, among others in *Cultural Brokerage*.

78 For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable international development: Article 2, Definitions, of the 2003 Convention, available from: http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?g=en&pg=00006 [Accessed 24 November 2016]

79 See also the following reflection by R. Harrison: ... *a dialogical model of heritage as relational and emergent in the connection between people, objects, places and practices not only better describes the ways in which most people think about and experience heritage as a quality of lived experience in the contemporary world, but also pushes to consider the relationship between heritage and other social, political and environmental issues* in Harrison, op cit., p. 226.

80 Arizpe, op cit., p. 172.

81 Harrison, op cit., p. 225.