

Collaborative Internet-mediated ICH Inventories

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the investigation project described here was to develop an intangible heritage inventorying methodology suitable for Portugal and in accordance with the provisions of the UNESCO 2003 *Convention, the Operational Directives* and the recommendations of experts. Within the project, the inventorying methodology and the instruments developed were tested on a sample of people involved with specific elements of ICH from the five *Convention* domains, and with an ICH element from the domain of traditional craftwork – the production of inlaid ceramics in Nisa, a small Portuguese village in North Alentejo.

Keywords

UNESCO, Intangible Heritage, Inventory, Participation, Portugal, Ceramics, Nisa, Alentejo

The rationale behind inventories

The *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* stipulates that each State Party shall ...draw up, in a manner geared to its own situation, one or more inventories of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory (Article 12), leaving to State Parties the responsibility of defining the type and scope of these mandatory inventories and finding out the best way to gather pertinent information. Notwithstanding this

freedom, reports of expert meetings convened by UNESCO,¹ the *Operational Directives*, the nomination forms for inscribing intangible heritage elements on the *Convention's* Lists and, more recently, UNESCO's website, provide some guidance and recommendations regarding the information that should be collected and, to a lesser extent, address some issues related to the inventorying process.

As implied in article 12/1 of the *Convention*, it is useful to include in the inventory information to support safeguarding, such as the description of how the participation and involvement of different agents was achieved and their role in ICH, the origin and nature of any threats that may impact on the particular element, the identification of safeguarding measures to be developed, and possible sources of financing to ensure viability and sustainability.

The decision as to whether the inventorying process should rely on a 'top-down' or a 'bottom-up' strategy is fundamental. On the one hand, as the implementation of the *Convention* is the responsibility of State Parties, the initiative for establishing, compiling and managing the inventory should rest with governments and public institutions. On the other hand, it is vital that all agents concerned, namely communities, groups, NGOs, researchers, experts and others, become fully involved in inventorying, which is the first step for safeguarding. As a result, the challenge lies in finding a way to support the widest possible participation without compromising the accuracy, coherence and standardisation of the inventory.

Inventorying methodology

It is recommended that the inventorying methodology should also be developed according to each country's specific needs and constraints. In the case of Portugal, the analysis of the *Convention's* text and the *Operational Directives vis a vis* the existing legislation led to the conclusion that although there were some differences between the international and the national standard-setting instruments they were not incompatible, and legislation concerning intangible heritage could be developed without changing the existing law.²

It was considered that the inventorying methodology should be developed combining 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' strategies, which would allow both the active participation of communities, groups and individuals, as required in the *Convention*, and the validation of data by the agency in charge.

It was proposed that a user-friendly, interactive database will be made available online for anyone to provide information on intangible heritage by answering questions related to the identification, description, safeguarding, existing information and references

regarding the ICH element, as well as the identification of the stakeholder groups, communities and individuals. This online database is, in fact, an intermediate platform between ICH agents and the inventory. To overcome any difficulties concerning the access to the database, lack of knowledge regarding information and communication technologies, or even illiteracy, accredited local entities such as municipalities, museums, NGOs, and others, may help people fill in the online questionnaire. Capacity building courses regarding intangible heritage and inventorying should be made available to people from these 'in-the-field' entities, who can also act as effective agents for safeguarding intangible heritage, particularly by identifying and promoting local ICH elements.

At this stage, it is essential to organise awareness-raising activities about the *Convention*, seizing these opportunities to present the database and encourage participation in the inventorying process. When the database has enough questionnaires with sufficient information regarding one intangible heritage element, those questionnaires are merged into one single inventory sheet and the information concerning the ICH element is systematised, completed and validated through fieldwork. Each inventory sheet must incorporate data that clearly describes the ICH element, identifies its practitioners and indicates whether urgent safeguarding measures are needed.

The last fields on the inventory sheet concern issues related to safeguarding such as activities planned or already in place, a SWOT analysis of the element and its context, a description of actual or possible safeguarding plans and an indication of available sources of finance. These fields will be filled in by the body in charge in consultation with experts in each area.

This inventorying methodology promotes the involvement of all the agents interested in safeguarding intangible heritage, namely practitioners, public and private entities, universities and research centres. Once the database and the inventory are available online, anyone can start the inventorying process of an ICH element, supervise the information available and update it or contribute with his/her own perception of the element concerned, thus making the whole process a truly collaborative experience which leads people to feel they play an important role in safeguarding intangible heritage.



Figure 1
Large pieces of quartz are baked in the kiln, then broken into tiny pieces and sieved to obtain fragments of three different sizes.
Photo. António Cabral

Testing the inventorying tools

Since the creation of an interactive online database was not feasible, the questionnaire and the guidelines were sent by email to a select sample of people involved in intangible heritage elements from all the *Convention* domains to evaluate their reliability.³

An immediate conclusion was that the proximity between the person responsible for inventorying and the informants is important for obtaining results, as the informants that I already knew, or that were recommended by someone I knew, were more willing to participate in this inventorying experience and provided more complete answers. The questionnaires of researchers were also more comprehensive and detailed than those from other informants including practitioners, leading to the conclusion that some people will not fully understand the questions and will be unable to fill in the forms on their own. Therefore, the results point to the importance of awareness-raising activities and to the need for training local mediators.

Multiple-choice questions should be used whenever possible, and a thesaurus of ICH terminology would be most useful, as the inclusion of an ICH element in pre-determined categories and sub-categories may eventually

support the development of joint safeguarding plans and actions, leading to a better allocation of the available resources.

The identification of practitioners was incomplete in all questionnaires, although this is essential to verify whether an ICH element is in danger and to develop appropriate safeguarding measures. The names of the practitioners may not be disclosed, but it is essential to know who they are and the role they play in intangible heritage, so that proper support can be envisaged.

As regards the transmission of intangible heritage, the analysis of data suggests that while formal and informal activities may co-exist, the same does not happen with informal ones.⁴ Since informal transmission takes place in the daily life of people, it may be rather difficult to assess whether an ICH element is actually being successfully transmitted or if it is in urgent need of safeguarding.

Finally, it is important to establish from the beginning how the constituent elements of an ICH manifestation should appear in the inventory – for example, should the know-how necessary to build a traditional musical instrument be registered on the same inventory sheet as

the music played on that instrument along with details of the events at which it is played, or should all these elements (that belong to different domains) be registered separately and the fact that there is a cluster of related elements be somehow identified in the inventory?

Testing the inventorying process

The completion of an inventory sheet was accomplished through the application of the questionnaire and the guidelines for an ICH element. I selected the production of Nisa's inlaid ceramics, since my knowledge of this traditional craft would allow me to compare the information gathered on the inventory sheet with the data previously collected through fieldwork.⁵



Figure 2
Drawing the decorative motifs in the wet clay with a needle and other instruments is the responsibility of the more experienced *pedradeiras*
Photo. António Cabral



Figure 3
Large pots take a long time to decorate, so they are wrapped in plastic to ensure that the clay will not dry out too quickly.
Photo. António Cabral

Nisa's inlaid ceramics form an original handicraft tradition almost unknown to people outside Portugal, and in recent decades it has been losing artisans. The municipality has tried to encourage its transmission by organising training courses where potters and *pedradeiras* (women who decorate the ceramic artefacts) could teach their skills, and in May 2009 it opened the Museum of Embroidery and Clay to promote the village's typical crafts.⁶

Being a family business, there are only three potters left in Nisa, and they rely on their wives and other local women to decorate their products. As I had interviewed the artisans in 2000-2001 during fieldwork, I assumed the role of a mediator and filled in one questionnaire with the information collected at that time. The other two questionnaires were filled by a technician from the municipality (who later became director of the museum) and a teacher from CEARTE – the Vocational Training Centre for Handicrafts.⁷

The three questionnaires were merged onto one inventory sheet and whenever the data did not match it

was the information provided by practitioners that was selected. No difficulties were found and the few discrepancies were resolved during the validation phase, when the information on the inventory sheet was completed and updated by interviewing the potters and their wives. The final fields which concern specific safeguarding issues were filled in with information provided by the municipality technician during an interview. The resulting inventory sheet for Nisa's inlaid ceramics gathered relevant information about this element and provided important clues for safeguarding it.

This whole inventorying process underlined a fundamental issue regarding the production of Nisa's inlaid ceramics that had not been addressed in previous studies, which had usually focused on the potters and their work. The originality and identity of Nisa's clay products lies in the predominantly phytomorphic decorations drawn by the *pedradeiras* who inlay miniscule pieces of quartz into the outer surfaces of the pots and dishes. It is therefore not enough to say that there are three potteries and three potters in Nisa; the anonymous women decorating the pots should also be

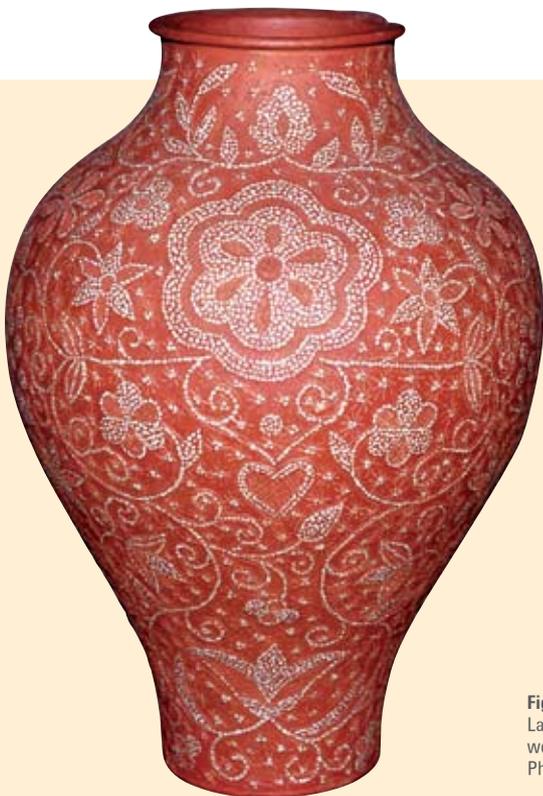


Figure 4
Lavishly decorated pots are rarely produced, but they reveal the exquisite work that the women artisans can produce. (Pot from the collection of the Museu de Arte Popular)
Photo. António Cabral



Figure 5
Nisa's inlaid ceramics were traditionally used for water, but nowadays they are produced mainly for decorative purposes.
Photo. António Cabral

clearly identified in the inventory, for their work is fundamental to safeguard this ICH element and to preserve its origins, layers of significance and identity.

With the retirement a few years ago of the only potter who worked at Cacheiro, a village nearby, this kind of inlaid ceramic now only exists in Nisa and Ceclavín.⁸ In this particular case, the visibility that an online inventory would bring to this decorative technique would certainly enhance its viability and thus promote its local development. Moreover, it could help in finding similar decorative work elsewhere in the world, thus helping to solve the mystery of its origins and evolution.⁹

Final remarks

The level of centralisation and control of each State Party is perceptible in the inventorying methodology they develop and in the degree of participation they allow to civil society, for it shows to what extent the various governments are willing to transfer the power of collective representation into the hands of those who are being represented. In this sense, the inventorying methodology described above seems appropriate not only for Portugal, but also for democratic countries with

a medium-to- high level of literacy and wide-ranging internet coverage.

Relying on the fact that all agents involved in intangible heritage will take a pro-active approach, once the technical features are put into place the success of this inventorying methodology will depend heavily on the efforts and resources allocated by governments to education, dissemination and awareness-raising about intangible heritage, as well as on the encouragement of wide participation in inventorying and other safeguarding activities. 🇵🇹

NOTES

1. See References
2. Law 107/2001 of 8 September, commonly referred to as the *Basic Law for Cultural Heritage*. The investigation entitled *Intangible Cultural Heritage: Proposal of an Inventorying Methodology* was part of my Master's dissertation in Anthropological Sciences, with the support of the Portuguese Commission for UNESCO. It started in 2007 and later that year the Portuguese Commission was asked to collaborate with the Ministry of Culture in the development of Law 107/2001 on the subject of intangible heritage. The resulting Decree-Law 139/2009 of 15 June integrates the concepts and recommendations of the UNESCO *Convention* and foresees the creation of an online database, to create the national ICH inventory.
3. The select sample included researchers, people from NGOs, public organisations, practitioners, trainers and promoters.
4. Although the *Convention* states that intangible heritage can be transmitted formally or informally, a distinction can be made between formal, non-formal and informal learning, as done in the education and training area (European Commission on Education and Training).
5. This prior investigation concerned the comparative study of inlaid ceramics from the villages of Nisa and Cacheiro, in Portugal, and Ceclavín, in Spain. Later, I also studied the inlaid ceramic collection of the Portuguese National Museum of Archaeology (Cabral 2003)
6. The museum website is available at <http://www.museubordadoebarro.pt/en/>.
7. No viable NGO to represent the artisans as a whole was identified. The only known promoter is the local municipality.
8. In Estremoz, Portugal, ceramics are traditionally decorated with groups of three inlaid stones.
9. In the past, inlaid ceramics were produced in several villages in Portugal and Spain. Some pots and fragments have also been found in archaeological excavations all around the world, mainly in places related to the Portuguese expansion (Carneiro 1989; Sardinha 1999).

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