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ABSTRACT

Intangible cultural heritage plays an immeasurable role in the existence, continuation and development of communities. Intergenerational transmission helps to strengthen the bond between people. The first legally binding act of international law concerning this issue is the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* of 2003. This article discusses the role and the significance of Cracovian nativity scenes for the local community, for whom they represent a 'living' tradition. Cracovian nativity scenes, inscribed on the UNESCO *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* in 2018, are the first Polish entry on the *List*. The issues discussed include perspectives on the principle of sustainable development in the cultural sector and present the challenges of safeguarding intangible heritage in the context of increasing commercialisation and globalisation.

Keywords

Kraków / Cracow, nativity scene (*szopka*), travelling nativity plays (*jasetka*), crib, Christmas traditions, Christmas crib competition, Wawel dragon, 'living books', sustainable development, Poland

Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage is an indispensable element of human existence; it is a transmitter of values. The coining of the term 'intangible cultural heritage' was preceded by strategic programmes and projects for the protection of folk culture and folklore (Aikawa-Faure: 2009, pp. 13-44; Lenzerini: 2011, pp. 101-120). Folk culture became the foundation upon which national and regional cultures would form.

Carefully maintained traditional wisdom, heritage and skills are like a mirror through which one can recognise, protect or reconstruct that which constitutes the identity and the memory of a community. Intangible heritage is a 'driving force', thanks to which a given idea or an artistic vision finds its expression in tangible creations. The 'Preamble' of the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*,

emphasises *the deep-seated interdependence between the intangible cultural heritage and the tangible cultural and natural heritage*. Therefore, in order to safeguard heritage more effectively, it is necessary to consider not only the tangible substance of an element, but also the intangible aspect ingrained in the social fabric and in the local environment.

Poland ratified the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* in 2011. Cracovian nativity scenes were among the first entries on the *National Intangible Cultural Heritage List*. On 19th December 2018, the Minister of Culture and National Heritage awarded Kraków's makers of nativity scenes Honorary Badges of Merit for Polish Culture (Decree: 2012). This cultural phenomenon meets the requirements of the *Convention* and serves as an example of the artistry and values shared by the cultural heritage of humanity.

The nativity scene (*szopka*) tradition in Kraków

Kraków, the former capital of Poland, is a city with a long history, captivating visitors with its monuments and its works of art. It is a city where the past meets modernity. It is located in the southern part of Poland on the Vistula River and is a flourishing administrative, academic, cultural and industrial centre with a well-developed transport infrastructure. In 1364, the king of Poland, Casimir III (the Great), founded the Academy of Kraków, which became the first Polish university and one of the oldest institutions of higher education in Europe and indeed, in the world. Nowadays known as the Jagiellonian University (*Universitas Jagellonica Cracoviensis*), it is conducting scientific research of international importance and offers a wide range of educational programmes.

The authorities and the citizens of Kraków engage in numerous strategies intended to protect the region's cultural heritage. A special emphasis is given to the tradition of nativity-scene-making, which has been practised continually since the 19th century. This corresponds with Article 2, paragraph 1 of the *Convention*, which discusses intergenerational transmission and heritage being *constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their*

history [Art. 2(1)]. Cracovian Christmas nativity scenes – or cribs – illustrate the mystery of the Nativity. This tradition commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ, whose teachings and ministry gave rise to the Christian religion. Inside the scene there are figurines of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, angels, shepherds and the Three Wise Men, as well as miniatures of animals. The legendary Wawel dragon is also a popular motif.

In keeping with tradition, makers of nativity scenes usually include a personal detail as a means of artistic expression. This can be considered as an example of the 'revitalisation' of an old custom [Art. 2(3)] and an expression of how today's creators continue to identify with it: in the construction of their nativity scene they aspire to capture the essence of the tradition, but also to add a touch of their own creativity and personality. This form of folkloric handicraft is therefore enriched by new values, thanks to which cultural diversity increases while remaining rooted in the past.



Plate 1
Antique nativity scene by Michał Ezenekier.
Source: The Seweryn Udziela Ethnographic Museum in Kraków, 6 January 2019.

Construction of nativity scenes was initially the craft of artisans from the suburbs and villages surrounding Kraków. The oldest crib, made by Michał Ezenekier, is on display in the Kraków Ethnographic Museum. It dates from the mid-19th century (Plate 1). It is 225cm high and its base measures 150 x 40 cm (Ethnographic Museum: 2019). Each element was made by hand. The details show the author's artistic skill and his respect for the legacy of his ancestors.

Starting in the 1930s, a competition for the most beautiful Cracovian nativity scene has been held annually in Krakow's Main Square on the first Thursday of December. Some of the contestants have been cultivating this tradition for generations. The process of creating a nativity scene may take several months. The figures, their clothing, the construction and the decorations on the interior are all hand-made. The makers pay close attention to every architectural

detail, drawing inspiration from the historical buildings of Krakow and from local folklore. Their style pays homage to distinguished people from the city's and the country's history, but also includes contemporary people and events of international significance.

The dedication to building a nativity scene true to the knowledge passed down from generation to generation reinforces a sense of identity and fosters creativity (Art. 2(1) of the *Convention*). The scene is made from fine cardboard and strips of wood or plywood which are covered with colourful tin foil. Creativity plays a significant role in the protection of cultural pluralism. Even though nowadays it is possible to find nativity scenes with built-in mechanisms that set the figurines in motion, or ones which function as music boxes, the craft still observes generations-old precepts. Nativity scene-makers favour traditional materials and working by hand.

Article 2, paragraph 2 of the *Convention* lists the manifestations of intangible cultural heritage and, among them, the skills relating to traditional craftsmanship (domain E). Taking this into consideration, Cracovian cribs can be considered not only as handicraft products, but also as fine and elaborate works of art. Cracovian cribs are a vehicle of culture which was ingrained in society. They are characterised by a combination of personal, temporal and situational aspects. The makers of nativity scenes 'speak', they are in a dialogue with the present. This



Plates 2 A and B
Some examples of present-day Cracovian nativity scenes.
Photos: Tomasz Jefimow, 2011.

can serve as a means of preserving *the sense of identity and continuity*, as indicated by the UNESCO *Convention* (Plates 2A and B).

Cracovian nativity scenes are a cultural phenomenon with a historical provenance that embodies traditionalism and folk art. At the same time, it is also a culture-forming phenomenon, since every year the Christmas crib competition is open to participants of all ages; it is attended not only by the locals, but also by tourists who wish to feast their eyes on all the colours and to experience the magical, legendary spirit of Kraków. The competition helps to promote knowledge of the city's history and cultural heritage, and also appeals to children and adolescents (Plates 2C and D).



The making of nativity scenes and the dedicated competition bring society together. Cribs create a space for people to spend time together, which inspires reflections of an axiological and normative nature. There are shows and workshops on traditional methods of making nativity scenes. In light of Article 3, paragraph 2 of the *Convention*, this can be considered as an example of informal education - which frequently proves more effective than institutional forms of teaching because it occurs in the presence, and with the participation, of people who act as 'living books', repositories of tradition. Intangible cultural heritage is fragile and ephemeral, therefore every initiative that sets out to popularise it ought to be supported on both a local and a national level.

International protection and the principle of sustainable development

In the days from 27th November to 1st December 2018, the 13th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage took place in the Republic of Mauritius. New cultural phenomena were added to the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. Cracovian Christmas cribs (*Nativity Scene (szopka) tradition in Kraków / La tradition de la crèche (szopka) à Cracovie*) were among those new entries. The nativity scenes constitute the first entry from Poland to be included on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. International



Plates 2 C and D
Some examples of present-day Cracovian nativity scenes.
Photos: Anna Kaczmarz, 2015.

cooperation, implementation, the synergistic integration of regulations and best practice all play an important role in the protection of cultural heritage.

In the face of globalisation, commercialisation and increasing consumerism, it is necessary to intensify efforts to ensure effective safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and to harmonise the systems of international law (Article 16-18 of the *Convention*) with domestic activities. Here we touch upon the principle of sustainable development, which postulates the integration of political, social, cultural and industrial activity. The origin of the principle of sustainable development is attributed to the field of economics (Jabareen: 2008, pp. 179-192; Soini, Dessein: 2016, pp.12; Nocca: 2017, p.28). However, it is critically important to ensure that heritage values are not isolated from the essence of identity for economic gain.

The principle of sustainable growth needs to be adapted in line with an understanding of the value of heritage. Then, instead of declining, cultural pluralism can be expanded and maintained. Taking the above factors into consideration decreases the threat of reducing cultural assets to mere material objects, or evaluating them only according to rigid formal criteria. It is vital to appreciate the essence of intangible cultural heritage, which is 'living' and which runs through the totality of the products of human intellect.

Incorporating the principle of sustainable development into the safeguarding of heritage will help support artists and creators, stimulate economic growth, create friendly spaces and places of employment in the cultural sector - on the basis of international cooperation, but without abandoning the nation's own 'roots'. It should be noted that the free flow of ideas is a significant factor in creative development and in the emergence of diverse forms of cultural expression (*Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions*: 2005). However, it should also be stressed that in order to nurture cultural diversity, it is necessary to ensure social justice, respect for personal dignity and to avoid the unification of cultures.

Conclusions

Cracovian nativity scenes are an important part of the life and customs of the local people. The cultivation of a folk craft helps to shape regional culture. Intangible heritage is crucial for understanding and decoding heritage in its tangible form. Together with the tangible elements, it enables us to interpret and articulate given aspects of cultural heritage. Cracovian cribs combine both of these aspects, helping to maintain identity and a sense of community.

The UNESCO *Convention* states that intangible cultural heritage is a factor in *bringing human beings closer together and ensuring exchange and understanding among them*. Cracovian nativity scenes fulfill the role of uniting people and generations. Coexistence, in a society which is currently permeated by various interwoven and overlapping social, cultural, economic and technological phenomena, calls for the reinforcement of the values of regional culture. Intangible heritage can help in promoting tolerance, overcoming stereotypes, and in supplanting meanings which, instead of serving memory, might otherwise be reaffirming counter-memory.

The multi-tower constructions of Cracovian nativity scenes were once used by carol singers to put on travelling nativity plays (*jasetka*). Their style, architectural, aesthetic and artistic values are characteristic of this specific region of Poland. In terms of their form and meaning, they do not have counterparts in any other European countries. In 2018, Cracovian nativity scenes were included on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*, which should be conducive to ensuring greater cooperation for the development of a long-term strategy to safeguard the tradition, and the exchange of knowledge and experience. International-scale safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage means elaborating a model of cooperation which takes note of the plurality of diverse values, phenomena and cultural assets, which together constitute a common heritage, without, of course, neglecting the perspective of the community where they were created. 🇺🇦

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