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Between Imagined Communities of Practice Participation, Territory and the Making of Heritage

UNESCO and Heritage Self-Determination: Negotiating Meaning in the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the ICH

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UNESCO and Heritage Self-Determination: Negotiating Meaning in the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the ICH

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In the last decade UNESCO's heritage narratives have come under fire from scholars in the field of critical heritage studies, who regard them as the most prominent form of "authorised heritage discourse", or AHD, an institutional and academic framework that emphasises the material, monumental and aesthetic aspects of cultural expressions while attributing a dominant role to heritage experts. The AHD is regarded as problematic since it marginalises different understandings of heritage produced by subaltern communities or lay people and assesses the "authenticity" of their cultural expressions against criteria seen as objective by heritage professionals (Smith 2006).¹

¹ This paper is based on research conducted at the University of Cambridge (2013-2014) and at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (2010-2013) in the framework of two projects: "The production of a global norm: Grassroots participation in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention", generously supported by the European Institutes for Advanced Study (EURIAS) fellowship programme; and "Intangible cultural heritage policies in Europe: What 'participation' of which 'communities'?", supported by a Marie Curie Intra-European fellowship (FP7-PEOPLE-2009-IEF n°252786). Previous versions of this paper were presented at the Trilateral Villa Vigoni Workshops on "Institutions, territories and communities: Perspectives on translocal cultural heritage", and at the seminar of the project "FABRIQ'AM - ANR-12-CULT-005". The present article greatly benefited from exchanges with colleagues participating in these programmes as well as from preliminary research conducted in the framework of the project "UNESCO FRICTIONS - ANR -14- ACHN-0006-01".

The UNESCO Convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003, hereafter “ICH Convention”) challenges the aforementioned AHD, denounced as Eurocentric and colonialist, in two main respects. First, it globally legitimises a new heritage domain, inspired by longstanding Japanese and Korean heritage categories that depart from an understanding of heritage as monumental, built and “material”. Second, it establishes the “participation” of “communities” as a key policy principle, disregarding authenticity as a criterion for heritage identification.

States’ interest in the ICH convention during the first 10 years of its implementation demonstrates that expanding the domain of heritage to include “intangible” elements was relatively easy for UNESCO. As the secretary of the convention frequently boasts in official presentations, more than 150 states have endorsed this treaty in the last decade, with a rate of ratification unprecedented in UNESCO’s history, and 317 elements have been inscribed on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) lists to date. Yet, as a recent report by UNESCO’s Internal Oversight Service stresses, the most awkward aspect of the ICH paradigm lies not with its “intangible” nature but rather with the participatory approach underpinning the convention:

Although community participation is at the heart of the 2003 Convention, it has proven to be one of the most challenging aspects in its implementation. Community participation needs to be enhanced in many areas related to the implementation of the Convention, including in inventorying, in the elaboration of safeguarding programmes and projects, and in the preparation of nomination files. (UNESCO 2013: 9–10)

This paper focuses on the challenges and ambiguities of the participatory policy principle put forward by the ICH Convention, a principle deserving investigation as it brings to fore representation issues, thus making particularly explicit the political nature of heritage and its intimate connection with power. Indeed, several ethnographic explorations of the impact of UNESCO-driven ICH policies on the ground provide evidence that the principle of “participation” of “communities” is such policies’ most controversial aspect. The difficulty in the application of this principle obviously depends on UNESCO’s “heavily governmental” decision making, whereby ICH policies can “easily become overly state-dominated” (Blake 2013: 104) and can, despite their original intentions, promote national narratives reinforcing a state’s control over its minorities, as, for instance, in Bahar Aykan’s (2013) account of UNESCO’s listing of the Turkish religious ritual *Semah*, practised by the Alevis heterodox Islamic sect.² This is one structural difficulty

² Aykan’s Alevi interlocutors claim that the heritage designation of what they regard as a religious ritual rather than an element of heritage is a government strategy for cultural domination, as it integrates them into the Sunni-Muslim majority. The state prerogative to produce documentation that

associated with UNESCO's participatory aim, as it is extremely arduous for a governmental organisation to effectively transfer to non-state actors the prerogative for heritage selection and the authority that depends on it (Meskel 2013).

A more subtle ambiguity characterises community participation in heritage-policy implementation, namely its potential "perverse, subterranean elective affinity" with the neoliberal agenda. Nancy Fraser, writing of second-wave feminism, has described this as "a perspective aimed originally at transforming state power into a vehicle of citizen empowerment and social justice [...] now used to legitimate marketization and state retrenchment" (Fraser 2009: 108, 112). Likewise, originally developed as a politically progressive, counter-hegemonic paradigm, whereby heritage was intended to serve as a site of political contestation, the participatory heritage governance promoted by UNESCO turns out to be an opaque move. This is what Dorothy Noyes (2011) has observed with regard to the UNESCO recognition of the Catalan festival of Patum. Here, the institutional structuring of participation by the local population has resulted in the domestication of popular contestation, which used to find expression during the Patum celebration, and the commodification of the festival, which ultimately distances the community therefrom. Finally, as Nicolas Adell's reflexive account of the elaboration of the nomination of *Compagnonnage* (this volume) makes clear, anthropologists play a role in the "participation" process because they often serve as go-betweens connecting "heritage bearers" and heritage institutions. It is on this particular issue, among the many puzzles associated with the ICH participatory paradigm, that I will concentrate in this article, as this is at once a major policy concern for heritage institutions and a pressing methodological and ethical matter for anthropologists. Indeed, as it deals with the archetypal subjects of anthropological research, the field of ICH policies is especially challenging and unsettling for anthropologists. The UNESCO definition of ICH – as comprising practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills transmitted from generation to generation and constantly recreated – overlaps in fact with the definition of culture that anthropologists have been reformulating since the nineteenth century (Tylor 1871), and on which they have staked their scientific authority (Kuper 1999). This overlapping creates an extremely thought-provoking situation in which we anthropologists assume different roles: in the capacity of experts in the domains that UNESCO aims to safeguard, we participate in the implementation of relevant policies at local, national and international levels (Kuutma 2007); as ethnographers specialising in the socio-cultural life of particular local communities, we witness and critically assess the social, cultural, economic and political impact of the UNESCO label (Tauschek 2010); and as distanced critical observers, we study the making of global policies in the international arena (Hafestein 2004; Groth 2012). Often these roles

proves to UNESCO the participation and consent of the "communities concerned" has, in their view, allowed the promoters of the nomination to manipulate their opinion and their will.

are not mutually exclusive. This is certainly the case for my own work. As pointed out on several occasions in this paper, I chose to explore the establishment and implementation of ICH policies across the scales of global governance while reflexively and critically engaging with them and “negotiating some kind of involvement beyond the distanced role of ethnographer” (Marcus 1997: 100). This multi-scale, collaborative and reflexive approach aims at investigating a complex global policy field against the backdrop of changing circumstances of anthropological research. At the same time, this methodological choice puts me in the difficult position of being both an agent in and an observer of the implementation of ICH policies. This uncomfortable situation complicates the relationship between the discipline of anthropology, which scientifically investigates cultural transmission, and the policy field regulating this process. For these reasons, my position itself deserves critical assessment.

Based on ethnographic observation of the institutional debate within UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter “ICH Committee”), my paper aims at exploring the conundrums of “participation” by analysing the ambiguous role attributed in this context to anthropological expertise. My objective is to provide a complementary exploration to that undertaken at local levels by considering a controversy that came to the fore during a meeting of the ICH Committee, surrounding an object of mediation submitted by “heritage bearers” living in the Peruvian Amazon to the Parisian headquarters of the international organisation.

1 From the Peruvian Amazon to the Bali International Convention Centre: A Huachipaire arrow at the ICH Committee

ICH Committee³ sessions are extraordinary circumstances for ethnographic observation,⁴ recalling situations that have been thoroughly investigated in classic ethnographic research while upsetting the “comfort zone” of the anthropologist. Seen through the eyes of the anthropologist, in fact, these intergovernmental meetings are highly codified institutional rituals officiated by individuals with specific statuses (Trice & Beyer 1984) belonging to a *communitas* of “heritage believers” (Bru-

³ The ICH Committee monitors the implementation of the convention and inscribes nominated elements on ICH international lists. It is composed of representatives of 24 states parties to the convention, elected for a period of four years according to principles of equitable geographical representation and rotation. Committee sessions are held every year in different places at the invitation of the various states parties.

⁴ For the past decade, I have been observing the work of the ICH Committee. I have followed the committee members to several of the committee’s annual sessions (in Abu Dhabi, Paris, Baku and Bali) and have attended the general assemblies of the states parties as well as numerous expert meetings.

mann, this volume; Brumann 2014). However, the venues commonly chosen for such meetings (e.g. conference centres or the conference facilities of global hotel chains) have similar setups regardless of whether one is in Nairobi or Tokyo, Istanbul or Sofia, and the aforementioned *communitas* is composed of people speaking a range of different languages and coming from all over the world, which makes the observation of these “thick sites” the “reverse challenge of multisited ethnography” (Bendix 2013: 23).

The cultural expressions that are conventionally associated with anthropology are only virtually present in these contexts. In certain cases, the participants can enjoy ICH-themed entertainment proposed by the local organisers of the committee sessions or sample performances organised by the different national delegations to celebrate the inscription of their nominated elements. In the last few years, these performances have included Mexican Mariachi, the Korean lyrical folk song Arirang and the Kyrgyz epic trilogy (Manas, Semetey, Seytek), as well as Dalmatian Klapa multipart singing, Brazilian performing arts from the Carnival of Recife (Frevo) and Breton fest-noz dancing and singing. More commonly, “ICH elements” are simply described in nomination files and lauded by the relevant national delegations addressing the committee. The only chance participants in the committee session have to see these “elements” is when photographs or videos are projected on two screens during the discussion of the inscription.

In addition to photographs of the nominated elements, the participants at the sixth session of the committee, held in Bali in 2011, were shown an item that most anthropologists would describe as “ethnographic”: a wooden Huachipaire arrow made from chonta wood and feathers. This arrow was part of a nomination dossier entitled “Eshuva, Harákmbut sung prayers of Peru’s Huachipaire people”, submitted by the Peruvian government. The Eshuva is a ritual chant performed by Huachipaire communities living in the southern part of the Peruvian rainforest for the purposes of healing, as part of traditional ceremonies or during the initiation of new Eshuva singers. In the application file it is marked as a practice under threat of disappearing, since the young generation is reportedly not interested in learning these songs, and there are thought to be only 12 living singers remaining.⁵ This led the Peruvian government to opt for nomination to the so-called Urgent Safeguarding List, which, unlike the Representative List, not only seeks to give global visibility to the element but also involves the design and application of a safeguarding plan aimed at promoting cultural transmission.

⁵The nomination file is accessible on the UNESCO website: www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=fr&pg=00011&USL=00531 <accessed January 7, 2015>.

Photo 2:

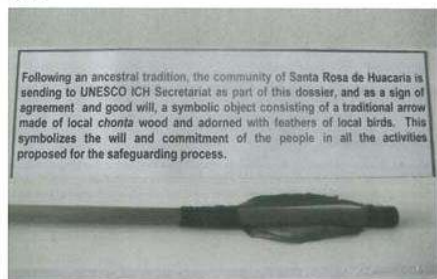


Photo 3:



Peru - Eshuva: Harákmbut sung prayers of Peru's Huachipaire people- n° 05531 - p. 2/2

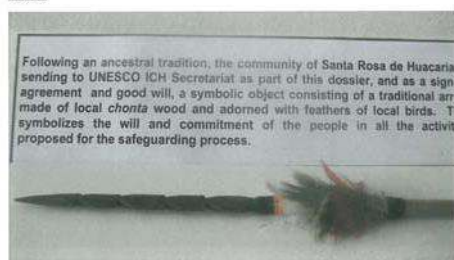
Community consent and commitment

The arrow is available at the Secretariat.

Text attached to the arrow:

"Following an ancestral tradition, the community of Santa Rosa de Huacaria is sending to UNESCO ICH Secretariat as a part of this dossier, and as a sign of agreement and good will, a symbolic object consisting of a traditional arrow made of local *chonta* wood and adorned with feathers of local birds. This symbolizes the will and commitment of the people in all the activities proposed for safeguarding process."

Photo 1:



Peru - Eshuva: Harákmbut sung prayers of Peru's Huachipaire people- n° 05531 - p. 1/2

Figure 1: Document attached to the nomination file of “Eshuva, Harákmbut sung prayers of Peru’s Huachipaire people” and listed as proof of the consent of communities. The document says that the arrow is available to view at the secretariat. It comprises three photographs of the arrow accompanied by an explanation of its meaning.

The Huachipaire arrow, intended as a symbol of the commitment of the community, became central in the extensive debate surrounding this nomination. It occupied the committee for two days, during which discussions were opened and closed several times before a conclusion was reached. The debate exhibited several distinctive features of negotiations in international arenas, namely lobbying and diplomatic alliances, tensions between political arguments and technical assessments, and contrasting interpretations of an international standard’s key concepts. This episode is particularly instructive when considering the puzzles generated by the participatory principle of UNESCO ICH policies as the arrow occasioned an animated discussion on the meanings of “participation”, “consent” and “engagement” of “communities”.

2 UNESCO and heritage decolonisation

In order to consider the different understandings of participation and the contentious renegotiation of expertise that have emerged from these debates, it is necessary to situate this controversy against the backdrop of the decolonising claims that gave rise to the ICH Convention. The definition of ICH put forward by the UNESCO Convention in fact clearly underpins the idea that communities, groups and individuals have a right to heritage self-determination: “The ‘intangible cultural heritage’ means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – *that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage*” (UNESCO 2003, art. 2.1, emphasis added).

By substantiating this right in the heritage domain, the UNESCO definition of ICH echoes a broader debate within the UN surrounding the self-determination of indigenous peoples, the most distinctive outcome of which has been the 2007 Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which recognises that the latter “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (art. 3). At the UNESCO level, heritage self-determination also reflects a reaction against World Heritage, regarded by many member states of the organisation as a “colonialist” and “Eurocentric” apparatus that globally legitimises and disseminates methods of cultural preservation and representation that were established in European contexts and that rest on the exclusive authority of heritage experts (most often archaeologists, architects or art historians), who are responsible for determining the so-called Outstanding Universal Value of a property. Such a shift from the founding, expert-driven UNESCO principles to heritage identification and protection has also been influenced by the postmodern reflexive turn in the social sciences and by a new awareness of their roles in objectifying and authorising cultural representations in support of colonial and post-colonial endeavours (Karp et al. 1992; Clifford 1997; Lilley 2000; Peers & Borwn 2003; Kreps 2005).

This move is widely apparent in the ICH Convention, to the extent that, as Brumann suggests in this volume, the increasing focus on the participation of communities, mainly understood as “indigenous communities”, in the WH Convention is today undoubtedly influenced by the ICH Convention’s distinctive participatory principle. Yet claims for a community-based heritage model have their roots in the World Heritage (WH) Convention (UNESCO 1972) and were raised by countries whose heritage policies have been shaped by negotiations with indigenous communities (Labadi 2013).⁶ Already during the elaboration of the WH Con-

⁶ In the USA, for instance, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990), which regulates excavations on Indian lands and repatriation of cultural resources and human remains held by US federal institutions, acknowledges the right of Native Americans to manage their heritage according to their own criteria and priorities (Tsosie 1997).

vention, Australia stressed that ideas that later developed into the concept of “Outstanding Universal Value” were not consistent with aboriginal heritage. Later on, the Australian branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) released the Burra Charter (1979), which was intended to “review the Venice Charter in relation to Australian practice” and to address the shortcomings of the the cross-cultural application of a tool stemming from a specific regional understanding of heritage as ancient monuments and archaeological sites (Water-ton et al. 2006). More recently, in 2000, the World Heritage Indigenous Peoples forum, organised in conjunction with the 24th session of the WH Committee (hosted by Australia), proposed to establish a World Heritage Indigenous Peoples Council of Experts to facilitate the participation of indigenous people in the protection of WH, as well as to bring complementary conservation expertise to WH protection. Although this proposal was turned down, it provides evidence of the growing attention within UNESCO to different understandings of heritage expertise (Meskell 2013).

The influence of participatory approaches to heritage that were developed in settler societies was also integral to the growth of ICH international policies. American public folklorists from the Smithsonian Institution’s Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage tried to incorporate into the UNESCO definition of ICH the idea of heritage self-determination, which they were championing in their work. The longstanding participatory approach of the Smithsonian is clearly apparent in the collaborative museography of the National Museum of the American Indian as well as in the Smithsonian Folklife Festival held every summer in Washington National Mall, which is described on the organisation’s website as “an exercise in cultural democracy, in which cultural practitioners speak for themselves, with each other, and to the public”.⁷ Indeed, the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage played a key role in the early debate on the establishment of a new UNESCO heritage convention, having co-organised a conference with UNESCO in 1999 entitled “A Global Assessment of the 1989 *Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore: Local Empowerment and International Cooperation*”. The conference reviewed past UNESCO action in the folklore field and assessed the effects of the aforementioned instrument (Albro 2007). While acknowledging the scant global impact of the recommendation, the participants identified as one of its major shortcomings the central role assigned by this instrument to research and documentation reflecting “the aim of protecting the products rather than the producers of traditional culture and folklore” (Seitel 2001: 273). In their “call for action”, they accordingly stressed the need to focus on “the communities themselves” in order for “an appropriate representation to be given of those whose practices create and nurture this culture” (Seitel 2001: 273). Under the slogan

⁷ <http://www.festival.si.edu/about/mission.aspx> <accessed January 7, 2015>.

“there is no folklore without the folk”, the conclusions of this conference incited UNESCO to embark upon a participatory approach to the field that would later become known as ICH.

Several years later, the former chief of the ICH section explained to me how the major problem with the Recommendation was indeed that it “was intended to safeguard researchers rather than communities”. This comment points to the key issue of expert knowledge and authority in heritage making, which has been undermined by the shift in the convention’s priorities from scientific research and documentation to communities’ self-representation. One of the most manifest consequences of the new approach underpinning the convention has been precisely the negotiation of new roles for what UNESCO calls “heritage bearers”⁸ and for the research and documentation specialists in the field of ICH. While “self heritage-making” is an established phenomenon and civil-society organisations promoting heritage projects have been active for decades (Isnart, this volume), this trend has evolved in parallel with – or even in opposition to – official heritage institutions and programmes. In contrast UNESCO embeds this approach in authorised heritage institutions, thereby subverting the concept of heritage, the identity of heritage professionals and the scope of public action in this field.

Blake (2009, 2013) and Urbinati (this volume) stress that the participatory approach of the ICH Convention is unprecedented among international juridical instruments for heritage protection. The term “participation” is present in two articles of the convention (11⁹ and 15¹⁰), which deal respectively with identification and definition of ICH and with participation of communities, groups and individuals in safeguarding activities. The first article establishes that states parties shall identify and define any ICH element “with the participation of communities, groups and relevant nongovernmental organizations”, and the second that they “shall endeavor to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals” in its safeguarding activities and “involve them actively in its management”. Although the convention does not give any definition of participation and the language of these articles suggests only a soft obligation on the part of states parties (e.g. by using “shall” or “shall endeavor to

⁸ In the glossary prepared by international experts during the drafting of the convention, a “bearer” is defined as “A member of a community who recognizes, reproduces, transmits, transforms, creates and forms a certain culture in and for a community. A bearer can, in addition, play one or more of the following roles: practitioner, creator and custodian” (van Zanten 2002: 4).

⁹ Article 11 (b) (“Role of States Parties”) establishes that “each state party *shall* [...] among the safeguarding measures referred to in Article 2, paragraph 3, identify and define the various elements of the intangible cultural heritage present in its territory, with the participation of communities, groups and relevant nongovernmental organizations.” (Emphasis added)

¹⁰ Article 15 (“Participation of communities, groups and individuals”): “Within the framework of its safeguarding activities of the intangible cultural heritage, each State Party *shall endeavour to ensure* the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management.” (Emphasis added)

ensure”), the criteria for inscription on the lists, set in the Operational Directives, reiterate this participatory principle. Indeed, according to Janet Blake, who was one of the legal experts involved in the elaboration and implementation of the convention, this instrument aims to provide “both States and communities with new opportunities to democratize the process by which we give value to heritage, by assigning a larger role to local people and communities”, but renders “cultural heritage protection a much more complex question than it traditionally has been” (Blake 2013: 92–93). I argue that at the heart of this difficulty is the negotiation of new relationships between “heritage experts” and “heritage bearers”. This issue remains a grey zone in the implementation of the convention, as the operational directives of the convention do not elaborate on brokerage and mediation between the two aforementioned categories of actors (Jacobs 2014). The debates of ICH experts in the UNESCO arena provide evidence of the diversity of possible understandings of this relationship.

Regular observation of the yearly meetings of the ICH Committee has revealed in fact that, as the implementation of the ICH Convention gradually reached its cruising speed and states became increasingly keen to have their elements inscribed on the UNESCO lists, the “participation” of “communities” in ICH identification and safeguarding became a controversial leitmotif in the committee’s discussions and a bogeyman for several national institutions in charge of the implementation of the convention. Some national delegates regard the reinforcement of the participatory principle with suspicion and claim that the notion of “community” is oversimplified. An example of this simplification emerged during the 2013 committee session, when a delegate expressed regret that, even though the expression “*groups and, in some cases, individuals*” always accompanies “community” in the text of the convention (Hertz, this volume), in the practice of the committee these entities are not regarded as relevant. This impelled him to take the floor and ask for an amendment to every occurrence of the term “community”, as the latter was not followed by any mention of groups and individuals. Indeed, the romantic, value-laden concept of “community” clearly casts a shadow over the two other categories in the debate currently taking place in the international arena. State delegates for example only refer to “communities” in their speeches, and even the carefully drafted official documents prepared by the secretariat drop the official formulation “groups and, in some cases, individuals”.

The negotiation of new roles for “communities” and “experts” in heritage action is a growing concern at the different scales of implementation of the ICH Convention. My engagement with the French ICH national committee, with a regional trans-border Italo-Swiss inventory project and with an Italian municipality in its elaboration of a nomination for the Representative List allowed me to observe the concerns and controversies among various stakeholders compelled to comply, at different levels, with the ICH participatory paradigm. Though welcomed by NGOs and cultural rights activists as a triumph of democracy, this shift has been denounced by some heritage professionals and academics as a hyper-

relativistic and populist approach based on a romantic and nostalgic infatuation with community (Bauman 2001). Issues of expertise are at the heart of this controversy. Applied anthropologists regard the convention as an opportunity to affirm their professional identity and to defend their often under-recognised knowhow, now finally seen as “useful” by the political and administrative hierarchy. They assume the anthropological approach to be “naturally” and intrinsically participative, as it is based on an intimate connection between the researcher and his or her research subjects and thus differs from the objectivist expertise of other heritage experts like architects and art historians. This assumption is nonetheless challenged by the principle of heritage self-determination, which involves a curtailment of research and documentation and consequently unsettles professional identities, producing a feeling of delegitimation among applied anthropologists, who ironically depict themselves as the next endangered species to require safeguarding from UNESCO.

3 Mediating participation: Understandings of expertise in the ICH Committee’s debate

The long and heated debates around the Eshuva nomination shed light on the challenge of heritage brokerage and on some of the different understandings of the concept of “participation”. In the assessment of this dossier, the six individual experts and the representatives of six NGOs that comprised the evaluation body¹¹ stressed that the nomination did not provide clear evidence of the participation of the community in the elaboration or implementation of safeguarding measures. They added that the proposed interventions simply promoted data collection and documentation. In addition, according to the evaluation body, no convincing evidence of the community’s involvement in the nomination process had been provided. The body therefore concluded that criteria U3 (“Safeguarding measures are elaborated that may enable the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned to continue the practice and transmission of the element”)¹² and U4 (“The element has been nominated following the widest possible participation of

¹¹ A “consultative body”, composed of six individual experts and six NGOs chosen according to the principle of equitable geographical distribution, assessed Urgent Safeguarding List nomination files. Nominations to the Representative List were assessed by another organ, known as the “subsidiary body”, comprising delegates of the states that are members of the ICH Committee. In 2014 the two bodies were abolished, with evaluation of all files now being carried out by a single evaluation body of 12 members, comprising six experts representing states parties non-members of the committee and six representatives of accredited non-governmental organisations, all of whom are elected by the committee.

¹² “The proposed safeguarding measures are not clearly aimed at counterbalancing the identified risks, in particular regarding the lack of transmission of the Eshuva songs to younger generations, but are instead focused on collection and documentation and do not appear to reflect involvement of the concerned communities in their elaboration.” (UNESCO 2011b: 38).

the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and with their free, prior and informed consent”) (UNESCO 2010: 3)¹³ had not been met and invited the Peruvian Government to review the case and, in particular, “to elaborate a better conceived safeguarding plan with the full involvement of the communities concerned and with explicit focus on the specific threats that they face, emphasizing transmission of the element to children and its practice by them, rather than concentrating on documentation” (UNESCO 2011b: 39).

An inside observer explained to me that the evaluation body read the nomination “as one elaborated by capital-city experts who ‘knew better’ than the community itself, which was presented as having acquiesced without objection, and they found no evidence within the nomination (or the arrow) that would support a contrary reading”. In accordance with the condemnation of the authority of expertise promoted by critical heritage discourse (Waterton & Smith 2010), experts are here regarded as major obstacles to the “bottom-up” approach put forward by the convention.

Before proceeding to an analysis of the intergovernmental committee’s debates, it is worth considering the role assigned to experts by UNESCO’s secretariat and by the evaluation bodies established by the committee and their interpretation of community participation. Among the various possible interpretations of the convention, theirs are presented as the most “orthodox”. The secretariat’s understanding of the key concepts of the convention is of crucial importance. This entity is responsible for developing the methods disseminated through capacity-building activities carried out at the global level to guide the implementation of the treaty. The members of the evaluation bodies are trained by the secretariat in order for them to become familiar with such methods. This form of “soft guidance” (Larsen 2013) is intended to generate a shared understanding of the criteria for inscription on the lists, and of the concept of participation underlying them, that is considered consistent with the “spirit of the convention”, that is, that implies a strong partnership between heritage institutions and communities rather than superficial involvement of the latter in the action of the former.

The secretariat’s uneasiness with academic authority was made particularly clear by the secretary of the convention during a workshop on ICH organised in 2012 by the French Ministry of Culture. On this occasion, the UNESCO official explained why she considered the nomination of the “gastronomic meal of the French”¹⁴ a “top-down” intervention, stating plainly that to her, the “top” comprised the group of academics and national institutions’ officials who played a ma-

¹³ “The submitting State has not adequately shown the participation of communities in the elaboration of the nomination, although the community of Santa Rosa de Huacaria sent tangible evidence of its free, prior and informed consent in the form of a traditional arrow adorned with feathers of local birds and symbolizing the will and commitment of the people.” (UNESCO 2011b: 38).

¹⁴ Inscribed on the Representative List in 2010.

jour role in the elaboration of the nomination.¹⁵ Another seminar, organised by the French Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013 and focusing on the different ways in which ICH is being included in European university curricula, provided a clear illustration of the place accorded by the “spirit of the convention” to academic authority in the ICH sphere. The remarks formulated during the seminar by a former UNESCO high officer and by independent specialists who had served in the evaluation bodies clearly established a difference between two modes of expertise that, in a schematic way, I call those of the “researcher” and the “facilitator”.

The “researcher”, trained according to specific anthropological academic curricula, uses his or her ethnological competence to participate in the safeguarding of ICH. While some curricula introduced during the seminar build on a critical and reflexive approach and explore the very process of heritage-making, others were presented as merely creating a corpus of heritage elements, adopting methods inspired by modernist folklore categories that privilege “natural transmission” and denounce as spurious the elements resulting from “altered transmission”. In the eyes of the guardians of the “spirit of the convention” taking part in the debate, academic research did not put the “heritage bearers” and their values at the heart of the safeguarding process. They further emphasised that the convention they helped to draft mentions “research” only among other safeguarding means and not as the most important one, and that “it is not research that allows ICH to live”. To clarify their point they explained that, in the ICH framework, a researcher is someone who assists and facilitates rather than someone who decides what is to be elevated to the status of “heritage”.

This description parallels that provided in the glossary prepared during the drafting of the convention. This text provides a unique definition of “Researcher, administrator and manager”, characterising them as “specialists who promote, display and mediate culture through personal engagement, and in organisations and institutions at local, national, regional and international levels” (van Zanten 2002: 6). Indeed, the experts trained by the secretariat to conduct capacity building are termed “facilitators”, echoing the vocabulary of participatory action research. An understanding of expertise as facilitation is regarded as consistent with the anti-colonialist approach underpinning the convention, which is aimed at a redistribu-

¹⁵ I was a member of the scientific committee involved in the elaboration of this nomination (2007-2009). An analysis of the 2011 nomination cycle reveals that this particular nomination was not the only one to be prepared by academics and public officials, as several nomination files document the participation, as well as the free and informed consent, of NGOs, centres of expertise and research institutions rather than heritage practitioners and bearers. The authors of this analysis present this approach as conflicting with the convention’s mandate for “genuine participation by the heritage practitioners’ communities which is not only spelled out in the convention but also embedded in the methodologies, concepts and documents that guide its implementation” (Rudolf & Raymond 2013: 156).

tion of authority. Therefore, even if most of these “facilitators”¹⁶ are trained as anthropologists, they are mandated not to intervene in the selection using their discipline’s scientific criteria but to provide “neutral” and “technical” guidance on the mechanisms and principles of the convention to “strengthen and solidify (...) human and institutional capacities for safeguarding” (UNESCO 2012: 2). This facilitator position is similar to that of the professional museum curators in “community-based exhibits”. They are expected to act as a “museological ghost writer” (Phillips 2003: 164), putting their expertise at the service of community members, who have the ultimate say over the content of the exhibit, including its accompanying texts.

The “spirit of the convention” appeared to be haunting the evaluation bodies of the 2011 cycle of nominations, since, for the first time in the short life of the ICH Committee, several nominations were turned down due to what was regarded as a lack of participation of the communities concerned. In their report, the evaluation bodies stressed the importance of actively involving community members at all stages of the nomination, particularly the identification of the element, and in the design of safeguarding measures “not only as targets or beneficiaries of such measures but as their instigators and implementers” (UNESCO 2011a: 18). The report further underscores that states are “requested to describe clearly how the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned have participated actively in preparing and elaborating the nomination at all stages” (UNESCO 2011: 12), to discuss the consultative processes leading to the nomination and to specify how and when they were organised and how the perspectives and aspirations of the bearers and practitioners were integrated into the nomination.

During this committee session, state delegates and representatives of the evaluation bodies discussed the concept of participation at length, highlighting the frictions between possible interpretations thereof. The “orthodox” interpretation of the evaluation bodies was visibly at odds with different national ways of understanding and applying this concept in heritage policies and institutional practices. The Eshuva nomination was the most debated case and also the most emblematic, as the Huachipaire arrow discussed above substantiated the diversity of possible interpretation of participation. As explained in the Peruvian application file, the arrow was sent by the community of Santa Rosa de Huacaria to the UNESCO Secretariat of the ICH Convention “as a sign of agreement and good will [...]” symbolising “the will and commitment of the people in all the activities proposed for the safeguarding process”. The meaning of such a gesture, which is claimed to be an “ancestral tradition”, is explained in the nomination file in the section about the “commitment of communities, groups or individuals concerned”. The arrow is

¹⁶ I am myself one of the facilitators trained by UNESCO to conduct capacity-building activities in the field of ICH.

accordingly listed among the documents comprising the nomination dossier under the heading “consent of communities”.¹⁷

The different possible meanings of the arrow split the committee into two factions. Some members endorsed the conclusions of the evaluation body, pointing to the confusion between the prior, free and informed consent of communities to submit their application (substantiated by the arrow) and their participation in the preparation of the file and the design and implementation of safeguarding measures. Sticking to the interpretation of “participation” adopted by the evaluation body, these committee members stressed that concrete evidence is needed to prove that the conception of such safeguarding measures comes from the communities themselves rather than from experts, and that these measures meet the aspirations of the communities concerned, who are thus expected to be willing to implement them, whether or not they actually drafted the nomination file.

Other members of the committee – mainly representatives of the Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries (known in UN jargon as “GRULAC”) – argued that each community has its own way of showing its commitment and that such diversity must be respected; whilst some communities may participate in the drafting of the nomination, others may use traditional means to show their involvement in the nomination process. The arrow sent by the community of Santa Rosa de Huacaria is therefore regarded by GRULAC delegates not only as proof of consent but also as a form of participation, proving the will of the community to safeguard this cultural expression. In an impassioned address, the GRULAC delegates opposed the impersonal conclusions of the evaluation body. They stressed the urgent need for UNESCO intervention while presenting the deficiencies enumerated by the evaluation body as purely formal details that deserved to be overlooked for the sake of safeguarding.

The arguments elaborated by these delegates were based on the apocalyptic vision of history that Daniel Fabre has termed the “*paradigme des derniers*” (Fabre 2008) which recalls the modernist nostalgia of the first generations of anthropologists for what they regarded as “vanishing cultures” (Berliner 2014). As one delegate put it, waiting for these communities to be literate in order for them to be able to take part in the drafting of the nomination would mean “losing” their culture in the meantime. Who cares who devised the safeguarding measures if the ritual songs are disappearing? A delegate from one South American country expressed his concerns over the hesitation of his colleagues, explaining that the last Eshuva

¹⁷ Nominations comprise a 16-18-page form (to be completed in either English or French and sent by the submitting state to the UNESCO secretariat), a 10-minute video introducing the element, 10 photographs and proof of free, prior and informed consent of the “communities concerned”. The main file comprises five sections corresponding to the different evaluation criteria used by the evaluating body. In particular, submitting states are required to provide information on the ways in which the community initiated or participated in the nomination process (section 4 of the nomination form: “Community participation and consent to the nomination process”), as well as on how they participated in the definition of safeguarding measures (section 3) and the identification of ICH (section 5).

bearers were old and might “disappear” before the element was inscribed, should the inscription be delayed by two or three years. A colleague corroborated his argument, noting that “only two bearers are still alive”. The following morning, the debate reached a dramatic crescendo when the same South American delegate urged his colleagues to face their responsibilities and take a rapid decision, since he had heard that one of the few bearers had passed away the day before.

The GRULAC countries proposed to amend the draft decision suggested by the evaluation body. After a few additional reminders to acquiesce to the organisation’s consensus rule and to adopt a non-punitive approach but rather to acknowledge Peru’s good will with regard to safeguarding ICH, the amendments were eventually accepted by the committee, whose final decision, now accessible on the UNESCO website,¹⁸ accordingly states that the nomination meets the five criteria necessary for inscription on the Urgent Safeguarding List. General statements on the importance of safeguarding the Eshuva ritual chanting thus overturned the technical recommendations of the evaluation body. The delegates speaking in favour of the Peruvian nomination tried to belittle the technical evaluation of the NGOs and the individual experts, insisting that such an evaluation was simply advice as opposed to the committee’s prerogative to decide on inscriptions. One delegate even invited his colleagues to consider the meaning of the term “consultative” as applied to the evaluation body charged with assessing nominations for the Urgent Safeguarding List. As often observed in the realm of WH, hard “political diplomacy” (Schmitt 2009) prevailed here over the soft “politics of technicality” that are increasingly shaping global governance (Larsen 2013).

One of my UNESCO interlocutors later described this debate as an elaborate shadow play aimed at securing support from the formerly colonised (the GRULAC countries) for their former coloniser, Spain, which had its own vulnerable nomination on the Representative List (*Fiesta of the patios in Cordova*). He could not recognise any coherent intellectual position in such a “bald-faced demagoguery and parliamentary contortion”. In UNESCO debates, in fact, technical guidelines have a positive connotation as neutral and based on decisions collectively taken against “objective” criteria. In contrast, political decisions are considered unrelated to heritage preservation and as the mere outcome of an exchange of favours intended to increase states’ national prestige. Like many of the committee debates, the arrow controversy undoubtedly reflects international diplomatic concerns, while shedding light on the malleable understandings of the concept of participation, its vagueness and its possible entrenchment in different registers of action (Blondiaux 2008). Specifically, this debate points to the most crucial, and at the same time most ambiguous, aspect of the participatory model put forward by UNESCO, namely the role of the mediators between the “heritage bearers” and the “heritage apparatus”.

¹⁸ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00011&USL=00531> <accessed January 7, 2015>.

This sticky point raises essential questions about the implementation of the ICH Convention, clearly elucidated by the testimony that I collected from key Peruvian players in this episode. Both the Paris-based Peruvian diplomats and anthropologists of the Dirección Regional de Cultura de Cusco highlighted that the involvement of experts from outside the Huachipaire community was necessary in the nomination process. In their view, even though the nomination was prepared by the Ministry of Culture through its regional office in Cusco, this did not mean that they did not participate. As many community members were not literate, the Dirección Regional de Cultura de Cusco was instrumental in informing them about the UNESCO programme and the possibility of submitting a nomination. A representative of this organisation furthermore explained to me that his colleagues and he were involved as anthropologists acting “with the consent of the community” to make a “technical revision” to the nomination, and that the community leaders had endorsed the way in which their singing was portrayed in the nomination. In his opinion, “participation” was inherent in this process, and the evaluation body’s objection that the nomination was not prepared by the community was unfounded.

The committee’s debate sheds light on the multifaceted nature of anthropological expertise. While the evaluation body and one section of the committee took the Peruvian anthropologists as “researchers”, privileging their values, methods and criteria over those of their research subjects, the GRULAC delegates depicted the same persons as “facilitators” charged with giving a voice to the community, a perception sustained by the argument that fieldwork is by its very nature a collaborative enterprise, and that no anthropological work is possible without the participation and “complicity” of the informants. Of course, the assumption that ethnography is intrinsically participative has long been called into question by ethnographic theory, and the issue of anthropological legitimacy in representing “the other” has been traversing the discipline since *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus 1986). Controversies around participation and expertise in the implementation of ICH policies are particularly interesting, as they extricate this issue from a circumscribed disciplinary field and apply it to the broader social and political domain that involves, in this case, diplomats, civil servants and “heritage bearers”.

4 Conclusion

Individuals and agencies with specific scientific and technical knowhow are still at the heart of the heritage apparatus. In the field of ICH, these go-betweens generally have an anthropological background. The debate at the UNESCO level implies two opposing understandings of their role. The first, regarded as colonialist by the custodians of the “spirit of the convention”, views them as “researchers”; the second, valued as consistent with the de-colonising approach of the convention and with the idea of heritage self-determination, sees them as “facilitators”.

What the guardians of the “spirit of the convention” ultimately objected to in the Peruvian nomination discussed previously is that the dossier did not embrace the decolonising model championed by the UNESCO ICH international standard, but instead maintained an approach based on the authority of expertise, which is firmly rejected by the ICH Convention. Peruvian heritage institutions in fact consider participation as an expert-mediated process, a view shared by anthropologists in charge of the implementation of the UNESCO convention within national institutions in France and Italy whom I have had the opportunity to interview or collaborate with in the last ten years. This finds an interesting parallel in the World Heritage field, where non-European nominations use “Eurocentric” arguments to justify the “outstanding universal value” of indigenous culture. In discussing the case of pre-Hispanic monuments, Sophia Labadi provides evidence that non-European states have not exploited the innovations introduced as an attempt to decolonise World Heritage, such as the acknowledgment of the relativity of the concept of authenticity outlined in the Nara Document on Authenticity in 1994. Rather, she stresses, they mimic the arguments originally developed in the European heritage apparatus to represent the grandeur of the nation, emphasising the architectural, aesthetic and historical value of these properties. Labadi argues that by using the strategies of the European AHD, non-European states subvert the established hierarchy of heritage values and “reposition themselves from the periphery to an egalitarian position at the very heart of European discourse” (Labadi 2013: 61).

It is tempting to conclude, therefore, that in the field of ICH formerly colonised countries have adopted the colonialist perspective as the most effective means to legitimate their political claims. However such conclusions must be nuanced in the light of the fundamental ambiguity characterising communication in a “thick” (Bendix 2013) international setting such as the ICH Committee. The committee members’ understanding of “anthropological expertise” is in fact biased by their linguistic background and by academic traditions in their respective countries. The concept of “anthropological expertise” assumes different meanings in different academic environments, influenced by specific theoretical conventions and political contexts.

In many parts of the world, where the dichotomy “Activist Research vs. Cultural Critique” (Hale 2006) is not as entrenched as it is in western academic settings, anthropology is viewed as inherently advocative, and researchers in this discipline engage with research collaborators to produce organic and collaborative knowledge. In these cases, the distinction between “researcher” and “facilitator” does not necessarily hold up. After all, are these two categories so different even in European contexts? Recent accounts by European academic researchers involved in heritage projects have explored disruptions to the conventional roles of anthropologist and informant, explaining how the former is often manipulated and used by communities to produce their own cultural representations. The researcher is thus turned into a mediator (Adell, this volume). He is brought by his interlocutors

to official meetings with representatives from national or international institutions, the local press interview him and publish photographs of him doing fieldwork, he is paraded alongside the mayor at local events like the opening of exhibitions or book launches. What counts in these contexts is more his physical presence than his actual anthropological expertise (Dassié & Garnier 2011). Former research subjects thus capitalise on the assumed authority of the anthropologist. Whether this is a sign of the decline of the discipline or an evolution of the figure of the anthropologist remains an open question. What is clear, however, is that even in European academic contexts, where anthropological advocacy is difficult to defend (Hastrup 1990), anthropologists cooperate haphazardly in the making of ICH. In this process, they are not the only or even the principal authority, as they ultimately have only an auxiliary role in projects of cultural legitimisation. Intending to intervene as “researchers”, they end up functioning as “facilitators”.

On the other hand, we may wonder whether the effects of research in terms of interpretative authority and control over representation are so different to those of facilitation. I argue that if the intervention of “researchers” involves narrative strategies, that of facilitators comprises “techno-political devices”, combining “legitimacy, representation and prescription” (Müller 2013: 10). Facilitators are supposed to “simply” assist their interlocutors in their heritage projects and encourage the participation of all stakeholders. They do not intervene as the bearers of scientific authority on the heritage of a group and are not supposed to influence or assess their interlocutors’ opinions and heritage values. This mediation, intended as neutral technical guidance to merely build the capacities of the communities, nonetheless influences communities’ self-representations, as it defines benchmarks and promotes activities identified as “best practice” according to international, standard criteria (Larsen 2013). Facilitating heritage self-determination thus has the unintended effect of schooling communities in UNESCO-speak, just as the principle of self-determination in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples involves the mainstreaming of indigenous leaders (Bellier 2013).

Regarded as “natural” mediators between ICH bearers and ICH institutions, anthropologists frequently become caught up with ethical dilemmas about their position. This uneasy situation contributes significant moral and methodological uncertainties to our work, but is in itself “good to think with”, providing us with an extraordinary chance to reflect on the meaning of doing anthropology and on our place in academic, policy and social worlds.

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