The French Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage: Domesticating a Global Paradigm into French Heritage Regime

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1 Introduction

How does the global-politique (Abélès 2008) concretely affect national heritage policies? What is the effect of UNESCO on state heritage regimes? Is it enforcing a UNESCOization (Berliner 2012) of heritage theories and practices or are national institutions resisting the homogenization of heritage criteria and procedures? In order to understand how global norms are articulated in national policies, I consider the case of the French implementation of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. I will focus on the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) inventory system and investigate how the key idea of the 2003 Convention, namely the “participation” of “communities,” is understood and applied in the identification of ICH at the national level. My aim is not to underline the possible gap between international norms and their local implementation, or to oppose “good” and “bad” interpretations of the idea of participation, but to understand how a global paradigm can concretely affect national heritage practice.

2 UNESCO and Global Standards

Cultural globalization has been a growing UNESCO concern for almost two decades; it has made cultural diversity a key policy priority for UNESCO. Several initiatives have addressed this issue: From the 1982 World Conference on Cultural
Policies (Mondiacult), the 1996 report Our Creative Diversity prepared by the World Commission on Culture and Development, to the 2009 UNESCO world report Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue. Since the 2001 Declaration on Cultural Diversity, this concern has been put at the core of UNESCO action and addressed using the tools of international law. The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH is one of UNESCO’s weapons in this crusade since, as stated in its preamble, it is intended to maintain and foster cultural diversity.

To the outside observer, the very fact that this organization engages in this battle at a global level paradoxically makes this agency itself a major actor in the very globalization process that it aims to control (Turtinen 2000). UNESCO core action lies in setting standards to be implemented at the world level by its member states. Such instruments establish common rules in the form of agreements between states (recommendations, declarations or conventions) and, by “coordinating the ethical, normative and intellectual issues of our time,” these instruments “define benchmarks” (UNESCO n.d.) which, in the case of conventions, are legally binding. The World Heritage Convention (1972), as the most longstanding and well-known heritage convention, is a good example of this procedure. According to those who commented on its local impact, this instrument endorses a particular kind of “protection” of heritage, which may be different or contrast with local cultural and social values, as well as with local strategies for the transmission of culture (Owens 2002, Ciarcia 2003, Shepherd 2006, Scholze 2008, Berliner 2012).

William Logan (2002) assesses the globalizing intrinsic characters and unintended effects of this convention, and points to several homogenizing aspects of the assistance provided by UNESCO with a view to improving international practice in the protection of heritage. He perceives this, for example, in the establishment of codes of international best practice for cultural heritage professionals, the provision of training programs and the funding of consultants to assist developing countries in preparing nominations to the World Heritage List according to the set of rules and principles established at the intergovernmental level. Being based on a global grammar, the very praxis of the UNESCO heritage system thus imposes “a common stamp on cultures across the world and their policies creating a logic of global cultural uniformity” (Logan 2002: 52).

In other words, while UNESCO celebrates the diversity of content (the elements of heritage to be safeguarded), it enforces common codes, categories and values because it operates through a common scheme or, as Berardino Palumbo puts it, a “global taxonomic system” (Palumbo 2010). This procedure echoes similar homogenizing processes criticized for establishing a “global hierarchy of values” (Herzfeld 2004) through the very use of standard procedures. Like World Heritage (WH), the more recent global institution of ICH is another example of what Richard Wilk calls the “global structures of common difference” (Wilk 1995). The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH, ratified by more than 140 States in less
than ten years, departs from its forerunner by addressing a different field of cultural expressions (the domains listed in art. 2.2) and by delegating its recognition to the “bearers” of this heritage (art. 2.1).

Despite this substantial difference, the ICH Convention inherits its main mechanism from the WH Convention: international listing. This choice was discussed at length during the 2003 negotiations (Aikawa-Faure 2009) and was criticized as a tool that itemizes, folklorizes, touristifies, and ultimately globalizes culture (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004, Hafstein 2008). The use of standard formats and procedures in the implementation of UNESCO’s conventions frame the heritage elements into a common syntax thus organizing and arranging cultural diversity. Diverse and geographically disconnected groups, such as the Senufo communities of Mali and Burkina Faso, the Buddhist Drametse community in eastern Bhutan, the jaguar shamans of Yurupari (Colombia), the followers of Saint Blaise, the patron of Dubrovnik, the Ainu people of northern Japan, to name just a few, have had to deal with the same nomination forms and guidelines. They all received letters from the UNESCO secretariat intended to help them in presenting their culture in a way that would match the UNESCO criteria in order to submit the “strongest possible nominations.” Staging local cultural elements in the global heritage system thus implies the adoption of global standards. According to this analysis, what is normalized in this process are not the elements themselves, whose diversity is safeguarded and displayed, but the structures, criteria and principles underpinning the heritagization process in all states’ parties.

In the following, I will challenge these conclusions reached in anthropological research through the presentation of the establishment and concrete production of the inventory of ICH in France. Can we still observe the same globalizing outcomes if we consider their impact on national institutions, rather than the effect of UNESCO’s standards on particular cultural elements?

3 Inventories of ICH According to the Spirit of the Convention

In order to understand the French interpretation of ICH inventory-making, we need to consider how UNESCO presents this measure. The UNESCO ICH Convention compels the states to establish inventories of ICH present in their territory. Even if the states have room to decide whether to have only one or several inventories and how to design them, the Convention establishes that such inventories are draw up “with a view to safeguarding” (12.1) and “with the participation of communities, groups and relevant nongovernmental organizations” (art. 11).
If one wants to understand what these terms mean in the framework of the Convention, the text itself does not help very much: Neither the term of “participation” nor that of “community” is defined. In order to grasp them, it is necessary to observe UNESCO at work: The meeting of the organs of the Convention, the expert meeting or the capacity-building workshops organized by the secretariat allow one to seize their actual meaning and follow its evolution. The tools of pragmatism turn out to be very useful in these situations: The observation of embedded actions, as well as of the performative discourse that they generate, allows for an understanding of the practical reasons that produce international standards (Akrich; Callon; Latour 2006).

The last ICH committee, held in Bali in November 2011, referred several nominations that did not provide convincing information on the actual participation of communities in the inventories.1 The subsidiary body appointed by the committee to examine the files stressed that “communities are central to each of the five criteria,” and insisted on the importance of active involvement of community members at all stages of the nomination process, in particular that of identification of the element and design of safeguarding measures “not only as targets or beneficiaries of such measures but as their instigators and implementers.”2 The debate stirred up on this issue demonstrates how participative identification is gaining importance in the evaluation of nominations to the international lists. On one hand, the committee deemed that the proof of the consent of the communities concerned cannot be considered as evidence of their participation in the nomination process; on the other hand, the committee is not offering explicit wording on what the intent of this “active involvement” is (Bortolotto 2012).

More information on UNESCO’s actual understanding of “participation” comes from the UNESCO secretariat. Even if the ICH section does not provide state parties with standard formats for inventories, it organizes capacity-building workshops intended to present possible inventory methods matching UNESCO’s requirements. The very name of the workshop “community-based inventory” is chosen on the assumption that community members will constitute a substantial proportion of the participants. The secretariat also explains that every inventory must be community-based in the sense that community members provide the necessary information to the researchers. By training community members in research

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1 Out of the 32 nominations that did not receive a favorable recommendation for inscription on the Representative List, 17 did not satisfy criterion R4 (“The element has been nominated following the widest possible participation of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and with their free, prior and informed consent” Unesco 2008). For ten nominations, this was the only criterion that was not satisfied.

techniques, the message is communicated that they are now to be actively involved in the identification process with a new and different role, namely that of researchers whose expertise, though different from that of scientifically-trained researchers, is legitimate and recognized.

Fostering the cooperation between heritage professionals or institutions and social actors, and emphasizing collaborative, bottom-up approaches to the recognition and safeguarding of cultural expressions, the spirit of the ICH convention ultimately entails a new definition of expertise in the heritage field and entrusts communities with key responsibilities in the safeguarding process. This principle is controversial: NGOs and other advocacy activists interpret this shift as a triumph of cultural democracy, while the majority of academic or heritage experts and professionals regard it as a dangerous hyper-relativistic and populist instrument. From this perspective, “participation” of “communities” is a value-laden idea that makes consensus among international bodies and a key notion of global advocacy discourse, but it is founded on a romantic idea of community idealization of supposed natural solidarity (Noyes 1995); “the magic word around which consensus can take shape in international tensions over the uses of tradition […] and which speaks to the moral concerns of the larger publics to whom policymakers must answer, indexing both the metropolitan romance with authenticity and subaltern demands for justice and agency” (Noyes 2006: 31).

Whatever its premises and effects, is the global norm of “participation of communities” really homogenizing local ways to deal with heritage? This question is particularly challenging for French institutions, which are neither designed to consider the concept of community nor to deal with communities in public action. French governmental policies are not intended to establish any difference between the citizens, and the principle of the indivisibility of the Republic is opposed to the recognition of collective rights for groups. Community is more often associated with an ethnocentric degeneration, a communautarisme disruptive of republican social cohesion (Wieviorka 2001). This approach has an effect on the heritage field and has been recently discussed following the opening of the Musée du quai Branly, where the absence of “native voices” has been criticized as a further example of the institutional reticence to officially recognize ethnic identity (Price 2007).

This framework can help us to understand the challenge faced by the ministry officials in charge of the implementation of the 2003 Convention in rendering the UNESCO community-based perspective in French and in establishing a French inventory of ICH.
4 The French Inventory: Resistance against UNESCOization?

4.1 The Establishment of the Inventory

Following the French ratification of the 2003 ICH Convention in 2006, a committee composed of members from various departments of the French Ministry of Culture (music, dance, archives, museums, and libraries) was established to implement the ICH policy and to select the elements to be submitted for inscription on the UNESCO lists. The Mission Ethnologie, a section of the Ministry of Culture devoted to French ethnology, was delegated to assist this committee and to be in charge of ICH programs. This choice was made on the basis of an equivalence established between the field of “intangible cultural heritage” and that of “patrimoine ethnologique.”

The ethnological heritage of a country includes the specific modes of material existence and social organization of the groups that compose it, their knowledge, their representation of the world, and, generally speaking, of the elements that form the basis of each social group and makes it different from the other ones. The following will, therefore, be included:

- Agents: individuals, social groups, institutions;
- Material and immaterial goods, potential or completed works;
- Organized knowledge: technical, symbolical (magic, religious, based on games), social (etiquette, group traditions), aesthetic…
- Means of communication: languages, idioms, systems of signs.

(Benzaïd 1979)

According to the priorities of the Convention, the Mission Ethnologie was asked first of all to draw up inventories of ICH. Firstly, an “inventory of inventories” was drawn up collecting all the available information on already existing archives and repertoires covering the fields of ICH (Grenet 2008). This inventory had the major inconvenience of including elements of ICH which are no longer practiced. For this reason, the Mission Ethnologie decided “to draw up another inventory, based on fieldwork, and involving the communities” (Grenet 2008). The Inventaire des...
Ressources Ethnologiques du Patrimoine Immatériel (IREPI) developed in Québec (Turgeon 2009) was chosen as a model both for its technical tools, such as the inventory form, and for its main moral principles: Turn to the public, internet diffusion, action research, meaning research that aims to return to their “owners” the collected data after they have been studied and organized by the researcher. This restitution is made in the form of exhibitions, conferences, articles in local newspapers, etcetera (Grenet 2011). An inventory form has thus been designed and a team of local partners has been identified and charged to test the form in their respective fields.

As we have seen, “participation” is the key idea of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. In order to evaluate the impact of the global ICH paradigm on the French inventorying system, it is necessary to consider how “participation” translates into the operators of the inventory (i.e. the tools designed by the Mission Ethnologie) and the operations of the inventory making (i.e. the praxis of the actors of the French inventory). In order to discuss this translation, I will draw on my participant observation of the inventorying process. From 2008 to 2010, I was involved in the program as a research partner of the Ministry of Culture and Communication with the assignment of making inventory forms to be included in the national inventory. This insider position also gave me access to the reflexive discourse of the different actors of this program through informal discussion with other researchers involved in the project and participation in two assessment meetings.

4.2 Participation in the Tools and Design of the Inventory

The inventory is a list of forms accessible on the website of the Ministry of Culture and organized into seven categories. The visitor can download the forms corresponding to the items inscribed as pdf files. According to the officer in charge of the inventory, this choice was made in order for the visitors to easily print the form and take it with them as an information handout if they decided to visit or attend the ICH element in question. The website does not feature any web application allowing the visitors to add information or edit the content nor to interact with the inventory in other ways. The interaction with the communities is delegated to the partners of the project, associations or research centers specialized in different fields. These consultants are contracted for specific inventory campaigns and pro-

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7 The organization of data is nonetheless very different in the two cases: IREPI is a database; the French inventory is a list of individual forms.
8 No programmatic or methodological directives have been drawn up by the institution in charge of the inventory so far. However a presentation of the project has been published (Grenet 2011, Hottin 2011b) A PhD thesis in public law focuses on the French inventory comparing it to the Chinese one (Li Wang (2010): La convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel et son application en droits français et chinois).
vided with the tools designed to contribute to the inventory: an inventory form and a consent form.

The inventory form is a word document composed of five sections (identification and localization; description; history; heritage interest and valorization; safeguarding measures) and includes a section where the name and data of the heritage stakeholders have to be filled in. These actors – called “communities” by the UNESCO Convention – are here referred to as “persons met” and presented, therefore, more as a plurality of individuals than as a collective entity. What kind of participation is intended for them? The consent form gives some explanations on that point:

**Conduct of participation**

The participation to this research consists of a recorded and/or filmed interview, of approximately 60 minutes. The interview is about the description of practices and knowledge of the participants, the apprenticeship of their practice and the transmission of their know-how. It may involve the taking of photographs and their use for illustrating the practice on the website of the Ministry of Culture. A copy of recordings and photographs may be sent to the participants, should they wish it.10

According to this document, the participation of heritage stakeholders is intended as strictly linked to the documentation process: They provide information to the researcher. The expression used to designate these individuals – “persons met” – indicates that they are providers of information to be used by the researchers appointed by the Ministry; it is the researcher who presents the element in the form. The idea of participation underpinning the structure of the inventory is, therefore, the classic ethnographic relationship established between a researcher and an informant.

A pragmatic study of the heritage inventory system has demonstrated (Heinich 2009) that institutional systems, categories and tools have a performative effect in heritage authorization (Smith 2006). How do the structure and the principles of the inventory affect the modes of production of such heritage? How did the partners of the project interpret their role in this assignment and how did they interpret the idea of participation?

### 4.3 Participation in the Practice of Inventory Making

The partners of the Ministry of Culture are research centers or associations involved in the study, protection and valorization of heritage. They may focus on specific cultural elements or on geographic regions. They are contracted on the
basis of a thematic project established in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture. The specialization of each partner and their possible territorial focus or jurisdiction establish the choice of a research field: The *Institut des Métiers d’Art* worked on the inventory of rare craftsmanship in France; the *Institut Occitan* focused on Occitan practices in Aquitaine; the *Centre des Musiques Traditionnelles* in Corsica started research on *cantu in paghjella*;\(^{11}\) the *Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles* in Normandy, in cooperation with the *Centre Régional de Culture Ethnologique et Technique*, prepared an inventory on practices and representations of the “vegetal world” in that region; and the *Centre Permanent d’Initiatives pour l’Environnement* of the Basque littoral worked on fishing practices. Two projects converged on the ICH of immigrants in France: The first, coordinated by the *Association Trajectoires*, focused on immigrant communities in the tenth arrondissement in Paris; the second one, carried out within the *Laboratoire d’Anthropologie et d’Histoire de l’Institution de la Culture*, identified practices associated with Italian immigration in France and Mexican communities in Paris. When the associations did not have people with research skills, they contracted young researchers to work on the inventory project; fieldwork was then distributed to experts on the different subjects. All partners could enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their work and each of us developed his or her own interpretation of the inventory-making process, as is evident from the diversity of the results obtained: While some of us adapted the structure of the form in order to write monographic articles, others chose a more schematic approach. Despite this diversity, we all adopted a common perspective, which was made explicit during an assessment meeting in July 2010. The discussion made clear that the ultimate end of the inventory was, for many partners, doing research: “To us, what was interesting in this research was […]”, “what we wanted to dig out is […].” The scientific approach is claimed openly and is evident in the working method adopted and presented at the meeting: Figure out how the different research fields “could be studied as intangible heritage,” conduct bibliographic research and finally carry out fieldwork with interviews.

This scientific standpoint is clear from the choice of the object of the enquiry (“The subject was suggested by the director of the department. Being an ethnologist, this has been going through his mind for a long time.”). The point of view of the researcher not only influences how an element is observed and described (“the practice conveys a set of representations that is interesting to study […] this is what we were interested in”), but can also have an impact on the definition of the element (“when we got interested in the practice of […] we changed the name of the form”), meaning that research priorities can influence the identification of ICH elements.

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\(^{11}\) The *cantu in paghjella* is a male Corsican singing tradition that combines three vocal registers. It was inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding in 2009.
The scientific ambition of this work was openly endorsed when some researchers explained that, given the poor elaboration allowed by the form, they conceived this work as a preparatory step toward further and deeper research (“not making an article, but keeping the form as a first step toward [the construction of] a scientific object”). This limitation was considered somewhat frustrating for them and they expressed the hope that in-depth research would follow the inventory (“the form is a starting point for in-depth ethnologic studies, PhD thesis for example, [...] this is the meaning of the form, finding research tracks”).

Finally, the presentations and the discussion at the assessment meeting made clear that the inclusion in the inventory depends on the evaluation of the researcher (“the intern selected a few practices which may match with the definition of ICH” or “the dynamism of the practice is crucial for us to choose what we could include or exclude from the inventory”).

Far from exploiting the “persons met,” the partners of the ministry are sometimes very involved in their fieldwork and try to show this in their research results; the Mission Ethnologie encourages this “coupling of scientific research and diffusion of information among the public” (Grenet 2011). This proves to be a real challenge for the researcher: In the case of the organization of an exhibition on traditional Basque maritime practices in the harbor of Soccoa, the researcher described the difficult task of explaining to local heritage stakeholders (in this case the fishermen of the Basque littoral) why their ordinary everyday activities are considered as heritage and listed in the inventory. When it comes to recognizing heritage, the criteria of the fishermen and those of the researcher differ and “gaps” between the different actors involved became evident. Heritage experts interpret this gap as “lack of awareness” and classic heritage policies are first and foremost intended to raise this awareness. However, in the framework of the ICH UNESCO paradigm, this gap takes on a completely different meaning, which is considered controversial from the juridical perspective. According to Li Wang (2010), author of a comparative analysis of the French and Chinese inventory, in both cases there would be a “problematic balance between the actors of inventory-making with a major role of state institutions, a limited participation of communities and an ambiguous and questionable position of the researchers.” From this perspective, thematic projects entail a top-down selection, which makes heritage out of scientific criteria and the inventory a corpus of ICH items intended as “mere objects of ethnologic research” (Wang 2010: 290). The Mission Ethnologie see its independent researchers as best qualified: They have no stakes in the promotion of one particular element, as do many NGOs, and can evaluate, for instance, if the element is the result of an artificial revitalization for commercial uses. The intervention of researchers may, furthermore, counter-balance the hyper-relativism that a community-driven heritage selection might imply. The researchers would thus be sufficiently neutral to withstand militant claims and able to evaluate the real nature of the elements to be
inscribed. The researchers involved in this project sincerely planned for their approach to involve the “persons met” in the identification project. To them, the fact that locals are consulted by the researcher and have the opportunity to provide information from which heritage elements are identified means their involvement. By making their work available to the subjects of their study through action research, researchers see themselves as pushing even further the involvement of their informants.

5 Democracy and the French Heritage System

Guided by their academic background and goals, the partners in the French inventorying process put the scientific perspective at the core of their approach. The tools designed by the Ministry of Culture do not invite them to negotiate a new role and to share their expertise with heritage stakeholders. Action research involves a public with a pedagogical rather than an advocacy potential, and “participation” is understood as the involvement of informants in ethnographic research. According to the analysis of the chief of the Mission Ethnologie, the Convention would force the team to work in new ways, but at the same time ICH programs in France draw from the preexisting, research-conditioned work of the Mission Ethnologie (Hottin 2011a). This research-based approach has proven to be instrumental in legitimizing the Mission’s service, as well as the role of anthropology within the Ministry of Culture. A research-based inventory is, in fact, an essential tool for dealing with tangible heritage, archives or museums, and thus associates ethnologic heritage with heritage domains and institutions with longer traditions enjoying state and society appreciation. In order to be upgraded to the board of legitimate national heritage, ICH has to be processed according to longstanding authorization procedures and to adjust to the logics underpinning heritage policies within the Ministry of Culture.

The inventory of tangible heritage is a good example for understanding the reasoning behind French heritage. Research and scientific know-how of highly specialized officers are at the very core of the process of inscription in the longstanding Inventaire general (Heinich 2009), established in 1964 to identify French heritage. The political perspective underpinning this program is intended as “generously democratic” in that it is meant to “arouse in every citizen the perception of a meaningful local and material heritage” (Balsamo 2003: 414). In this perspective, a corpus of heritage elements established on the basis of scientific criteria by highly specialized professionals is made available to the largest possible number of people, intended as a public that is educated and sensitized in order to develop “heritage awareness.” This standpoint has shaped French museum policy since the 1930s (Poulot 2005) and is consistent with the founding program of the Ministry of Culture: “Make masterpieces of humanity, and firstly of France, accessible, to the greater
possible number of French [...] and ensure to our cultural heritage the larger attendance," which underpins the establishment of the French Ministry of Culture under the aegis of André Malraux in the late-1950s still affects French cultural policies (Dubois 2010). According to the reflexive analysis conducted by the regional correspondents of the officers of the Mission Ethnologie on the actions of this agency, the ideal of cultural democratization also shapes the model of patrimoine ethnologique (Barbe 2009, Tornatore 2011). The founding, historical institutional mandate of the Mission Ethnologie rests on this perspective and emphasizes the role of research entrusting professional anthropologists – who are supposed to be objective – in order to counter the subjectivity of “wild ethnology.” The original principles of patrimoine ethnologique ban amateurish ethnology, considered a “pseudoscientific illusion.” In this perspective, “self-study” is to be avoided, because only professional ethnologists are seen to be competent to do research objectively (Benzaïd 1979). This approach has undergone an evolution at the central and regional level, and regional projects are often based on a different understanding of participation (Lebovics 2005, Barbe 2009, Hottin 2011b). Yet, as we have seen, it informs the campaigns of the inventory of ICH. The inventory is, in fact, expressly intended to be the result of a research process, as well as a tool for further research (Hottin 2011a), similar to other heritage inventories drawn up within French cultural agencies.

6 Conclusion

Founded on the idea that culture provides an identity to affirm rather than a body of knowledge to democratize, and aiming to change the roles of heritage actors,

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13 The Mission du patrimoine ethnologique, founded in 1980 and re-named Mission Ethnologie in 2003, played a key role in the development of French Anthropology in France (Langlois 1999) by way of the regular funding of thematic research and its diffusion through the journal Terrain. Anthropology of contemporary western societies, which was not developed in France at that time, also gained its legitimacy thanks to this institution. The role of this institution in the political arena has been studied both by historians and by its own members. The establishment of patrimoine ethnologique as an institutional category is presented by its initiator as an attempt to pay attention to social dynamics in the otherwise very traditional French heritage approach dominated by art history (Chiva 1990). The historian Herman Lebovics considers its creation as political strategy aiming at protecting French anthropology weakened by the postcolonial turn. This strategy would build on regionalist movements (in particular in Brittany, Occitania and New Caledonia), as well as on the re-launch of salvage ethnography justified by the rapid sociocultural change in the modernizing economic and urbanistic boom of the Three Glorious Decades (Lebovics 2005). According to Pierre Nora (Barbe 2009), the Mission du patrimoine ethnologique would ride the wave of the rising local interest in heritage expressed by the establishment of countless regional heritage associations. This would allow the Ministry of Culture to organize their intervention and control its militant fringes at the same time (Lebovics 2005).
the UNESCO ICH paradigm is far from overturning the preexisting French patrimoine ethnologique model, which has its own experts (professional anthropologists) and is a matter of knowledge and study.

The French domestication of ICH is particularly interesting for evaluating the globalizing effect of the ICH Convention. While UNESCO introduces into the global arena a common vocabulary and promotes specific values, their translation into a French institutional framework domesticates them to the preexisting available institutional structure and skills. In this case, global policies do not spread uniform structures framing local heritage according to a standard code; rather, they are twisted by local bureaucratic, administrative and scientific interventions and institutional structures. The French inventory of ICH, with its emphasis on ethnographic research and its aim for cultural democratization, does not passively adapt to global standards but ultimately represents a form of resistance against UNESCOization.

Is this an example of French exceptionalism? Is it a consequence of the internationally recognized authority of the French heritage system; of the “model” status of French cultural policies, akin to the model status of Scandinavian welfare policies, or US educational and research policies (Dubois 2010)? Comparative analysis on the establishment of ICH inventories in other countries (ASPACI 2010, Broccolini, this volume) shows that each state translates key terms of the UNESCO Convention in different ways, resulting in different safeguarding approaches. Rather than being a French exception, the domestication of global standards results in a constant negotiation between the spirit of an international convention and the institutional categories, structures and tools that shape national administrative and scientific treatment of heritage. In this respect, the domestication of the UNESCO ICH Convention seems to parallel that of the fastfood chain McDonald’s, the quintessential symbol of cultural homogenization and imperialism. Like UNESCO, McDonald’s is a global system, which depends on highly standardized procedures and exports them all over the world (Ritzer 1993). Ethnographic accounts of the impact of McDonald’s in Asia have, nonetheless, demonstrated how local interpretations of this global system turn it into a local institution (Watson 1997). Not only are menus adapted to different tastes, but the social appropriation of McDonald’s also addresses particular needs and habits: “Fast” comes to refer to the delivery of food, not to its consumption, and restaurants are turned into leisure centers and after-school clubs. In the beginning of the 1990s, eating in Beijing’s McDonald’s was not casual dining but an exclusive experience reserved for upper-class society and enjoyed by young couples for romantic dinners (Yan 1997). Much as experiencing McDonald’s in non-western and urban societies is, or at least was in the beginning of the 1990s, a way to access to global modernity (Watson 1997), framing heritage elements into the UNESCO system is a modern way to deal with the past.
While in the case of McDonald’s, the global(-izing) effect is compensated by social and cultural forces, the “local translations” of the UNESCO programs are governmental ones. Global governance is thus counterbalanced by nation-based institutions, the key actors who are entrusted with the capacity for heritage authorization (Smith 2006). The example of the French inventory of ICH confirms what has been already been argued for World Heritage; it is “as much, and probably more, a creature of its member states and their agendas as it is an instrument of UNESCO’s specialists, intellectual apologists and affiliated professional bodies of conservation specialists” (Askew 2010).

The impact of the UNESCO paradigm on French ICH policies is not to be minimized. Though domesticated to local taste, social habits and needs, McDonald’s had real effects on Asian foodways: In Japan, for example, the habit of eating while standing was previously not an acceptable mode of dining (Ohnuki-Tierney 1997). Similarly, even if in the first years of its implementation, the French inventory interpreted the UNESCO Convention’s idea of participation in a very specific way, the nominations submitted for the inscription on the international lists are more influenced by the UNESCO paradigm, because they are put forward and prepared by heritage stakeholders. This resonates with the passionate domestic debate on what role different actors should have in the recognition of heritage and what alternatives might be possible to the leading model of cultural democratization (Poirrier 2007). More concretely, French cultural institutions are internally confronted with a growing heritage production developed without the state and its experts. They are the result of flourishing local associations over at least twenty years (Leniaud 1992). While effective participation of communities is still mostly limited to nominations for international lists and is not an explicit, funding principle of the inventory system, the Mission Ethnologie is engaging in a debate on heritage emotions and social values of heritage. At present, this is but a scholarly argument that benefits from the expertise of state and academic institutions. However, it is worthwhile asking and observing whether the involvement of new actors in this debate will eventually lead to the UNESCOization of French ICH cultural policies.

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7 References


