

Intangible Heritage, Festival Tourism and agency

David Picard

Introduction

According to the Convention adopted by the 32nd Session of the General Conference of UNESCO, 'intangible heritage' includes „the practices, representations, and expressions, as well as the associated knowledge and the necessary skills, that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage“¹. The emphasis made on social recognition seemingly breaks with the epistemology of former UNESCO doctrines. In this new sense, heritage appears not to be defined primarily through forms of expert discourse but from somewhere within communities or groups. This brings along a problem of agency and authority related to the very processes through which 'intangible heritage' becomes socially recognized as a such.² The aim of this paper is to open a reflection on the particular role festival tourism plays in the agency of so-called 'intangible heritages'. Festivals have been defined as cultural forms of and about 'culture';³ cultural performances allowing to enact and celebrate the multiple symbolic elements which add sense and meaning to the various discontinuities of everyday life.⁴ At the same time, contemporary festivals often become transnational nodes allowing a large variety of audiences to meet and interact.⁵ The particular perspective on festival tourism – tourists participating in 'other peoples' festivals – is thought of to allow an analysis of different political, economic and symbolic dimensions underlying the processes leading to social recognitions or contestations of particular sets of intangible heritage.

1. Intangible heritage and the problem of social recognition

From an academic perspective, the problem of social recognition of particular sets of heritage has been situated within two complementary theoretical frameworks, one focusing on cultural patterns underlying individual action in a community or group, the other stressing the discursive, dynamic and subjective expressions of social identity

through which a community, group or individual makes the various relations of its existence meaningful. The 2003 UNESCO definition of intangible heritage seems to privilege an integrative approach taking into account both theoretical frameworks. From this point, two conditions appear to be necessary to match the definition. On one hand, intangible heritage is – still – defined through an ideally objective intrinsic value related to artistic excellence, historic importance and / or cultural significance. On the other, it needs to be socially recognised as being a part of a community's or group's 'cultural heritage'.

Human communities and groups tend to create forms of narration often used as parables to explain and justify their being in the world. These are often expressions of particular social or social-cultural contexts; they are discursive, dynamic and often highly politicised narrations articulating relationships within society. In this context, sets, selections and interpretations of 'cultural heritage' can be seen as a particular form of narration focusing on often artistic, religious, architectural or gastronomic elements which allow to delimitate borders and tell stories of a community or group, or – ultimately – humankind.

From an art historian or anthropological point of view, the content expressed through these narrations does not directly inform about the uniqueness or specificity of a community or group, or its contribution to the ongoing process of human creativity and the development of knowledge.⁶ Usually, stories and forms of narration enacted through socially recognised types of 'cultural heritage' are highly ethnocentric glorifying the collective Self and delimiting it to an often 'barbarian' Other. Here lies the principal problem in regard to the criteria of social recognition of 'cultural heritage': Communities and groups do normally believe in the truthfulness of these stories and forms of narration; in the 'authenticity' of the 'cultural heritage' which in reality has been the output of a selection and interpretation process.

Consequently, a tension appears between what is socially recognised by a community, group or individual as being part of their 'cultural heritage', on one hand, and what is being legitimised through different types of political, social or academic authority. Festivals can play a central part in dialecticising this tension through different forms of agency.

2. *The role of festivals in the agency of intangible heritage*

Festivals are complex social phenomena which enable communities, groups and individuals to meet, celebrate and/or contest various symbolic elements through which they define their 'culture', 'society' and being together. Through conversions of space, discourse, performance and forms of consumption and exchange, they become platforms which permit to enact and communicate what a community, group or individual recognises – or wishes to be recognised – as *its* cultural heritage. This implies the existence of different and often contested selections and forms of interpretations of heritage which frequently oscillate between expert discourses, on one hand, and forms of socially useful discourses, on the other. By bringing these different discourses, narrations and respective actors together, in a single time and space frame, the festival has the potential to facilitate the production of and mediate meanings and forms of recognition of heritage.⁷

Three types of agents with three different discourses can be identified: heritage experts, social and political stakeholders and various external agents.

Heritage experts traditionally include art historians, curators, anthropologists, and architects, and, more recently, environmental engineers, tourism developers and spatial planners. These experts usually operate an academic discourse on the – supposedly objective or „universal“ – intrinsic value of heritage based upon criteria of aesthetic quality and innovation, historic hallmark, cultural distinctiveness and, more recently, biological and landscape-aesthetic uniqueness. These academic discourses are often embedded within a humanist philosophy emphasising on human progress and creativity displayed through innovations and developments in various fields of society. More recently, the often too narrow and euro-centric definition of society underlying this discourse has been enlarged. This has led to a geographical and ideological decentralisation of traditional centres of heritage which now also encompass forms of so-called „popular“ and non-European culture and cultural / historical sites.

A second type of discourse is being formulated by various social and political stakeholders who, through their social position and often also their charisma, manage to create a social dynamic around the protection and preservation of intangible heritage. Often – seemingly or really – embracing the approach of academic discourse, these internal actors frequently define the intrinsic value of heritage as a marker of a community, group or individual belonging. In this context, forms of intangible heritage displayed and enacted through festivals have the potential to define – or contest – social

boundaries and values linked to places and/or social groups. Historically, various forms of intangible heritage (including folklore, food, narrations, etc.) have been recognised as markers of national identity, as the result of an institutionalisation process operated by governments and reigning absolutes. Festivals – including war as their most brutal and destructive expression – have played here a central role. In the contemporary context characterised by an increased demographic and economic mobility, new types of social boundaries appear. These are often defined through concepts of „place“ and/or „group“ defining social limits and forms of belonging through identity patterns built around space, ethnicity, nation, religion, diasporas, leisure interests and social-professional categories. In the contemporary context, the traditional definition of heritage mainly as a national pattern is necessarily contested; it is challenged in particular by the claim for regional or local heritage on one hand and ethnic or what the French sociologist Maffesoli calls „neo-tribal“ heritage on the other.⁸ However, whatever the context, there are formulations which create and express forms of inclusion and exclusion. The celebration and enactment of heritage in festivals operated through various social and political stakeholders and their respective social networks translates a process of agency and mediation of these social discontinuities.

A third type of agents includes individuals, groups and communities which are originally ‚external‘ to a place or group. This type of agent comprises different categories of migrants (including tourists), heritage experts and also the less tangible global media networks, the tourism industry and global capital flows. By introducing their relative formulations and definitions of intangible heritage related to peoples and places, these external agents challenge the internal processes of agency and mediation. This creates a tension which has often been semantically rationalised by the opposition between the local and the global.⁹ Indeed, from a cognitive perspective, the human brain seems to „like“ systems of oppositions to articulate and make reality meaningful. In this context, the global-local opposition expresses a particular way to think the contemporary social realities; a discourse articulating social boundaries between the „local“ and the „stranger“. At the same time, this discourse appears to be linked to a time frame implying a social hierarchy; the longer one stays in a place, the more he or she appears to be legitimised to claim the identity of the „insider“ or „local“. In this sense, short staying tourists and other migrants are being attributed the weakest possible identity. From an epistemological perspective however, it is clear that no individual is „worth“ more than another. All we can observe are human beings, their creations, discourses and interactions.¹⁰ In this sense, from an academic perspective, the very notions of „place“ or „group“ become problematic as both appear to express rather social discourses than academic concepts. However, through the social practices

and discourses observed, categories are clearly made. Through the selection and interpretation of cultural heritage, communities and groups draw symbolic boundaries to delimit themselves from the other.¹¹ Here, one of the most powerful symbolic limits defines the insider in opposition to the outsider. External agents frequently use the term „locals“ to refer to the people that live – or were born, or brought up – in a particular space. An analogue phenomenon happens for ethnic groups defined by kinship and – depending on the country and political doctrine – racial criteria. In this context, social-symbolic boundaries are not only drawn from within communities or groups, but also from outside. Forms of cultural heritage here become typical signifiers of the other.

If from an anthropological point of view, all human beings participating in a festival and are observed without any prejudice, experts, insiders and outsiders should be equally considered through their relationships and forms of interaction. This means that tourists for instance should not be prejudged as passive spectators (which they are objectively not), but through their participation in the various performances and exchanges that take place in the festival. The last section of this paper will analyse in more detail the modalities of festival tourism with regard to the agency of intangible heritage.

3. Festival tourism

Tourists participate in festivals through different forms of exchange and consumption. They actively observe performances by filming, photographing, cheering and paying. They purchase and consume various types of „typical“ food and drinks. They acquire souvenirs, smile a lot and often exchange addresses. Through the „magic“ which is often attached in human society to the stranger,¹² they thus give a certain validation to the enactments, costumes and discourses produced by the festival organisers and other participants. At the same time, from the psychological perspective of the tourist, they create travel memories which they transport back to their usual everyday life spaces.¹³ Through the objectivation of their experience, they create affective links with other people, transnational affective webs which will ultimately contribute to sustain peaceful relations between communities and groups. However, in this section, the emphasis will be put rather on the consequences of the touristic construction of (other) people and places than the touristic experience.

The tourism industry composes places through the selection of particular texts and visual signs which tourism managers believe are appealing to the tourist imagination and will – ultimately – make them go to particular places.¹⁴ In terms of the terminology used in tourism marketing, places are „products“ or „destinations“ which can be „purchased“ and „consumed“. In this particular context, festivals and the enactment of various intangible heritages during festivals become part of the product „commercialised“ by tourism operators. When tourism operators elaborate a marketing strategy and communication tools, they try to „package“ destinations by using the terminologies and semantic categories through which they „reach“ their potential customers. They hence construct their touristic products by formulating a place through the various aesthetic conventions, themes and categories through which tourists and their societies make their own world meaningful. From the perspective of European outbound tourism, „destinations“ are subsequently organised according to categories such as ‚history‘, ‚economy‘, ‚religion‘, ‚folklore‘, ‚art‘, ‚gastronomy‘, ‚landscape‘.¹⁵

However, especially in many non-European societies, social reality is constructed by different categories than the ones used here by European outbound tourism operators. The very notion of ‚history‘, for example, is not a universal pattern to narrate the collective being in the world.¹⁶ These categories hence often create new forms of communication systems operating between tourists, the tourism industry and visited places. The construction and interpretation of „destinations“ by the international tourism industry is thus ambiguous. The recurrent touristic question about, for instance, the ‚past‘ or the ‚heritage‘ of a society, often creates a state of emergency in societies where these notions are inexistent or irrelevant. In this case, they need to be filled with content or what Cohen calls „local colour“¹⁷. As a consequence, ‚cultural heritage‘ often becomes a signifier for the exchanges with the outside world rather than an expression of cultural patterns or forms of internal organisation. For instance, the „artworks“ produced by „locals“ appear to serve rather the exchange (and maintenance) of peaceful relations with the world outside than any internal spiritual or artistic discourse.¹⁸

As a consequence, communities, groups or individuals are frequently being formulated in terms of the „local“, „ethnic“ or „national“ – as if they were homogenous entities. In this context, the festive enactment of intangible heritages can become a signifying practice playing at different social scales. Tourists do normally not become aware of the hidden political and symbolic dimensions and tensions regarding the choice and interpretation of heritages and stories. This enables various internal agents to fill these with contents expressing or operating particular political or social aims.¹⁹ If internal

social and political stakeholders often wish to promote a particular formulation of the local or ethnic (by selecting particular forms of folklore, music, food, narration), tourists thus are often appropriated as an audience to stage and enact these specific forms of ethnicity or locality. At the same time, from an anthropological perspective, traditional communication systems and values of „host societies“ may well persist and transform into the new social context set by tourism.²⁰ Despite the reformulation of peoples and spaces and the use of new forms of communication categories (operated in particular through the festive enactment of intangible heritage), basic structures of power and social organisation may well be perpetuated in this new context.²¹ The introduction of „intangible heritage policies“ may hence induce a ‚resemanticisation‘²² of signifying social practices, giving the superficial impression of social and cultural change and homogenisation. In the contemporary world, every society, community or group seems to „need“ to have a display of ‚cultural heritage‘. However, underneath the aesthetic appearances, basic cultural patterns of political and social organisation may resist and transform independently.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to open a reflection on the role festivals – and in particular festival tourism – play in the agency of ‚intangible heritage‘ as a cultural pattern of and system of social recognition and exchange in non-European societies. It has been stated that festivals are time-space frames enabling communities, groups and individuals to formulate and enact the symbolic elements defining ‚culture‘ or ‚society‘. These symbolic elements include various tangible and intangible objects, buildings, spaces, performances and narrations which are socially recognised as such and are thus necessarily part of a collective consciousness. At the same time, festivals are complex social phenomenon which concentrate very different layers of social existence in a limited time and space. Consequently, there is no one and unique collective consciousness expressed through a coherent cultural performance; the festival allows the very different sub-groups and individuals to express their visions of the world. In this context, the very notion of ‚heritage‘ and its related historic pattern emphasised by the 2003 UNESCO definition of intangible heritage are in the first place European (and by extension American) forms to symbolise and enact social continuity. Subsequently, the emphasise on tangible or intangible heritage in or through a festival is only one among different discourses which can be observed in a festival. Furthermore, the selection of objects or intangible forms by which heritage is operated is interpreted in and according to the cultural systems and structures proper to different social contexts.

For instance, by emphasising on the intrinsic aesthetic or humanistic values of heritage, various experts often enact themselves a narrative of human development and enlightenment. Social and political stakeholders, on the contrary, are habitually more interested in affirming social boundaries and using the academic discourse of experts in a metaphorical sense, to symbolise the communities or groups they are drawing on. Finally, external agents (including international tour operators, migrants, medias and development programmes) often use forms of heritage to formulate the specificities of so-called „local“ or „ethnic“ communities and groups. In the case of European outbound tourism, these formulations are usually based on communication categories proper to European society; the other is made meaningful by using thematic categories including ‚history‘, ‚tradition‘, ‚heritage‘, ‚economy‘, ‚gastronomy‘, etc. In many non-European societies, these categories are not part of the cultural systems. However, they can become intermediaries or vehicles of communication and exchange with the world „outside“, hence integrating such societies in larger – often transnationalised – social systems. This type of social innovation (expressed through the formulation and festive enactment of cultural heritage) has been observed in almost any society of the world. However, a resemanticisation process usually takes place transforming the complex and globally heterogeneous systems of meaning underlying the protection and exchange of intangible heritages in various social contexts. A social recognition of intangible heritage is hence achieved, often less for its aesthetic or historic value but for its capacity to exchange with the „global world“ and maintain peaceful relationships with the potentially dangerous strangers. The festive enactment of intangible heritage thus may become a form and symbol of global participation and citizenship.

- ¹ UNESCO (eds.): Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Paris 2003.
- ² Max Weber: Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley 1978 (1956).
- ³ Richard Bauman: Performance and Honor in the 13th Century Iceland. In: Journal of American Folklore, 99 (1986), 131-150.
- ⁴ Milton Singer: Traditional India: Structure and Change. Philadelphia 1959.
- ⁵ David Picard and Mike Robinson: Remaking Worlds: Festivals Tourism and Change. Clevedon 2005 (forthcoming).
- ⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss: Myth and Meaning. London 2002.
- ⁷ David M. Guss: The Festive State – Race, Ethnicity, and Nationalism as Cultural Performance. Los Angeles 2000.
- ⁸ Michel Maffesoli: Le temps des tribus. Le déclin de l'individualisme dans les sociétés de masse. Paris 1991.
- ⁹ Marie-Françoise Lanfant, John B. Allcock and Edward M. Bruner: International Tourism: Identity and Change. London 1995.
- ¹⁰ Krzysztof Przeclawski: Tourism as the Subject of Interdisciplinary Research. In: Douglas G. Pearce and Richard W. Butler (eds.): Tourism Research. London and New York 1993, 9-19.
- ¹¹ Frederik Barth: Les groupes ethniques et leurs frontières. In: Phillipe Poutignat (ed.): Théories de l'ethnicité. Paris 1995; Arjun Appadurai: Modernity at Large. Cultural Dimensions of Globalization. Minneapolis 2003.
- ¹² Georg Simmel: The stranger. In: The Sociology of Georg Simmel. Translation by Kurt Wolff. New York 1950, 402-408.
- ¹³ Mike Robinson and David Picard: Tourism and Photography: Artialisation, Experience, Memory. Clevedon 2005 (forthcoming).
- ¹⁴ Tom Selwyn: Introduction. In: Tom Selwyn (ed.): The Tourist Image. Myths and Myth Making in Tourism. New York 1996, 1-32.
- ¹⁵ James Clifford: Of Other Peoples: Beyond the Salvage Paradigm. In: Hal Foster (ed.): Discussions in Contemporary Culture. Seattle 1987.
- ¹⁶ Johannes Fabian: Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Object. New York 1983.
- ¹⁷ Eric Cohen: The study of touristic images of native people. Mitigating the stereotype of a stereotype. In: Douglas G. Pearce and Richard W. Butler (eds.): Tourism research. London and New York 1993, 36-69.
- ¹⁸ Nelson Graburn: Ethnic and Tourist Art: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World. Berkeley 1976.
- ¹⁹ Emmanuel Fauroux: Comprendre une société rurale. Paris 2002.
- ²⁰ Philip McKean: Towards a Theoretical Analysis of Tourism: Economic Dualism and Cultural Involution in Bali. In: Valene Smith (ed.): Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism. Philadelphia 1990, 119-138; Michel Picard: Bali. Tourisme culturel et culture touristique. Paris 1992.
- ²¹ Fauroux (see note 19).
- ²² William Rowe and Vivian Schelling: Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America. London 1991.