



INTANGIBLE MARITIME HERITAGE: A PUZZLING SUBJECT

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Authorities,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

The intangible cultural heritage, considered as an inseparable component of the material heritage of a country and its peoples has increasingly attracted the interest of national authorities together with private cultural operators contributing to direct their institutional tasks towards the identification, the safeguarding and finally the improvement of its often considerable intrinsic values.

The first initiatives were taken at the international level, by UNESCO followed, later, by the institutions of the European Union. Operational and normative actions were consequently engaged, supported by a strong public interest, generating often, and considerable touristic flows.

In 2003 the convention for the protection of the intangible cultural heritage of human kind, was promoted by UNESCO and ratified by 134 member states. It represents now the main international instrument aiming at the protection and enhancement of goods such as social practices, oral expressions, knowledge and traditional know - how, handed over from generation to generation, that communities, groups and individuals, consider as an expression of their cultural identity.

The 134 countries having till now, ratified the 2003 convention, look, at present forward, at the implementation of a permanent international cooperation, in order to achieve the statutory aims of the convention itself. Among the tools proposed, the 2003 agreements include the creation of two lists: the first representing the intangible cultural heritage items, as proposed by the concerned countries, and accepted by the intergovernmental committee handling this matter. The second includes elements of the intangible cultural heritage needing urgent protection. Countries having ratified the convention may obtain international financial support for their safeguarding proposals.

It is worth to recall that the convention attributes an important role to play in identifying heritage items in danger and promote consequent actions, to local authorities, universities, museums, civil regroupings and NGO's.

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Nevertheless, glancing over both lists, the one concerning the intangible cultural heritage goods of humanity and the second representing the items needing urgent safeguarding measures, we may notice that the maritime cultural domain is almost inexistent. In other words, dear colleagues, among the hundreds of items enlisted in UNESCO's catalogues, less than a few dozen intangible maritime cultural heritage items are represented. Our Mediterranean (including the Black Sea), incredibly rich, with ancient and complex maritime traditions as they were considered by the French historian, Fernand Braudel are simply overlooked!

The first question coming to our minds is: «why such a startling oblivion?» let's try to solve the riddle. Material heritage items, such as those preserved and displayed in galleries, museums and libraries are inevitably linked, together with buildings and monuments, to time and history. Minor or major historical events are attached to such items. Indeed, they play the role of a frame, a hard-boned skeleton supporting the evolutions of that elusive reality called culture which, like a mirror, reflects the identity of a country, as perceived by its leading actors. As such the above cultural items have been, since long, the object of investigations, studies, and classifications by all sort of disciplines, shaping curricula and educational programs.

Unfortunately a country's culture is never homogeneous. Its social layers and components, groups, sub-groups, communities, professions and trade-tenants, may show highly diversified cultural patterns, including religious or even linguistic features. Cultures and sub-cultures are moreover inherently unstable configurations, adapting swiftly to changing environments. A sudden technological innovation, such as steam powered engines in the sailing world of mid six century, or electronic equipments for navigation or fishing purposes, as in the recent years, may drastically change the, sometimes century old behaviours and organisational patterns of traditional seamen communities.

As a first approach to the question we raised above, we could safely admit, that the maritime intangible heritage, while at the core of the maritime cultural fabric is not well known. We are acquainted with ships and galleons, with admirals and historical battles, but we know much less about the many anonymous sailors and fishermen of our coastal communities, about their beliefs, their crafts and traditional know-how their songs, tales and foods or the ways by which they confronted fear and hardship at sea...

Maritime anthropology and ethnology are young disciplines, and the yield of knowledge they can provide us, is confronted with a fading world, with the last fragments of a homogeneous, nevertheless, fascinating seamen culture reaching us, from remote ages.

But, many other questions lay still before us, requesting our attention.

The notion of intangibility, for instance, when confronted with the patrimonial connotation of heritage entangles us, albeit unwillingly, in a net of puzzling queries. A first one is of a methodological nature:

«What sort of criteria should be adopted in order to identify and select an intangible cultural item to be included in an ideal list of patrimonial goods worth to be preserved in the interest of future inheritors?»

The know-how needed to build a wooden sailing boat, for instance, in use in a given community till eighty years ago, is bound to be lost with the departure of an old boat builder. The boat itself is, perhaps, kept in a maritime museum with other specimen of past maritime life; but, what to do with the intangible know-how of the old craftsman? Is it worth to record it, even if, that type of wooden artefact will never come to use again?

More questions rise nevertheless from our previous considerations:

What is in practice the intangible cultural heritage? Why should a new category for heritage be introduced in a world already haunted by the conservation of the past footprints? Is it ever possible to preserve living cultural expressions without freezing them? Who should do it, and more so, who is the owner of the concerned heritage?

Popular songs and dances have often inspired great musicians or choreographers whose works are presently part of a worldwide shared cultural fabric. their source of inspiration are forgotten, or perhaps still live following their own evolution within other social strata, or other countries. What shall we choose or do, methodologically and conceptually in our effort to build a meaningful cultural inheritance?

In fact, this puzzling patrimonial category is increasingly at the origin of controversial points of view among institutional and scientific actors. the intangible heritage category, the maritime one in particular, is perhaps still too young and in need of further experience in order to allow a full appreciation of its limits and potentials.

Controversy and academic disputes are, so to speak, natural components of our knowledge societies; the time frame of their interactions is however different from the social and cultural processes characterizing our seamen traditional communities showing both, the permanence of ages- old features together with irresistible pressures for change. Do we wish to know more about this changing world? Do we want to keep for tomorrow what is still at reach from this fading legacy? – Then, for this purpose, lets join hands with the coastal and island communities of our countries, they are the first concerned. Time is pressing.

This short presentation aims at inviting you, dear colleagues, together with the distinguished audience of the Kocaeli symposium, to join the efforts of the AMMM, the association of Mediterranean maritime museums, in partnership with the maritime museum of Istanbul, to explore further the components of the inner world of our seamen, and engage, step by step, cautiously, in a travel on these still uncharted seas, looking forward, like Sinbad the sailor, at wisdom and knowledge.

Thank you for your attention.

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