

Local Identity on the Global Stage: The Challenges of Representing Diversity

Struggle towards diversity

Emphasizing intangible and tangible expressions of heritage in a publication on *World Heritage and Cultural Diversity* presents the opportunity to discuss a variety of current and potential future challenges. These can be either epistemological concepts that promise potential for scientific investigation and reconstruction, professional challenges in the application of models and guidelines, or educational needs for the heritage community, and its academic development in the early twenty-first century. The difficult and often contested role of intangible heritage expressions in the context of World Heritage Sites is one of the aspects triggering ongoing discussion. Equally, the section heading invites an exploration of the interrelation of the two relevant UNESCO instruments, the 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention) (UNESCO, 1972) and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Heritage Convention) (UNESCO, 2003). Such explorations could be aimed at evaluating their early attempts at cooperation and their potentials for mutual enforcement. However, these aspects seem to have been discussed previously at a number of international university seminars, such as the University of Montreal round table – “Tangible and intangible heritage: two UNESCO Conventions” (Cameron and Boucher, 2007), or the Cambridge Heritage Seminar – “Tangible-intangible cultural heritage: a sustainable dichotomy?” (Baillie and Chippindale, 2007). Yet another focus could be on cultural diversity and the processes which link the representation of intangible and tangible heritage expressions to the promotion of cultural diversity under the auspices of UNESCO. It is this aspect which this paper seeks to explore in analysing and deconstructing the status quo of diversity representation in UNESCO's heritage Conventions. For this

purpose, cultural diversity is conceptualized in predominantly one of its range of characteristics, as the driving force and expression of a “common heritage of humanity ... [that] should be cherished and preserved for the benefit of all” (UNESCO, 2005, Preamble). Cultural diversity is produced by and expressed through heritage diversity and vice versa.

Diversity of heritage, or better the attempt to represent the cultural diversity of the globe through UNESCO heritage Conventions, is a fascinating and currently passionately debated endeavour. Coined by the UN standard concept of equitable geographical balance or representation (Thakur, 1999), this endeavour has been translated into a desire for representative and balanced heritage appreciation; an ambition that has become the stumbling block of UNESCO's heritage listing Conventions. This is not only evident in the long-lasting struggle of the World Heritage Committee to establish measures towards better representation of all cultural regions, which is best known under the name Global Strategy (UNESCO, 1998a; UNESCO, 1994), but has also already entered the discourses of the Intangible Heritage Committee, which has merely started its listing procedures.

The 4th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Heritage Committee) recently convened in Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates). Surprising to all representatives was the atmosphere of disappointment that surrounded the first official listing of expressions of intangible cultural heritage. The event, which according to the expectations of most delegates should have given opportunity for celebration, was perceived as a demonstration of failure to respond to the one central, not to say core, objective of the 2003 Convention. Since its very inception, the 2003 Convention was aimed at counterbalancing the perceived Eurocentric representation of the 1972 Convention and function as “a corrective to the World Heritage List ... [which] generally excluded the cultures of many states, particularly those in the Southern Hemisphere” (Kurin, 2004, p. 69). To promote especially the

cultural expressions of the Southern Hemisphere, the then Director-General of UNESCO, Koichiro Matsuura, advocated this new Convention which would reduce the North-South imbalance of UNESCO heritage listing activities, a phenomenon which he himself vocalized:

“When I myself chaired the World Heritage Committee, just before being appointed to head the Organization, I was nevertheless very conscious of an imbalance. This had to do with the geographical distribution of sites on the World Heritage List, which was more broadly representative of the ‘North’. That imbalance in fact reflected a weakness in our system, which, being exclusively concerned with protecting the tangible heritage, overlooked the intangible heritage and thus left out a great many cultural features that are nevertheless fundamental in a map of cultural diversity, often belonging to cultures of the ‘South’. There was no way UNESCO could really do its job of preserving cultural diversity without giving equal attention to its two basic ingredients, namely the tangible and the intangible heritage” (Matsuura, 2001, p. 1).

Taste of failure

Less than a decade later, the new convention is operational following a record number of ratifications in just a few years. The criteria for inscriptions on two separate lists, the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (Urgent Safeguarding List) and the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (Representative List), are defined in the *Operational Directives* (UNESCO, 2008b, paras 1–2) and first candidatures were received in 2008/09, with the first new entries proclaimed in late 2009. After only one single listing cycle following its new set of criteria, the so-called Representative List already showed a dominant majority of “Northern” expressions. Apparently this trend is neither what

the authors intended nor expected, and left some of them rather stunned. Given the spirit of “catastrophe” that surrounded the unexpected imbalance, most discourses of the Abu Dhabi meeting centred on attempts to explain what had happened, and exploration of potential ways and methods to redirect this early tendency. The key speakers, spearheaded by the Director-General of UNESCO, straightforwardly declared the failure of the 2003 Convention, at least with regard to its central aim of representing global cultural diversity. The first listing, intended to transport the message of rebalance, gave the wrong signal, as “this imbalance gives the impression that some regions have more intangible heritage than others, and you will all agree that this is not the message that you wish to transmit” (Rivière, 2009, p. 3).

Their concerns are quite valid, as the geographical representation of the first listing cycle indeed gives rise to severe doubts regarding the capacity of the instrument to address the existing bias. Submissions for the following cycle which have already been received do not promise improvement – rather the contrary. “Looked at objectively”, noted the Director-General, “this crucial, so-called representative list is hardly ‘representative’ from a global perspective” (Matsuura, 2009, p. 4).

Statistical analysis of representation of UNESCO regional groups underlines the above reactions.¹ For the purpose of simplification, a few groups of countries are focused on here, as they have been named by World Heritage List critics, as creating the most obvious impression of disproportionate distribution. Following the analyses in the context of the World Heritage Global Strategy and the ICOMOS *Gaps* report, regional imbalance on the World Heritage List is expressed first and foremost in a small number of cultural sites in Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean and a rather obvious over-representation of cultural

¹UNESCO’s 193 Member States are organized into six regional groups – (I) Europe (West), (II) Europe (East), (III) Latin America and the Caribbean, (IV) Asia and Australia-Pacific, (Va) Africa and (Vb) Arab States.

sites in Europe and East Asia (ICOMOS, 2004). The 2003 Convention established a slightly different discourse, that of North-South representation.

Considering groups and balanced numbers, there is on the one hand Europe and North America, a group of fifty-one UNESCO Member States of which thirty-four had ratified the 2003 Convention at the time of the Abu Dhabi meeting. To this group could also be added what may Eurocentrically be called the "Far East", with sixteen states of which eleven are parties to the 2003 Convention. This group is perhaps most representative of what is referred to as the "North" in the 2003 Convention discourses and as the well represented in the World Heritage framework. On the other hand, the so-called under-represented regions of the World Heritage List, or a sample of the "South", consisting of the Caribbean Region of twenty-five states of which sixteen joined the 2003 Convention; the Pacific Islands, fourteen states of which only one had acceded to the instrument; and sub-Saharan Africa with forty-five states of which twenty-four ratified at the time of the first listing.

Simple ratio calculation of merely these ratification numbers illustrates that apparently the convention written for the South has attracted a higher rate of ratifications in the North. It should come as no surprise that this will consequently lead to a higher Northern representation of activities in the Convention's lists and programmes. However, the imbalance of the first listing cycle expressed in numbers is really surprising. Following the division introduced, the North listed sixty-five out of seventy-six items on the Representative List (divided into twenty-three from Europe and forty-two from East Asia) while what was defined as the "South" listed only five intangible heritage expressions, two in the Caribbean and three in Africa. The Director-General of UNESCO arrived at similar concerns in his presentation of ratios on the basis of UNESCO regional groups:

"Of the 76 inscriptions made this week and the 90 elements incorporated into the List last year, 44 per cent are from one

single region – Group IV. The rest are distributed as follows: 16.9 per cent are from Group II; 13.3 per cent from Group III; 10.8 per cent from Group I; 10.2 per cent from Group V(a) and only 4.2 per cent from Group V(b)" (Matsuura, 2009).

Note that these statistics are still embellished by the inclusion of the Masterpiece incorporations (included in 2008 from the previous proclamations of Masterpieces), without which they would be even more alarming. For the 2009 cycle alone, 57.8 per cent of all incorporations are from Group IV, 22.4 per cent from Group II, 7.9 per cent each from Groups I and III and only 4 per cent from both Groups V.

Representations on the Urgent Safeguarding List draw a similar picture, with ten overall Northern expressions, of which three are located in Europe and seven in East Asia, which represent the North. In contrast to these ten, only two registered expressions in Africa count for the South. During the second cycle anticipated for November 2010, the situation cannot be expected to improve on either list, and the Director-General has already warned that "the marked geographical imbalance of these first nominations is likely to deteriorate in the future. Of the 147 nomination files received for inscription in 2010, 98 elements – or 66 per cent – are from Asia" (Matsuura, 2009), almost exclusively from those East Asian states previously considered as representative of the North. It actually seems that China, Japan and the Republic of Korea, who share forty of seventy-six entries in the Representative List during the first nomination cycle in 2009 – that is 53 per cent of all expressions – are competing for the highest number of entries, a tendency which is not very likely to stop soon.

Ambitions and stigmas

How did the policies of the 2003 Convention fail to address the potential of imbalance and why is its reality after only one implementation cycle so far removed from its envisaged objectives? First, we must acknowledge that the experts who drafted the

Operational Directives to the Convention clearly misjudged the ambitions of the Member States. While trying to maintain a distance from the World Heritage Convention in order not to repeat its mistakes, they may have done better to observe it as closely as possible in order to learn from its experiences. The experts for example reiterated on several occasions, with the support of the UNESCO Secretariat and a number of Member States, that the Urgent Safeguarding List should be the centre of interest as it provides the basis for international funding, support and cooperation, while the Representative List should be treated as merely a register, with a simplified listing process to create visibility for the diversity of heritage expressions. This interpretation does not seem to be shared by many States Parties, who are perhaps too familiar with the World Heritage Convention, where the World Heritage in Danger List – equally intended as a tool to facilitate funding and international cooperation - has throughout the years been perceived more and more as an instrument of sanction and stigmatization. Why should states volunteer or even make efforts to have their heritage placed on such a list?

The Director-General expressed surprise about this phenomenon, in particular as it contradicted all previous debates in the organs of the 2003 Convention.

“I want to be frank and express my dismay about the marked imbalance between the Urgent Safeguarding List and the Representative List. This is particularly surprising because during the elaboration of the Convention and in adopting the *Operational Directives* in June 2008, many countries repeatedly emphasized that the primary aim was to safeguard living heritage facing threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction. ... Yet, for the first accelerated cycle of the Urgent Safeguarding List, UNESCO received only fifteen nomination files, while for the Representative List, we received 111 files. ... Does it mean that we in fact are more concerned about the Representative List than the Urgent Safeguarding List? I hope not” (Matsuura, 2009, p. 3).

The proposals for the forthcoming cycles seem to confirm Matsuura's fear: 111 nominations in 2009 and 147 in 2010 (a total of 258) have been presented for the “less important” Representative List and only fifteen proposals in 2009 and five in 2010 (a total of twenty) to the Urgent Safeguarding List, the key list of the Convention (Khaznadar, 2009). Part of this phenomenon has been manufactured in the text of the Convention by accepting the incorporation of Masterpieces, then demanded by many States Parties. With the incorporation ceremony in Istanbul (UNESCO, 2008a), the Representative List, intended by experts to be merely a register, reflecting global diversity rather than a distinction, started off with the wrong signal. By including the expressions listed as Masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity recognized in the earlier UNESCO programme (UNESCO, 2001), expressions that had previously received honour and distinction were transferred to a new list which was consequently perceived in a similar way.

The consequences are rather alarming. We have on the one hand the Representative List, which is perceived as prestigious but has almost no entrance barrier and is already completely overwhelmed with nominations, and on the other hand the List of Urgent Safeguarding – inclusion into which is a far more difficult process but is yet awaiting increased attention. This situation is aggravated, according to the Convention's Secretariat, because the Subsidiary Bodies evaluating the candidatures and the Secretariat team are so overwhelmed with work caused by the sheer numbers of submissions to the Representative List, that no human and financial resources remain available for the most important tasks, especially support and capacity-building for the target states in the Southern Hemisphere (Khaznadar, 2009).

The balance of heritage diversity

Following this statistically coloured report on further UNESCO lists of growing imbalance, it seems worth the effort of returning to the key question of representing heritage diversity within UNESCO cultural heritage Conventions. How can diversity of all

heritage expressions be reflected in an international register? Policies and strategies may need to be developed towards solutions, but where to find such solutions? In strategic management it is often recommended to define a vision before outlining the particular policies and strategies required to reach the envisaged results. However, in this case defining a vision seems by no means easy. What would a perfectly balanced list look like? Would it be a list with the same number of expressions from each UNESCO Member State? Or with the same number of expressions from each geocultural region? Do we have to calculate a quota based on number of residents, geographical size and other aspects to serve the needs of very large and diverse countries such as China? However, such a quota would imply that a Pacific island state with more than 200 languages and cultural communities could only have very few expressions listed because of the limited number of residents and the small size of its territory. What does the ideal heritage list look like that we are all striving to achieve and which could constitute our vision?

Drawing on the example of the World Heritage List, which is generally agreed to be neither representative nor balanced, it may be extremely difficult if not impossible to reach mutual agreement on how balance could be achieved. The World Heritage Committee has spent fifteen years (since 1994) promoting a Global Strategy for a more credible, balanced and representative list, and has yet to define how such a desired product would look. Without a clear vision, it is equally difficult to define performance indicators or monitoring mechanisms. Accordingly, regular reports by the World Heritage Centre describing the slow but constant success of the Global Strategy, in their lack of indicators or established evaluation procedures, are not very convincing.

The Global Strategy was initiated sometime between the 11th Committee session in 1987 in Paris, during which the Committee for the first time reflected on the challenges caused by the high number of nominations and the under-represented or non-

represented regions and themes (UNESCO, 1988a), and the 1988, 12th Committee session in Brasilia during which, after ten years of operational listing activity, the World Heritage Committee was approximately at the same point that the Intangible Heritage Committee reached in its first year of full operation (UNESCO, 1988b). In the light of the heavy workload caused by the number of nominations and the unsatisfactory representation of several regions and themes, the Committee decided to conduct a “Global Study” described as “a retrospective and prospective global reflection on the Convention” (UNESCO, 1988b, p. 4). In addition – it was decided, after no clear consensus for future strategies could be reached – an informal working group should further explore opportunities to address the issues at hand (ibid.). The debates in Brasilia appear to parallel the recent Session of the Intangible Heritage Committee in Abu Dhabi. After establishment of a working group and lengthy discussions during which some key individuals – including the President of the General Assembly of States Parties – called for immediate draconian measures including a revision of the *Operational Directives* adopted only in 2008 to be considered during an extraordinary Committee meeting and General Assembly as soon as possible (Khaznadar, 2009, p. 3), the Committee in a lack of consensus reached the decision to establish a working group (UNESCO, 2009, Dec. 4COM.19).

After the initial establishment of a working group by the World Heritage Committee in 1988, it took six more years with five expert meetings and workshops until the adoption of the first Global Strategy at the 18th session of the Committee in Phuket in 1994 (UNESCO, 1995). The objectives for the implementation of the Global Strategy were more precisely defined another four years (and five expert meetings and workshops) later, during an expert meeting in Amsterdam in 1998 (UNESCO, 1998a), which proposed four medium-term objectives, one of which was “a more balanced and diversified World Heritage List” (UNESCO, 1998b, p. 16). This objective has remained as the key ambition of the Global Strategy, and is still included in

its full title: Global Strategy for a Representative, Balanced and Credible World Heritage List. Central measures of the Global Strategy have been thematic studies on under-represented themes and capacity-building initiatives to increase the availability of the Tentative List. These should be judged successful as indicated by the increasing number of Tentative Lists made available by Member States. In addition the number of nominations was limited to two per State Party and the number of overall examination of files per year restricted to forty-five. It cannot be proved at this point that these measures increased the representation of under- or non-represented regions and themes, but apparently, they managed to slow down the increasing North/South divide.

Conclusions

What can be learned from this particular experience? Is it that we have to accept that both lists will never be really representative and all efforts to redirect the process are in vain? There does not seem to be a clear positive or negative response to this question. Probably no list will ever be really representative, but that does not mean all efforts are free of commendable achievements. On the other hand, efforts are indeed short of meaning and purpose as long as they lack a definition of aim, that is, at least a basic idea what a well-represented list would be. In the process of trying to define the ideal of balanced representation, it may be worth being courageous and asking whether a numerical "equitable geographical balance" of sites or expressions on these lists is indeed a realistic or at least desirable vision.

In light of the continuing lack of numerical equitability, it is worth reconsidering if diversity and representation can indeed be reflected on numerical scales. The exploration of alternative models detached from regional groups and national boundaries should be encouraged. However, this would require in-depth brainstorming or rather a "diversity think-tank" within UNESCO or UNESCO-focused university heritage programmes. Students should be motivated to contribute to this rather unexplored field

so much in need of new ideas and innovative thinking. It seems that contemporary university programmes focused on heritage studies have a strong potential to provide new solutions to the dilemma. Several such programmes seem to have taken considerable steps forward to change and abandon the very notion of quantifiable representation, or already are implementing alternative approaches in their policies and student selection. About a decade ago, Lee remarked that heritage professionals consisted predominantly of middle-aged "European-American type academics" (Lee, 1999, p. 47) that would hardly allow any conceptual diversification to happen. While his impression is still somewhat predominant in international professional conventions, a visit to the university programme in heritage studies promises a new trend. Students from a variety of cultural contexts and geographical regions share their experiences and together explore new potentials for the decades to come. In consequence, the ongoing diversification of heritage professionals is probably one of the most noteworthy contributions to a better representation of cultural diversity in UNESCO heritage Conventions and a structural reconfiguration of the heritage discipline.

Until these young professionals gain voices in the international debates of UNESCO we may still face a transitional period of restrictive approaches. The World Heritage Convention will hold on to its policy of limited nominations per year and per State Party, which will probably be gradually expanded in response to political pressures. The Intangible Heritage Convention will introduce a similar system, as was already called for by the Assistant Director-General for Culture, "I have particularly in mind the suggestion that the number of nominations per state and per annum for the Representative List be limited to three" (Rivière, 2009, p. 3). Whether by limitation of candidatures or other measures, a revision of the listing procedures in the *Operational Directives* can be expected in the medium term. Most measures already proposed may help to slow down the increasing imbalance, predominantly because they would give the Secretariat more time to support nominations from

under-represented regions. But they will not, as in the case of the World Heritage List, be far-reaching enough to revise the general trend. A few experts such as Khaznadar call for draconian measures that turn the steering wheel around and redirect the course of the 2003 Convention, “the situation is serious and band-aid solutions, half-measures that amount to naught, the continuation of old habits and attempts to reproduce the World Heritage model are all out of the question” (Khaznadar, 2009, p. 4). However, these calls have not produced specific proposals for implementation and there remains much scope for academic researchers and creative student theses to help the UNESCO heritage listing Conventions out of this cultural diversity impasse.

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