

## Academic and Research Engagements Alongside Professional or Public Entanglements in the Field of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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This special issue of *Slovak Ethnology/Slovenský národopis* was commissioned by the main editor Ľubica Voľanská who was aware of our double role as academic researchers and actors in the diverse processes developing around the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. We took up the challenge of special issue editors that correlated nicely with our objectives when co-chairing the Working Group on Cultural Heritage and Property at the International Society for Ethnology and Folklore (in French: Société Internationale d'Ethnologie et de Folklore or SIEF) where we had addressed the role of researchers in this framework on various occasions. Thus the current volume grew out of our own previous collaborative explorations and sessions sponsored by the SIEF Working Group, to contemplate the impact of academic engagements and accountabilities that may concur with professional or public entanglements in the field of intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

The adoption of the UNESCO 2003 Convention has brought a novel concept into policy frameworks, as well as into academia with a snowballing effect. Ethnologists, anthropologists, folklorists, sociologists, economists, legal scholars, and researchers from other disciplines now engage in diverging research undertakings associated with “intangible cultural heritage”, both in their scholarly pursuits or through public services, which makes them reimagine and reshape their professional paths in relation to the

named global normative instrument in heritage policy that eventually affects living practices and expressions. Academic associations and networks likewise play their part in advancing research, producing relevant knowledge, engaging in policy analysis and aiming at probing novel employment opportunities related to “intangible cultural heritage”.

Transversal aspects of conceptualization of “intangible cultural heritage”, its governance, respective community involvement, and junctions to sustainable development have become a poignant part of research agendas. However, it appears similarly noteworthy that the number of academically trained professionals who become involved in the public heritage sphere is constantly growing when scholars take up various public engagements or contribute to policy analysis. Without doubt, also the latter feed into innovative research, and its best results remain steadfastly committed to reflexive research principles. At the same time, such complex entanglements call for continuous reconsideration of the researcher’s inquisitive and exploratory and critical stance in relation to heritage related policies, strategies and institutional patterns, or the act of knowledge production in general. Researchers become instrumental in generating discourses and crafting practices for making, breaking, reinterpreting and transgressing heritage related public rules. This invites the questioning of the role of a researcher, of research practices and of contemplating research ethics, as well as brings forth the need for novel skills and sensitivities. There emerge expectations, besides conducting fieldwork and interpreting or disseminating information on intangible cultural heritage, for heritage professionals to master the system of heritage governance, its mode of organizing and managing – in other words, the heritage regime on the ground. Possible partnerships develop with various actors and particular agencies.

Researchers with academic background are obliged to follow established standards in their studies and reasoning, while their scholarship is often combined with education and training. Thus the quality and accountability of expert knowledge is intricately connected to teaching and training, both training for a practice and training for a profession. The quality of a professional emanates from a respectful level of education and an acquired level of relevant skills that grant an individual both confidence and operational agency.

The selection of articles in the current special issue of *Slovak Ethnology/Slovenský národopis* therefore tend to reflect critically on the entanglements envisioned or discarded when professional research paths encounter the complexities of intangible heritage safeguarding attempts. Their inquisitive eye examines how to engage with this field in order to contemplate the agency of change, the institutionalization of knowledge, constructing and interrogating theories of practice, and contesting hegemonies. Based on our previous studies in disciplinary histories (e.g. Kuutma, 2016), we cannot but admit an imminent need for reconsidering or reinterpreting the disciplinary practices or imaginaries in the scholarly frameworks concerned.<sup>1</sup> One observes time and again the urge to reconfigure and reconceptualise the field, starting with an obligation to render the term “intangible cultural heritage” in one’s vernacular. The studies published

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<sup>1</sup> Matters were not made easier by the recent developments at the UNESCO Headquarters when the designated administrative section serving the 2003 Convention was renamed into “the Living Heritage Entity”.

reflect upon personal experience as professionals, experts, educators etc., involved in diverse facets of heritage governance. The more widely known conceptual backing requests here for a novel theoretical approach to make sense of the recent engagements in the multitude of roles, dialogues and negotiations, closely tied with international and national developments affecting the practice of scholarly disciplines, among which anthropology, folklore, ethnology and museology gain particular attention in this volume.

In their contribution, Cristina Sánchez-Carretero and Victoria Quintero-Morón highlight the contradictions and paradoxes embedded in the ICH safeguarding practices when introducing the concept of “multi-ontological dissonances”. This term attempts to explain the co-existence of diverse and conflicting heritage paradigms among the professionals and researchers operating in the field. Basing their conclusions in the case study of the Patios in Cordova in Spain, they argue that major frictions arise from applying safeguarding measures (including inventories, catalogues etc.) that are not adaptive to proper participation processes.

Ioana Baskerville, in turn, explores her personal involvement in the ICH inventorying in Romania and in preparing a multinational nomination to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on the Lippizan horse breeding traditions. She contends that the discipline of folklore studies in Romania has concentrated on the aesthetic or the artistic expression, or on archiving practices that highlight the objective of textualization. Thus she acknowledges the current need to turn one’s attention towards (re)discovering the contemporary strains of traditions in everyday life, with a goal to accommodate researchers as mediators between the grassroots communities and the bureaucracy of heritage management. Baskerville observes the vital input of folklore archives in the ICH inventorying processes, being substantiated by national legislation, and suggests reconfiguring the mission of the involved academic institutions.

Tóta Árnadóttir discusses the “gatekeeper” role of researchers in ICH inventorying on the Faroese Islands, bringing forth the challenge of retaining a critical scholarly perspective, when simultaneously trying to find a balance between the preconceptions of heritage communities, groups and individuals, and the interpretation of human rights, mutual respect and sustainability. She demonstrates how the internationally shaped concept of ICH gets entangled in national political agendas and social projects for identity construction, where researchers become downplayed by more powerful actors.

Kristin Kuutma and Anita Vaivade draw additional attention to creative collaborative scenarios developing among previously distant heritage communities who share a commitment to safeguarding their intangible heritage, who take advantage of the new cultural policy frameworks and cross-border funding schemes available. The case studies from Estonia and Latvia introduce the Seto and Suiiti respectively, both acknowledged by inscriptions on the UNESCO ICH lists. The Seto and Suiiti community leaders have consequently obtained particular agency, established novel partnerships and undertaken initiatives that did not exist prior to this intervention of international scope.

Eva Kuminková and Ilona Vojancová analyse in their article the role of professional engagement in a specific heritage institution, an open-air museum. They put a spotlight

on scholars specifically trained and dedicated to safeguarding ICH, who demonstrate learned respect towards heritage practices and skills in contributing to policy making. Their argument that is based on examples from the Czech Republic promotes the significance of open-air museums as valuable partners to ICH bearers, communities, the general public and to governmental institutions. These museums may serve well in inventorying, their researchers can participate in arbitration, in creative processes, or take up negotiating between divergent views in heritage interpretations.

Finally, Robert Baron focuses on graduate programmes in providing knowledge and skills for young professionals to undertake diverse roles when engaging with the ICH safeguarding. His reflections depart from the experience of learning and teaching folklore in the United States higher education system, where folklore studies largely combines the European disciplinary fields of folkloristics and ethnology. Baron suggests advancing a kind of professional training that integrates theory with public practice and aims thus at developing a theory of practice. Public folklore, if grounded in high standard education, has the potential to foster cultural brokerage, dialogism, activism and advocacy as well as reflexive practical interventions based on re-contextualization and re-framing.

When thinking about the geographical scope of authors as well as case studies gathered in this special issue, we notice the confinement or potential of national borders, another decisive paradox accompanying the simultaneously global and parochial ideologies advanced by UNESCO-related programmes, be they listing or inventorying or something else. National borders affect decisively heritage governance and the design of safeguarding processes through policy and legislative regulations. Heritage inventorying is more often than not embedded in national aspirations, primarily aimed at constructing and legitimising a national heritage. Preference is given to symbolically loaded heritage representations when targeting political ends, both in terms of local power play as well as international cultural diplomacy, which seems to ignore the gradually louder calls for inclusivity that the guidelines of the global organization attempt to promote. Then, national disciplinary and institutional histories may similarly impact and define the role of heritage institutions as well as configure and craft the present-day intangible heritage safeguarding practices, with instrumental ramifications on the position of researchers in this picture. In sum, one should be constantly alert to recognize progressive potential on the ground, to sustain novel and creative cross-border partnerships, direct dialogues and reciprocal impact of grass-roots collaborations. Established national imaginaries may eventually be subject to a continuous reflexive scrutiny by researchers and other heritage professionals who may partake a critical role of advocacy and engagement, thus influencing both the shaping and applying of sensitive, dynamic and flexible heritage regimes.

The main editor of *Slovak Ethnology/Slovenský národopis* has included yet one additional research article, beyond the thematic scope of the special issue, a contribution by Hana Urbancová who investigates the role of women in collecting folk songs in Slovakia. The volume closes with three book reviews, authored by Katarína Babčáková, Magda Paríková and Soňa G. Lutherová. Among them two reviews associate well with the theme of this special issue: the first one, introducing the book *Transforming, Not Saving. Intangible Cultural Heritage, Museums and/or the World* (Jacobs, Neyrinck, Tsakiridis, Eds., 2020), addresses connections between the intangible cultural heritage

and the work in museums; the second one analyses a monograph that explores the junction points between the concepts “authenticity” and “intangible cultural heritage” (Saupe, Samida, *Eds.*, 2021).

In addition to the critical stance presented in academic research agendas by default, we would like to broaden the reader’s scope by saying a few words on the UNESCO-driven initiatives in the same direction. This global organization and its instrumental branches and subsections undergo regularly the process of internal auditing, thus the implementation of the 2003 Convention was first evaluated by the UNESCO Internal Oversight Service in 2013 (UNESCO, 2013). The published document draws attention, among other things, to the necessity of research while providing positive examples of various initiatives on national level, when making also reference to a previous targeted effort to map that particular area (see Deacon, Bortolotto, 2012). Since that time, research related to the 2003 Convention has been expanding significantly, containing among others a comprehensive legal commentary of the Convention’s text (Blake, Lixinski, *Eds.*, 2020) and publications on legislative and policy developments at national level (e.g. Cornu, Vaivade, Martinet, Hance, *Eds.*, 2020). The Convention website includes also a reference list that introduces a part of the available publications in the field of research.<sup>2</sup> In sync with the rationale of this special issue, we may contend that besides the disciplinary variety observable in the investigation of heritage practices and processes, there seems to be a growing exigency and interest to comprehend and critically reflect upon the very role of researchers themselves in these processes, and the way they influence policy-making or arbitration, and in turn, to contemplate the effect that the emergent conceptual and policy transformations impinge on research carried out in different parts of the world.

Moreover, one possible option for highlighting and furthering intangible cultural heritage focused research could be related to various programmes under the auspices of UNESCO Chairs, founded by well-established academic institutions as a rule. Being holders of two such Chairs in our respective academic institutions, we may confirm an increasing interest in partnerships with stakeholder networks, including research projects. There are currently thirteen UNESCO Chairs focusing on topics related to the 2003 Convention in all its regional groups but the Arab States, developing research as well as education initiatives,<sup>3</sup> and with a hope of this scholarly network to expand, we look forward to further activities and impact within and beyond academic research. Likewise, the latest UNESCO Internal Oversight Service report insists on a particular attention directed at research (UNESCO, 2021: 42–44). Research was among the safeguarding measures acknowledged by the UNESCO 2003 Convention in its Articles 2, 13 and 14, whereas the urgency to strengthen dialogues between policymakers and researchers appears again underscored in this latest guiding document. Their extensive

2 *Research references on the implementation of the 2003 Convention*, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/2003-convention-and-research-00945> (Accessed November 30, 2021).

3 The first-ever Massive Online Open Course (MOOC) on Living Heritage and Sustainable Development has been launched in 2021, with the involvement of several UNESCO Chairholders active in the field of ICH safeguarding. This MOOC is developed in partnership with the UNESCO Chair on Research on Intangible Cultural Heritage and Cultural Diversity at the Autonomous University of Mexico, the International Information and Networking Centre in Asia and the Pacific under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHCAP) and the SDG Academy from the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

study of international scope, involving numerous stakeholders, claims that “the listing mechanisms have created opportunities for research and teaching and have inspired academics worldwide who use them as examples” (ibid: 19). The thematic issue compiled here similarly shows that the listing mechanisms, and the role of researchers therein, has incited certain self-reflexive approach more broadly, in order to better comprehend the transformative role of researchers affecting their respective academic fields they engage in, occurring possibly as a result of their professional or public entanglements in the heritage arena.

To conclude, we'll return to the instrumental disciplinary network that helped us collect the contributions at hand: this Special Issue of *Slovak Ethnology/Slovenský národopis* was sponsored by the SIEF Working Group on Cultural Heritage and Property, and prepared in thematic linkage to the SIEF 2021 Congress titled *Breaking the Rules? Power, Participation, Transgression*, as well as to some past panels organized by the Working Group at previous SIEF Congresses.<sup>4</sup> It brings together both advanced scholars and early career researchers, thus contributing to cross-generational academic dialogues, poignantly advocated by SIEF. An additional aspect worth mentioning in relation to the thematic emphasis of this volume, is the fact that SIEF stands as a non-governmental organization accredited to the UNESCO 2003 Convention to fulfil consultative functions, and that the present co-chair of the Working Group on Cultural Heritage and Property, Robert Baron, serves currently on the Steering Committee of the ICH NGO Forum of accredited NGOs. As former co-chairs of this Working Group, we wish to extend our gratitude to all its past and present members, for their enriching participation in scholarly discussions, common research projects and publications that have seen light since its commencement in 2008, partaking thus in reflections on the politics of cultural heritage, while holding the consequences of the UNESCO 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention under special consideration. We are convinced that this Working Group will continue to uphold a meaningful platform for active scholarly debates under the care of the co-chairs Robert Baron and Carley Williams, as well as the Board members Ioana Baskerville, Helmut Groschwitz, Katriina Siivonen and Alessandro Testa.

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<sup>4</sup> This volume also builds a thematic bridge with an international and mainly French-speaking conference on the 2003 Convention and normativity «Nommer/normer: approches pluridisciplinaires du patrimoine culturel immatériel» in Paris, 2020/21, under the “Osmose” research programme and sponsored by the SIEF Working Group on Cultural Heritage and Property, to discuss the role of researchers in the conceptualization process, the interactions between public administrators, researchers and communities, and the impact of the concept of “intangible cultural heritage/patrimoine culturel immatériel” on academic research.

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