

## Political Imperatives in the Heritage Regime and the Emergent Collaborative Scenarios on the Ground: Case Studies from the Baltics

**KRISTIN KUUTMA, ANITA VAIVADE**



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*Kristin Kuutma, Institute of Cultural Research, University of Tartu, Ülikooli 18, 50090 Tartu, Estonia; e-mail: kristin.kuutma@ut.ee; Anita Vaivade, Latvian Academy of Culture, Ludzas iela 24, LV-1003 Riga, Latvia; e-mail: anita.vaivade@lka.edu.lv*

This article studies the political imperatives initiated by the UNESCO-related normative instruments, and the emergent terms of engagement in the dynamics of collaborative participation, both on scholarly and community level. The authors share participatory experience and expertise in the field of intangible cultural heritage in policy-making and research, with particular interest in the aftermath of UNESCO ICH-labelling and list inscriptions. We reflect at first critically upon the progress and stance of decisions taken as well as the international discursive framework and debates where we have participated. We likewise contemplate the collaborative role of experts in the intangible heritage framework. In our comparative case study into the impact on local heritage processes in the Baltics, the post-nomination circumstance has generated novel community-driven and negotiated collaborative efforts. Both the Seto community in Estonia and the Sui community in Latvia have found diverse ways of using heritage resources for their own goals, but also in their continued creative collaboration where a growing self-esteem proves to be a solid basis. This investigation links community participation to the issue of agency, and its creative capacity to constitute and reconstitute with a substantial effect of generating action. We have discerned various moments of empowerment and creativity in local responses to transformational social and economic processes. Our research results foreground the functional capacity of creative collaboration as agency of change, where innovation and right to hybridity become enabling qualities.

*Keywords:* agency, expert, intangible cultural heritage, community participation, UNESCO

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## TERMS OF ENGAGEMENT

This paper proposes a comparative study of political imperatives of community involvement that are devised by the authorised heritage discourse and the locally refined modes of creative collaborative efforts on the ground. In other words, we take up here the commanding principles that have been developed into authoritative guidelines in the 2003 Convention heritage regime, that is, a system of governance and management. That being said, we want to stress that the major goal of this contribution to the volume at hand, stands as follows: to observe the dynamics of collaboration and participation on different levels, involving both expert representation and heritage communities concerned, which immanently concerns the work of disciplinary specialists trained as folklorists or ethnologists, and other fields related to heritage governance, among them legal scholars.

The current authors both have tasted participatory experience in the UNESCO policy-making framework when participating in, and following the relevant international debates, as well as in crafting of heritage governance guidelines. At the same time, we have been observing the post-nomination developments with particular heritage communities of the Seto and the Suiiti in the Baltics, in order to register local responses to an international recognition and to its impact on municipal or national governance of heritage. We have undertaken an essentially anthropological study into particular socio-cultural and legal processes when doing fieldwork at various intergovernmental meetings as well as among the case study communities, including interviews with community leaders/activists and making observations at community organized events.<sup>1</sup> In addition, we have carried out desktop archival research into meeting documents, local periodicals, publications, and with other sources available on the internet. Our methodology follows the principles of engaged research that is practiced in development anthropology, where the experience of insider participation is combined with the detachment of an outsider (see Mosse, 2011).

The theoretical background of our argument is formulated, firstly, in general terms, on the analysis of the community involvement that fundamentally entails participation, which extends also to the sphere of policy-making. We consider participation as an act of engaging in, and contributing to, the activities, processes, and outcomes of a communal undertaking, which in the cases analysed in this article include collaborative efforts in a global policy-making organisation and in communities of practice (or of place). Our ethnographic investigation in highly politicised settings entails the practice dubbed by anthropologist David Mosse to be that of “observant participation” rather than “participant observation” (Mosse, 2005). Such an approach also takes into account the human-subject in the practised culture of expertise, reflects anthropologically on experts and their role in the heritage regime formation (see Boyer, 2008). We likewise contemplate on how terms are used and understood in the partnerships emergent in

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1 We acknowledge here the oft-studied problematic and contested nature of the designation “community” (see, for example, Noyes, 2003). However, with the purpose of building up a broadly understood anthropological argument, we apply in our study the term and reference of “community” as a bounded social unit, leaving thus also aside the more specific conceptual demarcation utilized in the 2003 Convention related policy documents or debates.

the process of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) policy-setting debates, and among the communities of practice. Thus, we follow the lead of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern who calls to reflect on the “terms of engagement”, that suggest particular grounds, conditions, or rules (Strathern, 2021: 283).

Secondly, in concurrence with the rationale of the main theme of this volume, we take a closer look at the contingencies of expertise in heritage framework. When considering the mechanism and settings of heritage governance and relevant policy debates, one has to discern different agency and hierarchies of stakeholders, determined by the predicament of representation (see Kroeber, 2018; Kuutma, 2019b). The crafted guiding principles of heritage management involve the process of translation and knowledge transfer where the expertise of folklorists, ethnologists and anthropologists plays a substantial role.<sup>2</sup> A prominent heritage scholar Laurajane Smith has contended that the representational formations on global scale are shaped by a particular political imperative, that of the new authorised heritage discourse (AHD) in the field of intangible heritage, which apparently exceeds her previously discerned Western and class-specific treatment (e.g., Smith, 2006, 2015). At the same time the AHD political imperative has played a particular role in Eastern/Central Europe where the past nation-building processes often focused on pre-industrial rural (peasant) culture, which resulted in establishing a national scale AHD based on previous scholarly practices and imaginaries, when ethnographic and folklore collections served as building blocks for national identity (see Kuutma, 2019b: 160).

That has sealed forms of expertise that resort to scholarly preconceptions of cultural forms to be categorised as heritage which unavoidably freezes practices and cultural elements in time and space – in the authorised heritage discourse the temporal fixation of tradition remains paramount. It is particularly painfully played out in claims for authenticity and disparagement of hybridity. Without further dwelling on the complicated and largely problematized term, which is nevertheless of interminable quality, let us state that the idea of “authenticity” may become a political lever in managing the potential hybrids, it may work as a mechanism to hold the implied communities in control. The politics of authenticity relates to the politics of identity and the right to hybridity, whereas “bureaucrats, politicians and intellectuals deemed by the nation-states to be experts” may appear to lean more towards venerating the “purity” of heritage lifeways (see Rapport, Overing, 2007: 206). In our turn, we would like to contest this position by demonstrating that those actors may also complicate the picture when they remain prone to a meaningfully reflexive stance while recognising the dynamics of hybridity in a more nuanced way, and thus hopefully broadening the heritage perspective in general.

On the other hand, our focus in the case studies on particular communities complements the material of policy-making meetings in the field of intangible heritage substantially. The meeting setting brings forth the influential formulations of AHD, but we should take more into account heritage practitioners’ reactions and interpretations (Yarrow, 2017). Knowledge and ideas voiced at meetings should be complemented with practitioners’ views. Thus thirdly, when analysing community-driven collaborative efforts, we resort to the study of agency to glean moments that generate social change.

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2 For a more detailed discussion of disciplinary involvement see Kuutma, 2019a.

Through such participation community members themselves “become ‘expert’ at rationalizing – disembedding and recombining – elements of their own institutions or socio-ecologies” (Mosse, 2011: 5).

Agency denotes an individual or collective capacity for choice and action. However, in our case the prevailing Foucauldian understanding of subject position as constructed through discourse or ideology remains more marginal, when our current contribution concentrates deliberately on theorizing political and social change that brings forth the processual nature of social structure (see Giddens, 1979), or interprets it as a discursive idiom (Jackson, 1989: 20). Hence agency should be perceived as an ability to constitute and reconstitute, in order to notice creative interpretation and re-rendering. Agency is the capability, the power, to be the source and originator of acts; agents are the subjects of action (Rapport, Overing, 2007: 3). Here the notion of creativity becomes paramount, especially when highlighting creativity defined as activities that transform existing cultural practices, emerging from traditional forms but moving beyond to reshape them (Rosaldo, Smadar, Narayan, 1993: 5–6).

Fundamentally, the current study and article presents the manifold collaborative effort between the authors of this piece. In our joint activities we carefully attempt to retain a reflexive critical stance to our participation experience in/with the intangible cultural heritage regime, i.e. the system of organising and managing heritage governance. The observations we have made in the following have emerged from our collaboration in the last decades, although coloured by our own disciplinary training with complementary skills in anthropological or legal studies. This allows us to notice various problems or potentials with the target communities. Having said that, we finally want to acknowledge the rapidly escalating number of investigations dedicated particularly to the emergent effect of the UNESCO initiated programmes in the sphere of intangible cultural heritage. However, for the sake of economising with space, if not more, we have opted to validate the scarcity of their enlisting at this point by our own engaged observations made in a longer period since the operational functioning of the 2003 Convention, and name here just a few larger collections of articles, focusing mainly on this targeted UNESCO framework and its impact, e.g., Bendix, Eggert, Peselmann, *Eds.*, 2013; Adell, Bendix, Bortolotto, Tauschek, *Eds.*, 2015; Foster, Gilman, *Eds.*, 2015; Akagawa, Smith, *Eds.*, 2019.<sup>3</sup>

## OBSERVANT PARTICIPATION INTERNATIONALLY

Based on our participatory experience in representing Estonia and Latvia, we embrace a decade in the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter – Intergovernmental Committee). The assembled ethnographic data<sup>4</sup> lends us a solid ground for critical reflection upon the progress and rhetorical nuances of decisions taken, both on particular nominations as well as the

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<sup>3</sup> The actual publishing year was 2018, but the copyright notice shows 2019.

<sup>4</sup> These include: participant observation notes taken at various meetings on international, national, and local level; autoethnographic materials; interviews; meeting documents and reports; 2003 Convention website with targeted publications.

stance expressed. Kristin Kuutma participated in the work of the Intergovernmental Committee during its initial years between 2006 and 2010. She also represented Estonia on the Committee Bureau and chaired the Subsidiary Body on the examination of nominations to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (hereafter – Representative List) for the cycles of 2009 and 2010. Anita Vaivade represented Latvia in the Intergovernmental Committee between 2012 and 2015, and represented Latvia on the Committee Bureau, served on the Subsidiary Body for examining Representative List nominations and as Rapporteur of the Committee in 2014. We have been engaged in the general debates on the implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter – Convention), concerning its Operational Directives, identification, inventorying, sustainable development, ethical principles. But we could likewise follow the dynamics of crafting political imperatives of community involvement over the years. Kristin Kuutma observed how these conceptions and forms were generated to begin with, and Anita Vaivade partook in the recent developments of their employment.<sup>5</sup>

The paramount participatory role of communities became articulated in the original Convention text, to a large extent due to the input of folklorists, ethnologists and anthropologists, engaged in its drafting besides the legal scholars and experts who habitually draw up norm-setting documents.<sup>6</sup> The introduction of a participatory heritage safeguarding model had also a “strongly human rights-based orientation” (Blake, 2017: 41). Although community participation has become recognised as the major characteristic of the Convention, it was integrated in its text at the last minute before its adoption. Besides, the formulation – “shall endeavour to” – used in the respective Article 15 “Participation of communities, groups and individuals” of the Convention, does not set any concrete obligations to the States Parties (D’amico Soggetti, 2020: 293), that is, to the contracting states to the agreement. Also, in order to reach the global acceptance of this standard setting instrument, the concept of “communities” was deliberately left vague and undefined, and accompanied by “groups and individuals” thus combining both collective and individual engagement with intangible cultural heritage safeguarding and formulating stakeholder involvement possibly broadly. However, the Intergovernmental Committee has struggled with this notion from the start, mostly because of the decisive position of States Parties in the UNESCO arbitration system and operational mechanism. This continues to grant opportunities for various interpretations and strategies. It is indeed an untypical approach in the context of international law, to put a considerable emphasis on the central role of communities

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5 We share also manifold long-term experience with preparing nomination files and then carrying out follow-up research on the ground. Kristin Kuutma got initially involved in the early 2000s in the Masterpieces programme phase promoting the new Convention, to compile nominations for the Baltic Song and Dance Celebration and the Kihnu Cultural Space as a skilled researcher in the field; the Seto singing tradition was part of her dissertation. Anita Vaivade took part, under then professional duties at the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO, in preparing the nomination of the Suiiti Cultural Space, followed by the periodic reporting obligations as a commissioned researcher.

6 From the anthropological perspective, the participatory ideal in different heritage regimes and its entanglements with heritage administration has recently been critically analysed by Chiara Bortolotto – an anthropologist with a long-term experience in studying the 2003 Convention implications – together with her research team (Bortolotto, Demgenski, Karampampas, Toji, 2020).

and their agency, while the States remain the counterparties to international agreements, such as the 2003 Convention (Jacobs, 2020: 280; also Blake, 2009). The approach and policies vis-à-vis communities remain ambivalent and often conflicting in the 180 states that have ratified the Convention by July 2020, and national definitions of intangible heritage policy field may diverge (see, e.g., Vaivade, 2020). Thus, national or regional politics comes first, unavoidably.

The actual framework of community involvement had to be addressed in the context of establishing and implementing criteria for the 2003 Convention lists, Representative List and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (hereafter – Urgent Safeguarding List), as well as regarding the promotion of best/good safeguarding practices. These criteria were first designed at expert meetings where again the role of folklorists, ethnologists and anthropologists was remarkable.<sup>7</sup> But in the actual nomination process, starting with compiling the files and ending with their assessment, a lot of it boiled down to interpretation. We have observed quite divergent and even contradictory understanding of the notion of communities and the meaning of participatory approach among the regularly rotating 24 members of the Intergovernmental Committee. The ambivalence towards community participation has not faded, as similar questions become voiced whenever the Committee membership is renewed. Due to the fact that the list nominations prevail as the most urgent and major concern (especially pending inscriptions to the Representative List, which is quite contrary to the ideals foreseen in the Convention), the Intergovernmental Committee and its bodies continue to discuss these issues due to their pervasive presence in the inscription process. Beyond inscription process, where increasingly rigid rules are applied as to demonstrate the involvement of communities, groups and individuals concerned (and the same applies to the monitoring of inscriptions), “participation of communities, groups and individuals” (Article 15), as well as of “relevant non-governmental organisations” (Article 11) remains a core general clause of the 2003 Convention where a meaningful content needs to be given to both “participation” and its respective subjects through interpretation.

An international discursive framework has been strongly affected by advocating inclusiveness and preventing appropriation, and yet the debates we have observed eschew addressing the complex political limits to the participation ideal. The Committee has raised its concerns about “adjectives of nationality” (decision 9.COM 10 in 2014)<sup>8</sup> and reminded the objectives of the Convention as to “contribute to mutual respect among communities” while explicitly condemning “nation-building or even nationalistic purposes” echoed in nominations (decision 11.COM 10 in 2016), as well as reiterating, in broader terms and in response to the observed nationalistic aspirations and adjectives of nationality, “the need to elaborate nominations, including the titles of nominations, with utmost care in order to avoid inappropriate expressions or vocabulary that are not

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7 For example, Kristin Kuutma attended her first such events in 2006, among them the Expert meeting on Community Involvement in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Tokyo, Japan (13/15-03-2006, see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/events>), where she was invited to participate in drafting relevant guidelines even before the Convention became fully operational. Both before and after the adoption of the Convention, folklorists, ethnologists and anthropologists have partaken in various UNESCO-initiated expert meetings, an overview of which can be found in Smeets, 2021.

8 For the context of that decision see Vaivade, 2017: 327–328.

in line with the Convention and all norms and principles of international law” (decision 12.COM 11 in 2017). However, this whole exercise so far substantiates certain type of dispossession. Many States Parties to the 2003 Convention harbour interest in exclusivity and politicize national designations. Over the last years, we have observed concerns being expressed internationally about the impact of national borders on the identification and safeguarding of intangible heritage, in particular in the cases of constructing multinational nominations and an invitation to be inclusive to “all sub-groups sharing the same practices and traditions in their varied contexts across national boundaries, when appropriate” (decision 10.COM 10 in 2015). Since 2016, the issue of nation-building, nationalistic purposes of adjectives of nationality has not been reiterated by the Committee within its overall decisions on the yearly inscription process. However, “nationalistic aspirations” have been critically addressed also lately within the work of experts evaluating nominations, them being concerned “by the use of the Convention to claim historical, cultural, geographical and political ownership” (UNESCO, 2020: 16) and reminding “that inscription of an element should not be used as a means of claiming authenticity or ownership of that element” (UNESCO, 2021: 14). In parallel, and without a direct connection to these discussions, a scholarly reflection is ongoing on the minority and majority cultural rights and the quest for their balance under contemporary conditions of global migration (Orgad, 2015).

The Convention mechanism is profoundly implemented via national agendas and framework – and consequently this international arena simply avoids or carefully tailors (political) debates on diaspora, minorities, or migration. Regardless of the fact that these territorial ambivalences have always shaped agency in cultural expression. For instance, a proposal to integrate the concern about minorities in the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage did not meet support from the Intergovernmental Committee in 2015 (UNESCO, 2016: 187). We may also note that “minorities” and “diaspora”, and thus specific attention to these groups, are absent from the formulation of “inclusiveness” provided within the Overall Results Framework adopted for the Convention in 2018 by the General Assembly of its States Parties. Notwithstanding the lack of a direct attention to minorities at the international discourse on intangible heritage (be they recognised as “national minorities” or without having a politically or legally defined status), we see this attention being present and, on some occasions, even prominent at the national level. What interests us here specifically is how such policy attention plays out within the dialogue, beyond national borders, between respective communities, and how that influences their actions with regard to their own heritage.

Although the Convention puts a “renewed dialogue among communities” at the forefront, in its Preamble (UNESCO, 2003), recognising the conditions that globalisation and social transformation create in that regard, this aspect has remained seldomly addressed further in the Convention and within its accompanying texts. On the one hand, this pertains to the specificity of the intergovernmental setting of the Convention as an international agreement focusing on the actions and responsibilities of the States Parties, including for creating favourable conditions for the agency of the communities, groups and individuals in their respective territories. On the other hand, the avoidance of debates on diaspora, minorities, or migration that we observe, is an indicator of the worldwide impediments and stumbling blocks on the way of intergovernmental

discussions concerning cultural identities of communities or their political histories. These difficulties, however, need not be an obstacle when it comes to direct collaboration among communities themselves. With our case study we want to present an example of such a collaborative practice and relevant agency construction, even if being related to a quest for a political recognition furthered by community representatives and activists within their respective States.

## COMMUNITIES CLAIMING AGENCY IN HERITAGE GOVERNANCE

The stated international heritage imperatives have their impact on local heritage processes, to be considered or contested. When observing the post-nomination circumstance, our comparative case study considers community-driven and negotiated collaborative efforts. The international heritage imperatives imply a shared responsibility for heritage safeguarding and a continuous dialogue involving the parties concerned, be they communities, their representative organisations, heritage related groups or individuals, competent governmental – including municipal – bodies, or other. They also imply expectations, directed towards governments at various levels, for facilitation through policy and legal provisions and for an inclusive process, enabling local communities to participate in decision-making and problem-solving processes. Nevertheless, the presumably more functional and effective safeguarding processes often rely on community stewardship and their agency in attaining a self-directed (social) change (see Bauman, 2000).

We offer here for consideration two examples: in 2009 the Seto singing tradition *leelo*, nominated by Estonia, was inscribed on the Representative List, and in that same year the Suiti Cultural Space, nominated by Latvia, was inscribed on the Urgent Safeguarding List. The Seto reside in the south-eastern corner of Estonia in the border zone with Russia; their language has explicit and archaic features differing from standard Estonian, but being yet very close to their immediate western neighbours; their religious practices are Greek Orthodox, in contrast to the historically prevailing Protestant Lutheranism among their western neighbours; their historical administrative linkages to Russia were distinct up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Suiti reside in the western part of Latvia; they have a distinguished accent and form an island of Catholicism among the neighbouring Lutherans, as a result of communal self-isolation due to the Reformation-related religious discord in the 16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries. These segregating factors have fed into engendering an explicit local identity and culture.<sup>9</sup> Both these communities are relatively small and remained marginal from the national perspective but they were particularly foregrounded by the 20<sup>th</sup>-century ethnographic researchers who became fascinated by their cultural practices, namely by the many-part singing characteristic to both the Seto and the Suiti. This interest and their quaint cultural practices gradually introduced and labelled them for the mainstream population. The national Seto and

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<sup>9</sup> Although historically religious affiliation has been a defining factor in their distinct communal identity, no creative collaboration aspects have emerged in that sphere, neither across border with the Seto and the Suiti, nor inside Estonia where also the Kihnu islanders are Greek Orthodox.

Suiti nominations for the UNESCO lists under scrutiny here, however, were based on the local initiative. Interestingly, for both of them the initial trigger came from the Kihnu island in Estonia where they had visited for soliciting advice. The Kihnu Cultural Space was nominated and proclaimed a UNESCO Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, under the preliminary programme launched to promote the Convention in making; and in 2008 the Kihnu cultural space was integrated into the Representative List, together with other such proclamations.

Despite the overall exemplary participation of communities in the UNESCO-driven intangible cultural heritage safeguarding activities in cases presented here, it is nevertheless an individual who is the most decisive source of motive power. In both, in the Seto as well as in the Suiti case particular individuals have furthered the cause. Those individuals also need to find recognition by local or regional municipalities, which grants them certain political position. Thus, there is a moment of collaboration that eventually extends to governmental level, in order to find formal national acknowledgement through stating their communal agency. Particularly in the context of individual agency, one can observe essential shifts. With the Seto, the last decades have witnessed a considerable empowerment of the public manifestations of Seto identity. Similar processes are taking place among the Suiti, and the cause for their cultural continuity has gained increased attention among the local municipal administration.

After the international heritage inscriptions of both the Seto and the Suiti, there have been shifts of power and diverging opinions among various groups within communities on local political developments. Also, there have taken place particular dynamic processes that involve on-going negotiations and search for mutual understanding between community representatives, local municipalities and State institutions, which have resulted in special regional development subsidies in Estonia and cultural heritage-oriented subsidies to community organisations in Latvia. Both the Seto and the Suiti communities, being regionally grounded, are continuously facing the realities of administrative territorial divisions, of the re-organisation of regional (in Estonia and Latvia) or political (Estonia—Russia) borders, and the coveted or contested options for local governance in their respective municipalities. These political processes also demand a continuous engagement from community activists, their supporters and their organisations to be equipped with argumentation to defend their views and visions about community development.

Over the last two decades, the Suiti have faced two administrative reforms – in 2009 and in 2021 – and both were considered by a part of the community as being in defiance of their interests. This led to two applications to the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia, submitted by the local municipality but with no result regarding their cause. One has to note, however, that the opinions within the Suiti community have not been unanimous on this matter, while both reforms have sparked diverging positions, which has also influenced their inner collaboration and caused marked internal tensions. In addition to the municipal representation, other paths have been sought after over the years. The governmental and non-governmental stakeholders have signed several memorandums of cooperation, whereas the number of non-governmental organisations has slightly increased, changing thus the landscape of stakeholders who now seek governmental recognition. In spring 2020, an association named Suiti parliament (*Suitu parlaments*) was established, based on voluntarily registered members and operating

through elected representatives.<sup>10</sup> The whole initiative was inspired by the example of the Seto parliament (*Seto kongress*), an annual gathering of elected community representatives. Although the administrative reform was carried out, it has brought along a consecutive political and legislative enterprise to provide cross-sectorial support for safeguarding distinct cultural identities in historical regions and in cultural spaces. In a similar vein, the Historical Latvian Lands Law was adopted in the summer of 2021, accompanied by a map which included also the Suitsi Cultural Space. While respective policies are still under way, at least the policy-development process was started by governmental institutions in dialogue with the Suitsi community representatives.

Regarding the Seto in Estonia, the general State Administrative Reform has altered the socio-geographic conditions for the Seto community considerably since 2017, which resulted in the establishment of a new administrative unit *Setomaa* (the Seto municipality) that joined three and a half previously diversely affiliated municipalities.<sup>11</sup> Although the community decision was not unanimous with substantial frictions and hesitations, this change has brought about a new boost to the local identity manifestation and concurrent collaboration programmes.

Despite the tensions regarding political decision-making, be it on administrative reforms or other matters, for the State these communities appear to be conveniently “safe” partners to be placed under the spotlight from the national perspective (see Tsing, 2013). They are marginal and idiosyncratic enough to serve as “minority groups” for internal or external auditing. At the same time their positive promotion substitutes or shrouds the crucial question of encompassing in the heritage-framework the existent proportionate ethnic minorities both in Estonia and Latvia, mostly Russian-speaking. This indicates the limitations and exclusions observably present in the pre-conceived imaginaries that actually determine what (or who) could take the prominent representative position in the celebrated national heritage framework. On the other hand, communities are not homogeneous and they provide likewise versatile arenas for multidimensional powerplay.

## SETO AND SUITI COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES

Although our research has indicated obvious grievances resulting from the UNESCO-lists-inscription – like dissatisfaction with the availability of government funding, escalating branding projects with concomitant appropriation of cultural space and practices, moments of disillusion and dispossession, internal power struggles – we want to focus here more directly on creative collaborative scenarios.

For the Seto and the Suitsi their vernacular expressive culture simultaneously includes cultural practice and space, regardless of the strategic choices of labelling used in the

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10 This association has not been registered as a non-governmental organisation and operates on non-formal grounds. It is a group of community members and other individuals who strongly support the independent self-governance of the Suitsi at municipal level. This position, however, is not shared by all community members, and it is not comparable to, for instance, the local Sámi Parliaments in Scandinavia.

11 Information on the course of this reform is available on a governmental webpage of the Ministry of Finance of Estonia at <https://www.rahandusministeerium.ee/et/kov/haldusreform>.

nomination processes. What is quite obvious is the advancement of self-esteem with the concurring recognition and targeted focus on cultural practices that had been gradually marginalised into quaint folklore. In this context their observable creativity and resourceful approach was demonstrated when producing new events and scenes for their heritage practice: both the Seto and the Suiiti have generated novel festival occasions, which also promote their singing practices. If previously the Seto or the Suiiti traditional many-part singing was largely known through the performance of women groups (in the Suiiti case even exclusively), then today there have newly appeared also men groups. Festivals are also mutually promoted, with reciprocal visits to the partnering community to pay tribute and actively participate in each other's undertakings.<sup>12</sup>

But the most striking developments occur in the communal Seto–Suiiti collaboration that had never existed before. Seto and Suiiti community leaders and activists exchange information and experience; they learn from each other how to put pressure on their respective administrative government offices; they draw joint projects to apply for the European funding; they work on educational and economic projects; they interchange singers to participate at their respective festivals, and they socialize.

Estonian–Latvian cross-border cooperation projects (financed partly by the European Regional Development Fund) have involved a number of activities, largely focused on education and awareness-raising among youth. Both the Seto and the Suiiti community activists and the local representative NGOs/associations established by them have initiated the promotion of traditional farm architecture, and they publish publicity materials for visitors into the region. The Seto invited the Suiiti to their summer university, and the Suiiti arranged youth summer camps *Little School of Traditions* for learning about Suiiti and Seto culinary heritage, crafts, games, dances, songs and stories. Such a camp was first organised in 2014, as part of the cross-border cooperation project titled *Supporting the Renaissance of Seto and Suiiti Ethnic Cultures* (abbreviated as *Seto-Suiiti Renaissance, 2007–2013*) and continued to take place also the following years. The Suiiti share their experience in relation to their cooperation practices with local governments; the Seto share their experience in working with and benefitting from regional development programmes. A recent cross-border programme was titled *UNESCO tourism (2017–2020)*, extending their cooperation to the Kihnu and the Liv communities, respectively in Estonia and Latvia, and resulting in numerous activities and outputs contributing to tourism development in the respective regions (European Regional Development Fund, 2020).

These collaborations have enhanced cross-border dialogue among community members and have influenced their practices for using heritage as a resource for development choices. The Seto and the Suiiti have obviously benefitted from the cross-border collaboration funding schemes applicable in their region. Also, the opportunities of the Erasmus+ programme have been successfully used to expand partnerships. For instance, the consortium *Network of UNESCO Cultural Spaces (2021–2023)* includes, along the Suiiti and the Seto, also their source of inspiration – the Kihnu cultural space in Estonia, as well as partners in five other European countries. This and other consortium projects are fully driven by the non-governmental sector.

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12 Understandably, the year 2020 brought along a COVID-19-hiatus for the festivals, as well as other initiatives and collaborative practices, shifting a part of such communication to virtual modalities.

What concerns the Seto, their historical and geographic circumstance favour also other collaborative initiatives: with the neighbouring region in Russia, where a small group of inhabitants of Seto descent still reside, and also with their other neighbours in the Alūksne region in Latvia. However, one may assume that the Seto community might not appear to be such an attractive consortium partner without the UNESCO label, which has served well in a number of undertakings not necessarily planned or imagined prior to the nomination process.

Regardless of the obvious success in establishing agency for community members in both communities, it seems, nevertheless, that the Seto community has been somewhat more successful in “re-inventing” themselves. But one has to acknowledge here the advantage of the establishment of a separate administrative district. This has greatly boosted local intangible-heritage-related economic development, both traditional and innovative, with the major sector involved being tourism, be it domestic, cross-border, or international. The Seto have claimed manifold public visibility, utilising the UNESCO designation, as well as other available symbolic capital, like obtaining the European Union’s label of a protected geographical indication for *sõir* – local cottage cheese – characteristic to the geographical area of Vana-Võromaa and Setomaa in Estonia. A similar modality of recognition and protection has been used for a traditional food product characteristic to the Suiiti, and more broadly in the western part of Latvia, namely *sklandrausis* – a round pie made of rye-flour crust filled with boiled potato and carrot layers – that has been included in the European Union’s register of traditional specialties, presented as “Latvian national dish”, although recognising historic linguistic connections to the western part of Latvia. In broader terms, the Suiiti community makes a great effort in trying to receive the appropriate governmental recognition, in particular beyond the rather random financial support in the cultural sphere. On the other hand, these conditions have enhanced community agency to raise funding through diverse sources, and this has overpassed the initial intent, which has brought along numerous projects and initiatives. Currently, one may notice somewhat cautious expectations in connection with the emergent policy initiatives and their accompanying financial measures to support historical regions and cultural spaces in Latvia.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have focused on the political imperatives and terms of engagement in the dynamics of collaborative participation, both on scholarly and community level. Our expertise and involvement in the field of intangible cultural heritage particularly on the international level has given us further insight into and recognition of the significance of the particular case studies. It has drawn our substantial interest into the aftermath of UNESCO ICH-labelling and list inscriptions, and to the cross-border influence as it has been played out on community level.

The Seto community in Estonia and the Suiiti community in Latvia have both their experience with UNESCO nominations, and both find diverse ways of using heritage resources for their own goals, but also in their continued creative collaboration. While international cooperation modes and imperatives, and also national policies provide a particular frame for potential collaborative initiatives, communities nevertheless

remain as initiators as well as decision makers for the activities to come, and a growing self-esteem proves to be a basis for developing alternative collaborative scenarios.

In our investigation we linked community participation to the issue of agency, and its creative capacity to constitute and reconstitute with a substantial effect of generating action. Our observations and analysis gleaned the moments of empowerment and creativity in local responses to the socioeconomic or socio-political processes affecting their situation, which were simultaneously geared towards interactive participation. These research results highlight the functional capacity of the emergent collaboration as an agency of change, which may eventually accentuate various options for innovation that give rise to new social and economic activities with enabling qualities.

These inventive undertakings by local community activists that the larger community gradually adopts demonstrate the permissive stance of hybridity, where a preconception of traditional practices becomes irrelevant. It results in a self-motivated and self-directed change, which was nevertheless ignited by the heritage regime imperative.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

KRISTIN KUUTMA – (PhD) is Professor of Cultural Research and holds the UNESCO Chair on Applied Studies of Intangible Cultural Heritage at the University of Tartu (UT), Estonia. She leads the UT Graduate School of Culture Studies and Arts and has served on several international academic review boards. She obtained her PhD at the University of Washington (USA). Kuutma chairs the Estonian National Commission for UNESCO, and continues to represent Estonia on the 2003 Convention Intergovernmental Committee organs. In 2006–2010 she led the Estonian delegation as a Committee Member, and presided over the Subsidiary Body to evaluate inscription nominations under the Convention in 2009 and 2010. Kuutma has carried out extensive fieldwork on the concurrent policy-making and implementation, holding relevant research grants like *Cultural heritage as a socio-cultural resource and contested field*. Her numerous publications in cultural anthropology focus on disciplinary histories, knowledge production, representation, and critical heritage studies.

ANITA VAIVADE – (PhD) is Adjunct Professor and Chairholder of the UNESCO Chair on Intangible Cultural Heritage Policy and Law at the Latvian Academy of Culture. After master degrees in sociology and legal sciences, she defended her doctoral thesis on the Conceptualisation of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Law. She has served as Culture, Communication and Information Sector Director at the Latvian National Commission for UNESCO (2006–2012) and led Latvian delegation to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2013–2015). Since 2014 she is co-leading *Osmosis* research project, an international study on national laws related to intangible cultural heritage. Anita Vaivade joined the UNESCO global network of facilitators in the field of intangible cultural heritage in 2017. She undertook in 2020 her three-year postdoctoral research project *Intangible Cultural Heritage as Resource for Sustainable Development in Northern Europe: Rights-Based Approach*.