

10 Cultural Tourism and Intangible Heritage: A Critical Appraisal and Policy Guidelines

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Chapter summary

The relationship between tangible heritage and tourism is a delicate issue due to the commercial excrescences of tourism which often endanger the preservation of historical sites or buildings. This is even more so with the relationship between intangible heritage and tourism, as traditions and social practices are extremely vulnerable because of their immaterial nature. Hence, the key question is: How can sustainable forms of tourism be developed in order to respect the integrity of the intangible heritage? As tourism is often seen as a threat to cultural diversity, UNESCO is hesitant to invoke the help of the tourism industry for the preservation of traditions. At the same time, tourism is considered indispensable because it brings in revenues that can be used for the safeguarding of cultures. Moreover, tourism could strengthen local people's self-respect by attracting new markets of visitors interested in their traditions. This chapter argues that cultural tourism can contribute to the sustainable preservation of intangible heritage, but that warrants are necessary to realize this objective. That is why various policy guidelines are proposed to counter the risk of commodification. Provided that the assistance and the collaboration of communities who still practice living traditions are guaranteed, it is possible to develop successful projects from which both tourism and the intangible heritage can profit.



Figure 10.1: The Mexican Day of the Dead, a traditional event evolved into a popular tourist attraction (Photo by the author).

Introduction

Traditionally, cultural tourism research has most often been focused on tangible heritage. It is about the study of tourist visits to physical objects like museums and monuments and about heritage preservation through visitor management. But there is also the so-called *intangible heritage*, and in particular popular festivities and traditions that attract tourists (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998). The example of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, a colourful, carnival-like feast that consists of dancing and eating numerous sweets, shows that even funeral customs can be transformed into a tourist attraction (Van der Zeijden, 2012). The Day of the Dead was one of the first examples to be put on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage and is at the same time one of Mexico's most popular tourist events. The website *Go Mexico* discerns a top seven of popular 'dead destinations', such as Oaxaca where dark tourists can 'witness vigils in a variety of cemeteries and take part in night-time carnival-like processions called *comparsas*' (see also Karel Werdler, this volume, Chapter 8) [Figure 10.1].

Within UNESCO there is much debate about the possible negative effects of tourism, which may transform intangible heritage into a commercial commodity, and the Day of the Dead in Mexico is certainly an example of this transformation process. This chapter argues that cultural tourism can contribute to the safeguarding of intangible heritage in a sustainable fashion, but that warrants are necessary all the more because intangible heritage tourism presents specific risks and dilemmas related to its living character. That is why we will propose a set of guidelines that uses cultural tourism in a way that is profitable for all stakeholders. By dealing with these issues from the perspective of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), the argumentation aims at convincing the ICH sector that it can benefit from tourism for the preservation of ICH.

Tourism as a danger and a challenge to intangible cultural heritage

It is not well-known that, apart from a convention on the world material heritage, UNESCO also adopted a convention for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in 2003. This convention is about traditions and social practices and how to keep these viable for the future. It aims at 'ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage', including 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage' (www.unesco.org/culture). The convention formulates an answer to 'processes of globalization and social transformation' which may give rise 'to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage' (ibid). Tourism as such is not mentioned in the convention text, but it is safe to presume that international mass tourism is considered one of the threats to the cultural diversity of intangible heritage. Indeed, the subject tourism is treated in a very cautious manner in the operational directives that accompany the UNESCO convention. Article 102e states: 'All parties are encouraged to take particular care to ensure that awareness-raising actions will not lead to over-commercialization or to unsustainable tourism which may put at risk the intangible cultural heritage concerned' (ibid). Article 117 says: 'Particular attention should be paid to avoiding commercial misappropriation, to managing tourism in a sustainable way, to finding a proper balance between the interests of the commercial party, the public administration and the cultural practitioners, and to ensuring that the commercial use does not distort the meaning and purpose of the intangible cultural heritage for the community concerned' (ibid).

UNESCO warning signs are always on the alert. So the Intergovernmental Committee rigidly examines requests submitted by States Parties for inscription on the international intangible heritage list. During the Intergovernmental Meeting in Paris in 2012, some of the proposals were criticized precisely because of the risk of commercialization. For instance, the draft decision on the Mongolian knucklebone shooting, a national shooting sport in Mongolia, states: 'A number of measures are proposed, aiming essentially at commercial expansion of the practice, but further information is needed on the communities' participation in the safeguarding of the element and on measures to protect it against possible over-commercialization and unsustainable tourism as a consequence of inscription' (ibid). This was reason enough for the Intergovernmental Committee not to accept this tradition for the intangible heritage list. Another example that was discussed in Paris was the practice of carpet making in Kyrgyzstan. As handicrafts are always made for a specific market, there is always a commercial aspect implied, the more so because in this particular case it was not the local population who bought the carpets, but tourists from a neighbouring country. Some of the delegates in Paris considered this as changing the carpet into a commercial commodity.

UNESCO seems to be very reluctant to invoke the assistance of the tourism sector. At the same time there is a growing awareness that tourism is sometimes indispensable for creating a sustainable future for intangible heritage. This issue was discussed during a regional UNESCO meeting in Vietnam in 2007 entitled *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage and Sustainable Cultural Tourism: Opportunities and Challenges* (UNESCO and EHHCAP, 2008). The proceedings discern three broad categories of intangible heritage where tourism can come into play: handicrafts, performing arts and living heritage. Not surprisingly, these elements qualify for tourism purposes because they involve something that tourists can experience, for example traditional events like a religious procession or a ceremonial wedding. Sometimes tourist interest and attendance are even indispensable for the tradition to survive. Indeed, tourism is referred to not only as a means of 'bringing in revenue', but also as having 'the capacity to strengthen local people's self-respect, values and identity, thereby safeguarding aspects of their intangible heritage and enhancing their development potential' (unesdoc.unesco.org). One of the examples given in the UNESCO publication is the case of the Hmong, an ethnic group living in Sa Pa in North-West Vietnam (UNESCO and EHHCAP, 2008). The Hmong have a specific tradition of making clothes, from the first stages of growing and processing hemp to weaving, dying with indigo and embroidering (Hanh, 2007). Since the old market for these products had disappeared, the Hmong needed an alternative. When Sa Pa became a tourist resort, the Hmong saw an

opportunity to sell these traditional clothes to tourists. However, as these clothes were rather plain, new products were developed, which are more attractive for tourists, including bags, hats, shirts, blankets and pillow covers, but which the Hmong had never made for themselves. In this way, the new tourist market enabled the Hmong to keep their old craft skills alive. There is also a report by the United Nations World Tourism Organization entitled *Tourism and Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNWTO, 2012) that mentions the positive effects of cultural tourism, for instance the development of new routes or bundling attractions to create a themed set with a stronger market appeal. In the Netherlands, too, there is growing urgency for finding new meanings for old traditions. This is, for instance, the case with some of the Catholic processions that to some extent have lost their original religious functions and meanings in the increasingly secularized Dutch society. Here again the question is whether tourism might bring in new functions and new meanings.

De-contextualization and folklorization

UNESCO's main concern is that new forms should not violate the integrity of the original 'pure' and 'authentic' ICH context. In the UNESCO report resulting from the Vietnam meeting this is called the problem of *de-contextualization* (UNESCO and EHHCAP, 2008). What is more, tourism can change not only the context of the tradition but also the content. There is a difference between the Hmong making clothes for fellow kinsmen or for tourists. The preferences of the visitors become leading instead of the needs and wants of the Hmong. One step further is to stage traditions especially for tourists. In the tourism research literature this is called *staged authenticity* (MacCannell, 1973). How authentic is a traditional wedding ceremony in some parts of India, when indigenous couples marry over thirty times a day just for the sake of the tourists? This is obviously a case of over-commercialization.

It is worth looking at this issue from the perspective of ethnology, the academic discipline which studies daily life in all its different aspects. As all ethnologists know, *authenticity* is a problematic concept due to its connotation of 'original' and 'pure' (cf. Melkert and Munsters, 2010). This connotation may contribute to the creation of an idealized and unchanging picture of ICH, whereas in reality ICH is 'constantly recreated' in the wording of the UNESCO convention (www.unesco.org/culture). ICH is something that always changes in line with changing historical circumstances and it might even be this permanent evolution that makes ICH 'authentic' and 'real' (see also Saskia Cousin, this volume, Chapter 4). In order to



Figure 10.2: The cheese market of Alkmaar: cultural mass entertainment for tourists (Photo by the author).

understand the essence of this issue it helps to reduce the problem of *de-contextualization* to the dilemma of so-called *folklorization*. Folklorization is a well-known issue in ethnology (cf. Van der Zeijden, 2008), which the German ethnologist Hans Moser was the first to address (Moser, 1962; 1964). Folklorization is creating a folkloristic image of ICH by transforming it into a tightly orchestrated event bound to strict rules of behaviour, or, in simpler words: This is our tradition and this is how it should be performed and in no other way. Folklorization forms a part of a dynamic process of giving heritage a new meaning by transforming it into a museum piece. It cannot be denied that tourism sometimes has a great influence on the way in which intangible heritage is folklorized and experienced. ICH is transformed into a spectacle with, at best, educational value or, at worst, pure make-believe or nostalgic yearning. The Netherlands offer several examples of this process. Egmond aan Zee, the coastal village where the author lives, organizes Visserijdag (Fishing Day) every year. For communities like Egmond, tourism

offers a useful platform to articulate their cultural identity by staging their roots in a folkloristic set-up (Brouwer, 1999; Van der Zeijden, 2005). In the nineteenth century, Egmond aan Zee was a fishing village. During the tourist season in June, the old crafts connected with fishing are brought to life once again. The tourist can experience it all: the making of spillers, the smoking of fish, accompanied by performances by the local shanty choir De Zâalnêelden (www.egmondonline.nl). The nearby city of Alkmaar presents a comparable example. Every Friday during the tourist season, thousands of tourists visit the famous Alkmaar cheese market (www.kaasmarkt.nl). They get a taste of all the different aspects of the merchandising of cheese in bygone days: the cheese inspection, the bargaining, the weighing of the cheese, and, the most colourful element, the cheese carriers who, dressed in traditional costumes, transport their buyers' lorries fully loaded with cheeses. The neighbouring Dutch Cheese Museum in the Waaggebouw (weigh house) sells all kinds of tourist products, such as miniature cheese carriers and T-shirts with the text 'Holland' printed on them (Van der Zeijden, 2006) [Figure 10.2].

One might ask oneself what is being sold: Is it living, 'real' and 'authentic' heritage, or just a commodified tourist image of it? Because of its tourist commodification many would argue against putting the Alkmaar cheese market on an intangible heritage list. There is no living community behind it anymore: it is just a tourist event.

Creating sustainability by seeking the right balance

With the notion of folklorization in mind it is now possible to address the issue of sustainable cultural tourism in a way that recognizes the dynamics of ICH while simultaneously avoiding over-commercialization, which may create an idealized and static picture of ICH. Sustainable development not only belongs to the key concepts in the contemporary world of tourism (Munsters, 2004), but it is also at the core of the 2003 UNESCO convention drawn up to safeguard ICH. More precisely, UNESCO wants to preserve *living* cultural heritage, and living cultural heritage always implies change and dynamics. Concerning the dynamics of ICH it is important to note that most of the publications on safeguarding ICH with the help of cultural tourism are about small-scale projects in economically weaker regions of the world, which try to profit from intangible heritage as a new source of income. The underlying cause of the economic disadvantage of these regions is that the old, traditional way of making utensils and objects like knives or chairs for practical use and for the local market of kinsmen predates the Industrial Rev-

olution. On the contrary, the local craftsman of the twenty-first century work in a totally different setting defined by the mechanisms of the consumers' market. If he wants to sell his products, he had better adjust to this new market (Thommessen, 2009). From this perspective it is worth adding to the aforementioned case of the Hmong in Vietnam an example from Croatia (Horjan, 2011). In Croatia, strategic partnerships were formed between the cultural sector and the tourism industry with help from the government and with a grant from the EU. Surveys by the tourism sector indicated that there was a growing tourist interest in 'authentic' rural life, but that there were no programmes offering such an experience. Therefore, the Croatian project focused on traditional crafts, with full participation of local craftsmen who were supported in developing their skills. The project was not restricted to the development of new tourist attractions in the region, it also helped the communities in safeguarding their intangible heritage. The Croatian alliance between culture and tourism was not successful in all aspects. According to Horjan, 'it has to be admitted that the tourism side showed no real interest in offering such products for tourists or for more demanding audiences and enthusiasts. The project assumed that joint investment of both sectors in the development of rural tourism would be seen as a common advantage, but the tourism sector admitted that they prefer to play on safe ground, without investing in promoting new products for special, small-scale audiences' (2011: 51).

The Croatian example shows that the partnership between tourism and ICH is a delicate one because the tourism industry is, in economic terms, much stronger than the other party. That is the reason why warrants are necessary to protect the interests of the community, and ICH has always to come first. This means that programmes should always incorporate measures for safeguarding ICH and guarantee community involvement. This has to do with the nature of ICH, which can never be separated from the actual cultural bearers who perform ICH as their living heritage. Because of this, the UNESCO convention regards community involvement as the key issue. The whole convention is community-based, so projects aimed at safeguarding ICH with the help of tourism should never be undertaken without the involvement and participation of the culture-bearing communities. Article 15 of the convention calls upon States Parties 'to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, when appropriate, individuals in safeguarding their intangible cultural heritage' (www.unesco.org/culture). The operational directives are even clearer for they require 'the widest possible participation of the community, group or, if applicable, individuals concerned and with their free, prior and informed consent' (ibid). Community involvement is also one of the important recommendations of the UNWTO encouraging the formation of

‘partnerships with the widest possible range of other key-players so as to ensure that the interests of all are taken into consideration, while keeping the ICH authentic and dynamic at the same time’ (UNWTO, 2012: 81).

In short, what the UNESCO convention teaches us is that ICH tourism projects can only be successful if they are based on a strategic partnership between the tourism and the heritage sector, in which the local communities are actually involved and from which they can benefit. For tourism, ICH is indispensable because of ‘the feel’ of the local culture tourists want to experience; for ICH, the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills is important. Balancing is the main ambition, to be achieved in a constant dialogue between the tourism sector and the host communities. In this context, the cultural tourism sustainability mix developed by Munsters and Niesten (2013) based on an equilibrium of the interests of the various stakeholders can serve both as a useful instrument to analyse the objectives of the key actors and as a strategic framework for the implementation of the policy guidelines we will develop in the next section.

Policy guidelines for the planning of sustainable cultural tourism

How to give this flesh and bone in daily practice? We would like to conclude by providing some policy guidelines derived from our experience within the VIE, the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage, that as a cultural broker is responsible for the implementation of the UNESCO convention in the Netherlands. The Netherlands ratified the UNESCO convention in 2012. The VIE is presently drawing up a National Inventory of Intangible Heritage by means of a proposal system in which the communities themselves can put forward elements of their intangible heritage to be entered on the inventory. As they are entrusted with the safeguarding process, the communities have the lead, with the VIE in a supporting role. Proposals for the National Inventory should always be accompanied by a safeguarding plan providing an outline of the following steps to make for the sustainable development of ICH:

- When tourism is involved, VIE always asks for a moment of reflection. What can be the possible consequences of attracting tourists and how could it affect the tradition? How to deal with a large increase of tourists: Will their attendance dominate or even change the tradition? And, if so, how will the host community manage this development?
- When a project is started, the first thing to do is to map all the stakeholders and involve them in the project. It is useful to make a SWOT analysis of the tradition

and discuss it with the stakeholders by including partners from the tourism sector as well as from local museums and other heritage institutions that with their know-how can assist the communities.

- Together, the stakeholders can make an inventory of the ICH elements at hand to be used for tourism purposes. Then the creative phase follows, in which the involved parties have to assess which elements might be of interest to tourists and what are suitable forms to present them in an attractive way.
- Tourism can strengthen the market appeal but one should never lose sight of the main objective: that the community should be the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills which are so important according to the UNESCO convention. The development should be kept small-scale and the benefits for the local communities themselves should be guaranteed. It is all a question of balancing and this can be more easily managed at a local level.
- What might also help is to invoke the support of public funds. Public funding can strengthen the intangible heritage aspect of a project and lead to a stronger focus on preservation.
- Commodification and over-commercialization are the pitfalls to be avoided, for they might violate the integrity of the tradition. It is necessary to assess beforehand the possible negative effects of tourism, and to monitor these effects during the project in order to implement adaptations when needed. However, a system of warrants should never degenerate into an obstruction to changes. As has been argued in this chapter, the dilemma of folklorization has to be tackled. There is always a risk that ICH is transformed into a museum piece. This is not profitable for the tourism sector because tourists increasingly seek an 'authentic' experience and not a living museum exhibition.
- On a national level it is important to invest in capacity building for the local communities in agreement with the recommendations of the UNWTO 2012 report, which stresses the importance of investing in the training of tourist guides, preferably originating from the local communities themselves because they possess in-depth knowledge of their ICH.

More generally speaking, we would like to underline the necessity of more research. What is particularly needed is more knowledge about the theory and the practice of intangible heritage tourism, knowledge which should be translated into useful tools for practitioners working in the field. Above all, a research agenda has to be drafted in order to grapple with the specific problems and dilemmas related to the cooperation between the culture sector and the tourism industry. In addition, the aforementioned policy guidelines should be elaborated in the form of a manual

which can be used by the communities and the tourism industry. In Switzerland, the government and the tourism sector have already joined forces and asked the University of Lucerne to develop a manual entitled *Lebendige Traditionen und Tourismus. Ein Leitfaden zur Angebotsgestaltung und -vermarktung* (Tauer, 2012). With minor changes and the inclusion of local examples, this manual could be made suitable for a more general audience. These kinds of initiatives surely contribute to overcoming the love-hate relationship between tourism and ICH and to creating the win-win situation which is a vital precondition for the sustainable use of ICH for tourism purposes.

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