a cura di LETIZIA DIPASQUALE SAVERIO MECCA LUCIA MONTONI

Heritage for people

Sharing vernacular knowledge to build the future













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DOCUMENTING AND SAFEGUARDING INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

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Intangible cultural heritage as resource for sustainable development

Intangible cultural heritage refers to the knowledge, practices and expressions shared by communities around the world. The value of intangible cultural heritage is due not only to the cultural manifestation itself, but also to the wealth of knowledge, skills and know-how that are passed down through it from generation to generation (UNESCO, 2003), which also allows the preservation of tangible heritage. The safeguarding of intangible heritage helps to sustain cultural diversity in the face of increasing globalisation, and to strengthen the sense of identity and belonging that contributes to a community's well-being (UNESCO, 2003; UNESCO, 2021)

The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003) identifies 5 areas for the classification of intangible cultural heritage: a) traditions and oral expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage; b) performing arts; c) social practices, rituals and festive events; d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; e) traditional crafts (UNESCO, 2003).

In the context of this research, we mainly analysed the intangible heritage related to vernacular architecture, and thus the know-how and skills related to building practices, which are linked to a profound knowledge of nature and the socio-cultural context.

The knowledge of traditional building craftsmanship is crucial since it constitutes an essential part of the identity of the architectural heritage, yet at the same time it also represents the technical thinking of a human group in a space-time interval, and is a vehicle for learning the processes of adaptation that have allowed for the establishment of a skillful relationship with the environment.

However, knowing how to build is also profoundly connected to the knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and in a broader sense to all the other categories mentioned by the Convention, since together they constitute that vision of the world shared by a traditional community, in which culture, nature and social well-being interact with each other in a balanced and sustainable manner. Therefore, the safeguarding and transmission of the components of intangible cultural heritage in a systemic way is crucial for the sustainable development of the habitat, as it can provide useful insights for local approaches to the sustainable management of natural resources, prevention of soil erosion or natural disasters, ensuring well-being, protecting biodiversity and building resilience.

opposite page
Master Ali making a mud brick
vault without centering for a
group of students in Esfahak,
South Khorasan Region, Iran

(credits: E.P. Ferrari)



A woman engaged in the maintenance of the earthen plaster of her home, Syria (2008)

(credits: L. Lupi)

The transmission of tacit knowledge and traditional crafts

Before discussing knowledge related to traditional craftsmanship, it is necessary to introduce the topic considering how knowledge is classified according to Western epistemology, which divides it into three main kinds (Pavese, 2021): propositional knowledge or *know-that*, acquaintance knowledge or *know-by acquaintance*, and procedural knowledge or *know-how*. Intangible cultural heritage can be largely ascribed to forms of *know-how*. The *know-how* that is at the base of several valuable traditional crafts is commonly transmitted through apprenticeship and from person to person. In this sense, it should be reminded that traditional crafts have always undergone a process of transformation and adaptation, not being static entities. In fact, culture (and knowledge) is an on-going and dynamic process bound to the ever-changing world (Harris, 2007). Traditional crafts and their related knowledge are dependent on transmission practices (such as apprenticeship) and environments of practice where skills can be trained, learned and techniques can be refined and adapted, and sometimes even changed. This has been the way (generally outside formal contexts) to preserve and continue the dynamic transformation of traditional know-how.

Nevertheless, it might seem subversive in a society that considers normal to account for all knowledge in written forms, to actually discover that not all knowledge can be subjected to explicit codification (Gascoigne, Thornton, 2013). Polanyi and many other philosophers of science have long debated the necessity to recognise that much knowledge is *tacit*, therefore untellable, non-codifiable and not in-

dependent from a context (Polanyi, 1958; Polanyi, 1966; Gascoigne, Thornton, 2013). On the other hand, we also have forms of *explicit knowledge*, which can be expressed in a propositional form (verbal, linguistic, symbolic, etc.) and that can be codified and context-free. This distinction poses a challenge for the documentation of cultural manifestations that cannot simply 'be captured' by words or formulas. In any case, the importance of this distinction stands in the fact that even if *tacit knowledge* cannot be carved out into words or codified in other forms, it can be 'thought with' in the realm of performance-based knowledge (Marchand, 2003). Avoiding the intellectualistic reductionism which considers all forms of knowledge to be codifiable, as well as an opposed point of view that pessimistically considers whatever is *tacit* to be ineffable, we should recognise, however, that *tacit knowledge* cannot be codified in context-independent general terms, but that it can nevertheless be articulated (Gascoigne, Thornton, 2013). Articulation of *tacit knowledge* is dependent on two elements: context and person (craftspeople), thus articulation is possible by being present as a skilled person applies his or her knowledge in a specific context. It is for this reason that not only in the past, but even today, most of the knowledge intended as intangible cultural heritage is taught and learned from person to person, and in many years of practical experience in specific contexts of practice.

The challenges of documenting intangible heritage: methods and tools

Researchers have a tool-kit at their disposal for the recording of all those aspects of intangible heritage that can be articulated into propositional and codified forms (written, visual, symbolic). Methodologies can be borrowed from different fields and the ones mentioned here are mainly derived from an ethno-anthropological approach. Interviews are one of the main tools employed for data that can be converted into text. They can be written manually in a note-book or also audio- or video-recorded to be later transcribed. Interviews (structured, semi-structured and unstructured) are not only a useful tool to collect data of various nature, but are also a way to personally get to know research participants and establish mutual trust. Direct observation of practices supported by photographs and video-recordings are powerful tools that can provide us with a great amount of data. Recording data in this way can produce written and visual material alike, since we can extract information based on different criteria and depending what we wish to focus on. As a result of both these methods we can also use symbolic language and abstract representation such as diagrams or figures to present our findings. Audio-recordings and sounds can also be a form of valuable data for research on traditional crafts.

Nevertheless, the documentation of intangible cultural heritage often poses great challenges, especially when it comes to 'grasping' the qualities of tacit knowledge. As we have seen in the previous section, what is *tacit* cannot be recorded with words nor codified through symbols. As a first instance, any documentation of this kind should acknowledge that not all aspects of traditional crafts can be recorded. The 'essence' of any form of know-how can only be grasped through direct learning and practice. Regarding this challenge, some anthropologists have called to attention the interesting possibilities



Syrian master builder (maâlem) explaining the construction technique of corbelled domes, Syria (2009)

(credits: L. Dipasquale)

offered by ethnography as a research method¹. Ethnographic work is mostly based on participant observation, which means spending protracted periods of time (months or years) engaging with research participant. In this way, the researcher is able to analyse at a deeper level the subject matter of their work. When this methodology is applied to traditional crafts, it can also be combined with apprenticeship, an approach known as 'apprentice-style ethnography' (Marchand, 2001 and 2009; Downey, 2010; Downey et al., 2015). This approach utilises a practical strategy so that the researcher is not only intellectually, but also physically involved in the learning process of the subject. The protracted experience within a context of practice with experts allows the researcher to gain not only information and facts about the subject of study (know-that), but also hands-on and embodied knowledge (know-how). In fact, this experience is not only limited to observation and recording from the outside, but includes being cognitively involved at multiple levels. In this way, a study of crafts with craftspeople allows the researcher to include the experts into the research process, as they become co-creators in the work. A privileged access to craftspeople practices and experience is offered through the physical contribution of the researcher, and this is achieved with an exchange of 'toil' for 'ethnographic knowledge' as well as craft skill (Marchand, 2008). As anthropologist Paul Sillitoe points out "no amount of reading subjec-

¹Trevor Marchand's seminal contribution on architecture, crafts and anthropology is of great relevance in this respect. What we can learn from his research is that different types of construction work (from masonry to carpentry), like other skilled physical activities, are exchanged, understood and negotiated between practitioners mostly without the use of words, since learning is achieved primarily through observation, imitation and repetition, while the use of propositional instruction is primarily aimed to communicate, focus, and coordinate these activities (Marchand, 2008).

tive reflections will enable you to know what it is to plaster a ceiling or to build a brick wall", therefore "you have to do it to know it" (2017). Being aware of this factor is very helpful to guide researchers in the field of crafts, in particular building crafts, to expand their research tool-kit and methodologies. At the same time for architects, the application of these methods in their research projects ensures new insights as well as a more profound knowledge which goes beyond merely abstract notions.

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