

Community-Based & Participatory Approaches to Cultural Heritage in the Dolomites

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Cultural Heritage

The concept "cultural heritage" has been introduced by UNESCO's 1972 "Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage" and designates elements with "outstanding universal value" which had to be considered as "world heritage of mankind as a whole", something of concern not just to a certain group or to a single nation state. Hence, with UNESCO's 1972 Convention heritage protection switched from being a domain of nation states to an international issue.

Heritage research has become a large, interdisciplinary field of inquiry. The topics range from local impact of heritage nominations, the improvement of heritage conservation and management, the assessment of the economic potential of heritage especially in relation to tourism, and critical perspectives on processes of heritagization.

With the "intangible turn" of the world heritage discussion which had its climax in UNESCO's 2003 "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", the living aspect of cultural heritage became the focus of cultural politics. This new kind of heritage is manifested in the following domains: "a) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; b) performing arts; c) social practices, rituals and festive events; d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; e) traditional craftsmanship".

Participation

One of the key dimensions which distinguishes UNESCO's 2003 Convention from former UNESCO instruments is "community participation". This participation is implicitly contained in the definition of intangible cultural heritage as "practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills [...] that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." Community participation implies that the definition of which cultural practices may be identified as intangible heritage is up to the communities themselves, hence there cannot be fixed criteria to define "authenticity" of intangible heritage without risking an ethnocentric bias. The 2003 Convention had to overcome the problematic nature of the world heritage concept by finding a balance between universalism of the world heritage approach on the one hand and the relativism of approaches to authenticity on the other.

Several heritage theorists and practitioners have underlined different problems and paradoxes on UNESCO's concept of intangible cultural heritage. As regards participation one problem is the idea of exclusion, since the heritage discourse gives birth to a problematic relationship between a dominant national and a more marginalised minority heritage. Religious, ethnic, or cultural minorities' traditions are often excluded from the official national narrative. Furthermore, a radical impact can result from governmental and international involvement on how communities perceive their traditions.

Research Questions

- How can cultural heritage in a Ladin valley be identified and safeguarded by following a community-based and participatory approach?
- Does heritage research require specific participatory and community-based methods?
- How can a sustainable management of cultural heritage be developed between civil society and institutions?

Overcoming Scientific Colonialism: Research Approach

- Combination of "traditional" ethnographic approach with approaches stemming from participative action research (PAR) and community-based participatory research (CBPR).
- Participatory action research (PAR): emancipatory methodology that promotes reciprocal and collaborative practices through participation of 'the researched' in the design, implementation, evaluation, and benefits of research
- The research project initially designed by the fieldworker remains open and dynamic, responding to participant's interests and the circumstances of the field
- The discussion between academic and community researchers to map out common goals and expectations for the project should start as early as possible
- Mixture between "traditional anthropology" (the anthropologist goes as an "outsider" into "a field" which does not belong to his/her usual social environment) and "indigenous anthropology" (the anthropologist is an insider and member of the community he/she is studying)

Methods

- Participative identification of main actors of "Ladin heritage"
- Participative identification of "living knowledge" in a specific Ladin valley
- Involvement of the broader public through participatory visual methods (Photovoice, Videovoice)
- Creation of a Participatory Digital Archive as community-curated repository of knowledge
- Interviews with elderly Ladin people as bearers of heritage knowledge
- "Transmission of knowledge": Promoting intergenerational tradition of cultural heritage through involvement of school pupils in the collection of heritage knowledge (for example by interviewing their grandparents)
- Participant observation, interviews and focus groups

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