

# **A digital collection of Intangible Cultural Heritage: potentials and limits of safeguarding intangible cultural practices in virtual environments.**

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## **Abstract:**

We argue the case of representing and safeguarding intangible cultural practices in virtual environments by recognizing potential conflicts posed by cultural theory, ethnography and theory of the media. We want to encourage a critical approach towards the representation of intangible cultural heritage, especially considering the possibilities and risks represented by the virtual environment and the interface as cultural artifact. Potentials of the circulation of digital information are discussed, stressing the radical shift this has marked in the social and cultural organization of private and institutional life in a globalized era. Relevant design solutions to the project herein discussed, take into consideration the axes connecting content, medium and user.

## **1 Introduction**

The collection of the present visualization project is constituted by the Intangible Cultural Heritage practices officially inscribed in the Unesco Intangible Cultural Heritage List as established by the 2003 General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), at its 32<sup>nd</sup> session (Unesco Convention 03). The collection consists of three different medium respectively a descriptive text, a video and a sum of 6 to 12 pictures describing the cultural practice. The process of the acceptance of the candidate practices is submission based and is evaluated by a central committee. In the panorama of intangible cultural practices, this almost by accident created virtual collection (given that its content is considered only an evidence of the submitted requests), represents a unique case of a first official attempt to virtually record intangible practices worldwide. Essentially, the current virtual collection serves a pure informative scope, highly linked to the necessity of providing experts with a clear outline of the bureaucratic process a practice has to undergo to. In the attempt to conceive an alternative visualization model, several theoretical assumptions must be outlined and discussed answering the question if an intangible cultural practice can in the first place, be at all represented in a digital environment. And If so, at what price and how can this influence a possible safeguarding process?

## **2 Perspectives on the digital safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage**

*Safeguarding the intangible heritage involves the collection, documentation and archiving of cultural property and the protection and support of its bearers.* (Bouchenaki 2004) The fate of the intangible heritage is thus far more closely related to its creators as it depends in most cases on its actual oral transmission in given cultural contexts. The intangible character, in this context, is to be understood as an element relying almost exclusively on the transmission of knowledge through community members. Interestingly, the intangible character of the collection contrasts the nature of its preservation which relies thoroughly on its

material documentation. Safeguarding intangible heritage calls for its “translation” from oral form into some form of materiality, e.g archives, inventories, museums and audio or film records. (Ibid. Bouchenaki) Although the documentation process could be regarded as “freezing” intangible heritage in different media formats, it should be clear that this constitutes only one aspect of safeguarding and that greater care and attention should be given to choosing the most appropriate modern ethnographic approaches to better understand the realistic potential of preservation politics. (Ibid. Bouchenaki) The essential objective of making an accessible virtual archive serves the purpose of raising awareness among field specialists at an institutional level. Even though communities are regarded as a crucial actor in the safeguarding process, they are nevertheless kept at a certain distance and the current state of the virtual collection is evidence of a bureaucratic expert-friendly content arrangement.

The benefits of encompassing a larger audience throughout the implementation of new media, is scarcely considered and applied. According to ethnologists and cultural theorists, oral traditions and folklore are threatened by problematic issues linked to globalization such as modern wars, post capitalistic economy, massive migration and the encumbrance of global media industries. In this scenario, the risk envisaged by ethnologists and folklorists who are reluctant in accepting the benefits of virtually collected documentation about intangible cultural practices, concern the misuse of its values given that practices can be objectified into products/artifacts to be consumed (by the tourism and/or the (social) media industry).

*The very cultural heritage that gives indigenous peoples their identity, now far more than in the past, is under real or potential assault from those who would gather it up, strip away its honored meanings, convert it to a product, and sell it. Each time that happens the heritage itself dies a little, and with it its people.* (Tom Greaves 1994) Tom Greaves characterizes as primary risk for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage the influence of the global market and the pressure it exercises in the production processes. An innovative alternative model where folklore is sustained by digital technology is however foreseeable (if not necessary) to help the preservation of intangible practices in a (foremost technologically)

interdependent globalized world where software not only mediates but also re-configures embodiments and interactions in an ever more digital environment. Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi argues in *Orality and Indigenous Knowledge in the Age of Globalization*, that a dialogue between indigenous culture and the new media is impossible to bypass. A relevant example worth mentioning examines a film inspired by a story widely recounted among the Malinke people of Mali and Guinea which has proven popular both in Guinea and among Guinean immigrants in Europe. The director, actors, and viewers conveyed that precisely because these practices are in decline, the film provides an important opportunity for transmitting knowledge to the younger generation, urbanites and expatriates alike.(Makuchi Nfah Abenji 2011). In the context of informational globalization, *culture*, in terms of shared symbolic and material resources and relations, increasingly circulates as information, detached from national, institutional structures (Lash 2002). While not simply an outcome of digitization, it is argued that digitization enables and intensifies processes of circulation, flattening, de-terretorialization and de-differentiation (...). Such transition, if indeed that is what it is, has significant and even profound implications (Hand 2008).

### **3 Understanding the appropriateness of digital environments: technical media and image making**

According to Hand there is intense cultural preoccupation with and great disagreement about understanding access to digital culture, what is meant by interactivity and how notions of authenticity are problematized in digital cultural life. The circulation and movement of digital information around the globe constitutes a radical shift in social and cultural organization, especially related to concepts of networking and information flows. Poster argues that information technology has shaped new forms of the circulation of knowledge, where networks are thought to be the dominant mode of organization. In fact what Lash refers to as *circulation* and *flattening* goes as far as defining the man/machine interface mechanism as an indispensable condition of the everyday life influencing reception and reflection . In other words any delay or distance between doing something and thinking about it is lost in the global information culture. (Hand 2008).

If we observe the circulation of information and images shifting from the analogue to the digital, we need to reconsider the concept of time linked to automation of order and execution. The *flattening* as both Poster and Lash refer to, describes the automation process as the elimination of the delay between the “doing” and the “thinking” thus paving the way to a programmed visual perception that is less likely to be critical to context related content and more subject to voyeuristic consumerism. In addition the idea of circulation is related to the hierarchies and the distribution of power and the *flattening* is a result of the circulation of information and most importantly of the decision-making in determining which information and how this information will be visualized. Yet, circulation is thought to connect and by means of circulation itself, the power of national institutions is decentralized. It could be argued that the digital as environment and as tool, concentrates the performance of cultural acts in the hands of participants for it makes information available and ready to be exchanged. (See Sturken. 2009) Communicative action is removed from the nation-state scheme and finally introduced in a time-space continuum that could ideally be considered as impermeable to the traditional hierarchical relations of power.

In the global environment, intangible culture is challenged to contaminate itself by technology, where the digital media might become a key to its long-term survival. The visualization process in its immateriality is to be thought in the sum of numerical data accessible through computers. The result is new media – graphics, moving images, sounds, shapes, spaces, and texts which have become computable. (Manovich 2001:20) Accordingly, and in contrast to critical theory, the focus should not be upon wider economic, politic or sociological phenomena per se, but rather upon the emerging conventions and practices of new media designers as they organize the data which structures the users experience. (Hand 2008:56) Visualization forms as part of the software machines, are a liquid cultural object thus subject to infinite variability, as for example opposed to Benjamins mechanical reproductions which can vary in number but not in form. This assumption, though it might seem to radically threaten the nature of the intangible cultural practice, is paradoxically in accordance with its “fluent” nature, to be grasped only in its actual occurrence. We might argue that the substance of the cultural practice resides in the fluidity of the “everyday occurrence” and in this

respect the virtual can also be seen as a “fluent” representational environment of the practice itself. Elements of Intangible Cultural Heritage continuously evolve, from manifestation to manifestation, while being transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation. The viability of intangible heritage practices relies on the ongoing transmission of the special knowledge and skills that are essential for their enactment or embodiment. (UICH: Transmission, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/transmission-00078>) Although, the virtual is in itself a non straightforward and confusing notion. In fact modern cultural theorists differ in opinions about its nature and definition. Poster for example, argues that the potential of digital objects is never actualized. The actualization of potential does not occur, rather, it is always endlessly deferred as a field of possibilities through which multiple narratives may be explored. (Poster 2001). Consequently we might argue that the gap between the digital narrative descriptiveness and the actual performative act of the intangible cultural practice is never to be completely bridged.

As Madeleine Akrich states, technical objects and people engage and interact, defining themselves in reciprocal influence. *It is after this engagement between people and technical artifact has occurred and relationship has established itself that we can say “that objects do this and humans do that. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that technical objects built our history for us and impose certain frameworks.* (Akrich 1992:222) In this mutual engagement between man and machine the interface becomes a cultural object. In this respect, the visualization of the intangible cultural heritage has a double aspect as well as function. We frame and therefore force the nature of the cultural practice in a descriptive structure. Secondly we re-create through the interface a vehicle able to shape the perceived image. *“Sehen ist immer Denken, da das, was sichtbar ist, ein Teil dessen ist, was „Strukturen vorausgedacht haben.* (Deleuze, Gilles 1986) The structures to which Foucault refers to in their political and institutional nature, apply accordingly to information visualization techniques where the „technical artifact“, here understood as the actual design result (interface), filters and therefore imposes in its technicality, its own framework.

The Unesco collection of intangible cultural practices presents itself as a series of documentation tracks. For the purpose of this paper it is important to stress that each country decides independently in the recreation of the visual situation and motifs which describe and re-stage the single practice. The association that these digital tracks recreate as a medium between “user” and “practice” depend inevitably, not only on ones own experience but, also on the technical frame that the technicality of the medium imposes on the viewer/user. Nicholas Mirzoeff argues that the dominant view inevitably influences the way an image is perceived creating a partition between technology and viewer hardly to be completely bypassed (Mirzoeff 2009). The risk of creating a visual narrative serving more a voyeuristic purpose on folklore, rather than one of exploration and understanding of intangible cultural practices, is not only high but also difficult to thoroughly obviate. Spielerische Kulissen wie Erlebnisparks, Computerspiele, oder Filme werden als illusionserzeugende Konstruktionen angeboten und nachgefragt. Dabei gelten Gefühle, Phantasien, Erlebnisse, nicht als Wahrnehmungsstörungen, sondern als Wirklichkeit eigener Art.” (Gehrad Schulze 1999:7) Baring in mind what was previously argued by Akrich and the effect of the technical frame, it is impossible, in the presence of technical media, to bypass the problematic issue imposed by the mechanization of the senses in the man-machine communication process.

#### **4 Design elements and goals**

The narrative the present project recreated was inevitably determined by three aspects: the existing material to be reconfigured, the users and the institutional needs. The general focus has been to readjust the existing material according to an ideal average user, eager to explore the collection more attracted by the richness, peculiarity and the performative character of the practices, rather than its bureaucratic registration procedure in the Intangible Culture Heritage list.

The existing state of the digital collection of the practices is reduced to an appendix of the administrative structure of the UNICH Institution. The improvement of the visualization strategies to reach a broader audience was here considered as a means to raise awareness thus making users and institutional goals coincide.

The team draw inspiration from The Google project, showcasing the extraordinarily rich collection of the British Museum. The collection was embedded in visualizations stressing connections between various objects, over continents and time and on multiple layers. Another important example, blending intangible and tangible cultural heritage in visualizations conceived for a modern (virtual) viewer, was the Polish archive (NInA). This multi media archive combines traditional and contemporary culture thus inspiring continuous growth of a collection in perpetual dialogue with historical memory.

The design process identified two goals: on the one hand to make the collection accessible for a broader audience and on the other to add value (as well as meaning) by highlighting connections within the given collection of data. The first aims at raising attention and thus awareness on the prestige value of being enlisted. The increased visibility has proved to support initiatives for the preservation of practices. The second goal, is concerned with information-visualization techniques. On the current digital collection there is no evidence of how the single practices relate to one another. It must be stated that this function is not foreseen from the UNICH Program and would require a scientific ethnographic in depth analysis of the past, the current state of being and the future perspectives of the single cultural practices. As likewise stated by our project partner, we were aware that this would require funds to be invested in ethnographic research groups, taking the idea of the list a step further. However, the attempt to envisage possible design solutions regarding the connections, proved to be a very ambitious task and brought to the surface manifold challenges regarding issues of modern geography, post-colonial and power related image making.

#### **4.1 Design process**

Proceeding with a delineation phase, the project team brainstormed and sketched wireframes. We started finding out a new structure for the access of information, distancing the approach from the current, rather monotonous enlisting of practices. Inspired by the idea of a user/ explorer, open to new sensations and discoveries, we decided to divide the collection in three different views. An “overview” offering a strongly visual look (a matrix) over almost the whole collection at once and ideally

already offering the a fore mentioned visualizations. Following, the “category view” which would allow the viewer to get a closer look at a specific cluster/group of practices. And thirdly, the “detail view” allowing the visitor to dive into in depth information concerning a particular practice, nonetheless simultaneously displaying related ones. Hence. retaining the possibility to smoothly keep on strolling through the collection. Ideally there would be animated transitions between the views that overlay each other, helping the “strolling path” to be comprehensible and allowing the viewer to navigate more effortlessly, back and forth within the same category as well as within categories in general.

The goal behind these strategies was to fully explore the potential of the existing images and videos, given that in the current state of visualization of the collection, they are only visible in the detailed view. Regarding the second goal, parallel aspects of practices were chosen that revealed shared similarities of practices being located in completely different regions of the world. This aspect could logically best be implemented in the “overview”. Intending to avoid a stereotypical world map layout, our idea was to use uniform little shapes to represent each practice, further to be arranged in clusters of regions. On interaction, the connection of similar practices would then be consequently highlighted. However, implementing the cluster-overview brought multiple challenges to the surface, for instance the access to only low resoled pictures. A part of the collection missed videos completely due to a lack of administrative maintenance. As a consequence, it was not possible to go with modern layouts that feature full width imagery. Secondly, in order to divide the collection into categories, an in depth content analyses of the practices was required to find domains embracing all practices, yet trying to keep the number of categories low. This process of manual analysis and meta-data enrichment continued as we faced the task of dividing practices into respective regions of the world.

The well known 5 continents subdivision was considered insufficient due to the unbalanced distribution of the practices. It was of high importance to remain free of post-colonial and west-centered thinking and terminology. Though it became perfectly aware to the project team that these issues could hardly be biased. An in depth research on modern geography and cartography revealed no significant

counter-model to the current colonial and post colonial understanding of continents and regions. The pace of conceptual exploration in the history of cartography—searching for alternative ways of understanding maps—is slow. Some would say that its achievements are largely cosmetic. Applying conceptions of literary history to the history of cartography, it would appear that we are still working largely in either a 'premodern,' or a 'modern' rather than in a 'postmodern' climate of thought. (Harley J. B. 1989 : 2) Rather than invalidating their study, it is enhanced by adding different nuances to our understanding of the power of cartographic representation as a way of building order into our world. If we can accept intertextuality then we can start to read our maps for alternative and sometimes competing discourses (Harley. J. B. 1989:13). The idea to represent the clusters in diamond shapes, resembling mineral assemblage in rhomboidal crystals, was appealing in its abstraction for there is no hierarchy between the cultural practices. Nor does the year of the official registration in the UNICH List, determine preferences or power structures of any form or kind. Maps on the other hand, work on our inherited (educational system related) visual memory, intrinsically dependent on relations of power and economic exploitation.

Another requirement to the collection visualization was to respect each practice equally, while also respecting a multitude of given image thumbnail ratios, therefore a Masonry layout type as chosen. Items in a Masonry grid share one width but are flexible in their height, thus images can keep their original aspect ratio which prevents details from getting cut off when the image is re-sized to fit the grid. Circular Std has been chosen as the key typeface for our final prototype. Circular is a geometric sans typeface designed by Laurenz Brunner and draws from 20th-century typefaces such as Futura and Neuzzeit Grotesk. Circular has a neutral appearance while maintaining screen performance and high readability for readers at any level. Since Circular hardly draws attention to itself, it's particularly suitable for this collection where focus should lay on the highly figurative content.

## 4.2 Towards a prototype

In order to test the aesthetics of our hypothesis, a high fidelity screen design was presented in the form of an animated prototype. For rapid prototyping we opted for a purely presentation approach, utilizing Apple Keynote's animation features. Each view has been designed using Sketch, a vector based screen design application which allowed us to create high fidelity mock ups that are resolution independent, hence being suitable for display on virtually any screen. Each moving layer was exported from Sketch and a Keynote's Magic Move animation tool was used to animate a full journey through the user interface. Magic Move proved to be a suitable tool for simulating scroll animations and transitions between user interface states.

The three different medium documenting each practice, namely the descriptive text, the photographs and the video footage, are thought to interact and complement each other in the different category views. However, during the design process the video emerged as the most powerful tool. Its features make the narrative as immersive as possible, thus partially translating (in all its medium-related restrictions) the performative character of the cultural practices into the visualization process. It is significant to point out that the debate with the attempt to distinguish between "objective video footage" and "creative video footage" used in the gathering of data and in documentary film production in the fields of Anthropology and Ethnography, started at the beginning of the nineties and so far "there is no agreement over the purpose and nature of ethnographic uses of moving images (Pink, Sarah. :173).

The video as medium acquires nonetheless new importance as an additional tool to understanding the text, because it supports people's sensory experience concerning how people perceive their material environment and interact with it (MacDougall 2005). The key point here is that the audio visual representation of video, evokes empathetic response in audiences and would therefore enhance the users curiosity in exploring the collection.

One of the projects main goals, namely stressing the resonances between practices, turned out to be the most difficult challenge. The sorting of practices into regions

and categories in the implementation process, demanded an excruciating amount of time as the team gradually realized the true extent of manual meta-data enrichment required, to pursue all of the envisioned goals. Furthermore, the highlighting of the shared similarities would have needed the intervention and help of field excerpts to make up for the quality divide of the data between different practices and countries. Moreover, the device – size binomial became another difficulty to overcome. Since the virtual collection was conceived to live in a web context, the importance related to devices and their sizes challenged both, the theoretical and practical approach of the project. In order to make the user experience as inclusive as possible, a wide range of browser window sizes and mobile device sizes must be considered and optimized for. Known patterns from responsive design mostly respond to layout issues. For the present project, spatial proximity of information was sensitive to a high risk of content manipulation and reordering of information – since it is a common approach in responsive web design – this might have altered the data to such an extent as to threaten its meaning. In this respect, the question of ethical ethnographic usage, or “consumption” as previously argued, questioned again the relation between audience, device and usability of the virtual collection.

## **5 Conclusion**

The relation between digital environment, medium and image-making/consumption in a digital born collection of intangible cultural practices are explored, hence envisioning possible advantages and solutions in including the digital media, not only in the safeguarding process but also in the implementation of further efforts concerning the evolution and or (in the worst case) the extinction of intangible cultural practices. The core contribution to exploring the potential of a digital collection is embodied in the attempt to visualize resonances between practices, thus paving the way to an ethnographic genesis of intangible cultural practices. This should ideally attract not only the attention of field experts, but also that of the average users, inside and outside the communities of practitioners. Though the current digital collection was created almost by accident, quasi as a marginalia of a bureaucratic process, the attempt of the present project showed how it can live independently and nevertheless strive for the achievement of the same goals.

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