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The ethical void in intangible cultural heritage

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Abstract

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has been widely defined by international organizations and national governments, particularly by UNESCO, as encompassing the practices, knowledge, and cultural expressions that communities recognize as part of their living heritage. These definitions emphasize the preservation of traditions, knowledge systems, and cultural practices transmitted across generations. However, they rarely address ethical values as a component of ICH, despite the central role such values play in shaping social norms, community cohesion, and intergenerational transmission of cultural principles. This article examines the absence of ethical heritage within dominant conceptualizations of ICH and explores the theoretical, methodological, and political implications of this omission. It argues that ethics, understood as a culturally embedded and socially enacted system of values, could reasonably be recognized as part of intangible cultural heritage. Through a critical analysis of institutional definitions and academic debates, the article discusses possible reasons for the exclusion of ethical values and proposes reconsidering current heritage frameworks to incorporate the ethical dimension as an essential element of cultural diversity and collective memory.

Keywords: Intangible cultural heritage; Ethics; UNESCO; Cultural values; Intergenerational transmission; Cultural diversity

1. Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is a complex concept that has gained increasing relevance within international cultural policy. According to UNESCO [1], ICH encompasses the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills that communities, groups, and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. These elements are transmitted from generation to generation, constantly recreated by communities in response to their environment and history, and provide them with a sense of identity and continuity.

Cultural heritage therefore extends beyond monuments or material artifacts. It includes living traditions inherited from previous generations and transmitted to future ones. Examples include oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge related to nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship [1].

The importance of intangible cultural heritage lies not only in the cultural expressions themselves but also in the body of knowledge and skills that these expressions transmit across generations. This transmission contributes to the maintenance of cultural diversity and promotes dialogue among cultures by encouraging respect for different ways of life. The social and economic significance of these processes affects both minority and majority populations within a state and is relevant to both developing and developed countries [1].

Within this international framework, various national approaches to defining ICH provide valuable perspectives for comparative analysis. For example, the French Ministry of Culture [2] defines intangible cultural heritage as the set of

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practices and knowledge that communities collectively inherit and continuously recreate. Living heritage thus reflects cultural diversity and forms a bridge between material heritage and natural heritage.

Similarly, the Chinese government [3] defines intangible cultural heritage as the traditional cultural expressions and practices of diverse ethnic groups within the country that have been transmitted across generations. In Latin America, Ecuador [4] defines cultural heritage as a dynamic and integrative set of assets and social practices created, maintained, transmitted, and recognized by individuals, communities, peoples, nationalities, and cultural organizations.

Despite these conceptual variations, a common pattern emerges. ICH is consistently described as a collection of traditions, knowledge systems, and living cultural expressions inherited from the past and transmitted to future generations. However, none of these definitions explicitly includes ethical values as a constitutive element of intangible cultural heritage.

This absence raises important questions. Can ethical values truly be separated from the cultural practices and social traditions through which communities organize their lives? What are the implications of excluding ethical systems from the conceptual framework of ICH?

Ethics plays a fundamental role in shaping cultural and social identity. Ethical norms influence behavior, regulate social relationships, and contribute to community cohesion. Excluding ethical heritage from discussions of cultural heritage may therefore limit how societies understand and protect their cultural inheritance, potentially overlooking an essential dimension of collective life.

2. The Concept and Evolution of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage possesses several defining characteristics. It is simultaneously traditional, contemporary, and living. While rooted in the past, it continues to evolve as communities reinterpret and adapt inherited practices to present circumstances.

ICH is also inclusive and community-based. Rather than being confined to a single cultural group, many forms of intangible heritage circulate across communities and social contexts. Its value lies not in exclusivity but in the sense of shared identity and responsibility it fosters among individuals and groups.

Another key feature of ICH is its representative and participatory character. Communities themselves create, maintain, and transmit the practices that constitute their heritage. As a result, heritage is not simply preserved; it is continuously reproduced through social interaction.

UNESCO has established ethical principles for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing that communities should determine the value of their own heritage without external judgment. These principles promote mutual respect, cultural diversity, and the active participation of communities in heritage preservation.

However, an important paradox emerges within this framework. Although UNESCO recognizes ethical principles as guiding norms for safeguarding heritage, it does not consider the ethical systems practiced by communities themselves to be part of the heritage domain.

The normative foundation of global heritage governance is the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage [5]. In its preamble, the Convention acknowledges the role of intangible heritage in fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect among cultures. Nevertheless, the Convention does not explicitly recognize ethical practices or moral values as domains of intangible cultural heritage.

This omission is striking because ethics can also be understood as a cultural construct. Ethical systems include moral principles, norms, and values that guide collective life. In many societies, ethical codes are embedded in traditions such as community justice systems, codes of honor, and norms of hospitality.

Scholars have frequently emphasized the dynamic and constructed nature of cultural heritage. Laurajane Smith [6] argues that heritage should not be understood as a fixed entity but as a discursive and performative process shaped by power relations, through which identities and collective memories are continually recreated and negotiated as societies reinterpret the past in light of present needs. Similarly, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett [7] conceptualizes heritage as a form of contemporary cultural production rather than a passive inheritance from the past. In her view, cultural practices

acquire heritage status through interpretive frameworks that assign them value and meaning, often transforming them into objects of representation and exhibition for specific audiences. These perspectives highlight that heritage is actively produced within social contexts rather than merely preserved from the past. Kowalska [8] argues that intangible cultural manifestations are carriers of social memory and cultural values. Similarly, Martorell [9] suggests that cultural heritage plays an important role in anchoring societies to enduring values and collective identities. Heritage provides symbolic spaces through which communities articulate belonging and continuity.

Other scholars [10] highlight the importance of traditions as repositories of accumulated human experience. For example, Yoruba proverbs [11] encode cultural wisdom, moral teachings, and historical knowledge, illustrating how ethical ideas can be transmitted through cultural forms.

Yet contemporary debates in heritage studies tend to focus primarily on the ethics of heritage management rather than on ethics as heritage itself [12], [13]. Discussions often revolve around questions such as "Who owns the past?" or how cultural resources should be preserved, interpreted, and distributed.

In reality, cultural heritage concerns not only the past but also the present and the future [14]. It shapes how societies engage with contemporary moral dilemmas and how they imagine their cultural legacy [15].

3. Why Has Ethical Heritage Been Excluded from ICH?

The absence of ethical values from official definitions of intangible cultural heritage may stem from several theoretical and political considerations.

First, ethical values often possess a universal dimension. Principles such as justice, dignity, or reciprocity appear in many cultures across history [16]. Because UNESCO seeks to protect cultural diversity rather than promote universal moral doctrines, incorporating ethics into heritage frameworks could generate tensions between cultural relativism and moral universalism [17].

Second, ethical systems may appear abstract and difficult to delimit as specific cultural practices. In order to be recognized as ICH, a cultural element typically needs to be identifiable, documentable, and transmissible in concrete forms such as rituals, crafts, or performances. Ethical norms, by contrast, are often expressed implicitly through social behavior rather than through clearly defined practices [18].

Third, the inclusion of ethics could introduce political controversy into the heritage system. Intangible cultural heritage is already a highly politicized field in which states seek international recognition for their cultural expressions. If ethical systems were recognized as heritage, governments or cultural groups might attempt to legitimize particular moral doctrines as part of the global heritage landscape [18].

Such dynamics could generate ideological disputes and undermine UNESCO's commitment to cultural pluralism. By focusing on concrete cultural expressions rather than normative systems, heritage institutions may attempt to avoid these conflicts.

Nevertheless, these concerns do not eliminate the cultural significance of ethical systems.

Communities are defined not only by their rituals and practices but also by the values that guide everyday life. Ethical frameworks regulate social relations, shape collective responsibilities, and influence how communities interact with their environment.

Many societies possess distinctive ethical traditions transmitted across generations. For example, Andean conceptions of "buen vivir" [19] emphasize harmony between humans and nature, while the African philosophy of "ubuntu" highlights relational personhood and communal responsibility [20].

These ethical systems are not merely abstract philosophies. They are enacted through everyday practices, social norms, and collective rituals. Codes of hospitality, systems of reciprocity, and intergenerational respect all represent ethical principles embedded in cultural life.

Recognizing these systems as part of intangible heritage could contribute to preserving diverse moral traditions in an increasingly globalized world.

Furthermore, many traditional ethical frameworks are closely connected to sustainable environmental practices and conflict resolution mechanisms. Indigenous ecological knowledge, for example, often incorporates ethical principles regarding the respectful use of natural resources [21], [22], [23].

Acknowledging these ethical systems within the ICH framework could therefore support broader global challenges, including environmental sustainability and intercultural dialogue.

4. Conclusion

The concept of intangible cultural heritage has historically focused on practices, performances, and forms of knowledge while largely excluding ethical values. This exclusion may have been motivated by the desire to avoid theoretical ambiguities, methodological difficulties, and political controversies within the international heritage system.

However, ethical systems are deeply embedded in cultural life. They are transmitted across generations, enacted through social practices, and continually adapted to changing historical contexts. In this sense, ethics shares many of the characteristics already used to define intangible cultural heritage.

Recognizing ethical heritage would allow a more holistic understanding of cultural transmission. It would highlight the ways in which communities preserve not only practices and knowledge but also the moral frameworks that guide collective life.

Incorporating ethical values into the conceptual framework of intangible cultural heritage could therefore strengthen efforts to preserve cultural diversity, promote intercultural dialogue, and recognize the plurality of moral traditions that shape human societies.

Such an approach would contribute to a broader and more inclusive understanding of heritage, one that acknowledges not only what communities do, but also the values through which they understand the world.

Compliance with ethical standards

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