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# **IMMATERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE: A RESOURCE FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM? – CULTURAL POLITICS AND LOCAL EXPERIENCES WITH THE UNESCO STATUS**

## **Dynamic Touristic Visions Versus Immaterial Preservation Agendas**

One of the main research agendas of the discipline of ethnomusicology since more than 100 years has been the preservation and documentation of immaterial/intangible cultural heritage. Every outside intrusion/alteration of the practices – considered to be worth documenting and transcribing – was considered a potential threat to its presumed authenticity. Ethnomusicology, in this respect, assumed an increasing role within what in a globalised context we might call the ‘authentication industry’. It is, therefore, not surprising that ethnomusicologists always had a sceptical view on the long-term effects of tourism on local culture. The potential of tourism for the mission of ethnomusicologists is, therefore, to be reconsidered – and it is in this light that I want to see my contribution to this volume.

Talking about sustainable tourism means also talking about ‘cultural’ sustainability. How can tourism contribute to preserve local cultural practices in situ? What role illustrates authenticity in this case? How can tourism promote cultural diversity in collaboration with national cultural policies and with the cultural policies of transnational actors such as UNESCO? How can immaterial cultural heritage, such as local and musical knowledge or oral histories, be incorporated into a holistic touristic vision considering social everyday practices, material and immaterial heritage as complementary elements of a whole?

It seems that, particularly, immaterial cultural heritage has played a neglected role in the touristic sector. Already, the elements of the term itself: ‘immaterial’, ‘intangible’, and ‘heritage’ have become questioned and increasingly contested terms in the community of musicologists. The main issue here is

that the term ‘heritage’ seems to promote a homogenous and static vision of culture, neglecting its performative aspects and processes of its continuous reinvention. As Italian ethnomusicologist Ignazio Macchiarella puts it: “oral music is not a simple heritage of the past (or a survival of it), it is actually something that people do ‘here and now’: people think through the music, they decide who they are through it” (Macchiarella, 2008).

Additionally, if immaterial cultural heritage has played a role in touristic visions, it was only a very particular version of what immaterial cultural heritage meant and how it was represented. Its representation was shaped according to particular models – in Southeastern Europe, in part inherited from communist times – in which the stage, folklorisation and the idea of a cultivation/evolution of ‘rough’ performances played a central role. These models are continuously promoted both by national cultural policies and by the policies of UNESCO.

I would like to exemplify the still-dominating models for an appropriate representation of immaterial heritage practices through a concert on the occasion of the opening of the Bulgarian EU presidency, held in Sofia’s national theatre in January 2018.

The programme follows several inherited principles of how to represent immaterial heritage. The setting already implies the logic of the stage. It is, in the words of Thomas Turino (2008), a ‘presentational performance’ characterised by the strict division between those who perform and those who listen, attributing different roles to each. Moreover, it also implies the spatial, social and emotional detachment of the musical pieces from their place of origin. The *Shopluk* polyphony of Central Bulgaria, for example, was performed on that occasion by the Eva Quartet, a group founded in 1995 with singers from the famous choir *Le Mystère des voix bulgares*. What is implied here as well is the logic of a musical evolution: from the Choir *Joan Kukuzel* representing the byzantine-orthodox roots of the Bulgarian musical tradition, through the folk polyphony, through a choreographed *Nestinari* performance of the National Folklore Ensemble to the instrumental *Bulgara ensemble*, mixing electronics and a drum set with bagpipe sounds and those of the national instrument *gadulka*, ending with *Kris and Velin* with a ‘One Republic’ cover song: a post-modern dance performance with a background of traditional instrumentalists. Both *Kris and Velin* have a classical music background but work primarily in the Pop, Latino and R&B scene. Additionally, the narrative also proposes the idea that ‘updating’ of the ‘tradition’ connected to its cultivation and

professionalisation within the context of urban art music, is indispensable to keep these traditions alive and to maintain its 'authenticity'.

What I want to propose in my contribution is a counter vision to this idea. A vision which promotes participatory practices instead of presentational ones, a vision that (re)connects social realities to musical practices, a vision which abandons the logics of the stage in favour of a performance in situ. How this can be achieved shows a grassroots initiative that I have accompanied since 2008 in Albania in the Shpati region, in close proximity to the Ohrid Lake.

This initiative, supported partly by World Vision, USAID and local municipalities, proposes cultural sustainability fostering local development.

### **The Albanian Case: The UNESCO Label and Musicians' Appropriation Strategies**

Before I elaborate on my experience, let's discuss the general tendencies that have been taking place in the Albanian music scene after the UNESCO declaration of polyphony as an intangible heritage in 2005 (ICH UNESCO, 2019). Did it give a push to local practices, did it stimulate locals to think about the potential of immaterial practices in relation to sustainable cultural tourism?

The main tendency that can be observed is growing professionalism and the commercialisation of formerly local musical practices (Pistrick, 2015). These dynamics can be interpreted as a continuation of cultural representation models dominated by the idea of the stage as an appropriate and exclusive 'showcase' for cultural diversity. The long-term effects of this thinking both in cultural politics and among the musicians over the course of almost 15 years with the UNESCO status are diverse and contradictory. In general, they have not led to sustainable cultural initiatives but instead to short-term initiatives aiming at exploiting the UNESCO status for short-term touristic profits. In detail, this has led to the following:

- The disappearance of local singing practices in favour of homogenised styles (Lab, Tosk multipart singing);
- The professionalisation/institutionalisation of musical practices (the foundation of Cultural Associations (*shoqata kulturore*) often in urban contexts);
- The flourishing of musical ensembles in the Diaspora (with the main motivation of preserving national identities abroad. In Athens alone, five multipart groups with Albanian Diaspora singers exist);

- The intensification of cross-border contestation of cultural practices (notable at the Greek-Albanian border: The opening of a polyphonic centre in Ktismata, Northern Epirus near the Albanian border after the UNESCO declaration was the most evident sign of this);
- The rise of pedagogical activities (the installation of *Oda* (lit. guest rooms) in which musical knowledge was orally transmitted from masters to children).

In all these activities, funding remained restricted to a narrow group of ensembles which received grants, travel possibilities, access to concert venues. The majority of musicians, especially on a local level with no connections to the cultural institutions and policymakers in the capital, remained excluded from national and UNESCO funding schemes. Instead, they continued their activities in a partisan and self-organised manner on the basis of private sponsorships and communal support.

Several of these groups also sought collaborations with popular music artists to secure funding. On the one hand, these initiatives helped raise public interest in traditional music. On the other hand, aesthetic reorientation of traditional musicians increasingly followed the 'role models' of singers who often derived from the popular music business. Others, such as the singer Ylli Baka, born in the Southern Albanian town of Tepelena, raised with a high esteem for traditional local culture, have transformed into popular music artists using traditional instrumentations or 'sonic markers' predominantly to prove the 'authenticity' and 'rootedness' of their musical creativity.

Beyond those few traditional musicians who have been integrated into the local popular music business under the 'Folk' label, for local musicians in Albania, as in the comparative case of Sardinia, nothing has essentially changed after the UNESCO proclamation: they usually say "We just keep on with singing as we know" (Macchiarella, 2008). However, behind this defiance of cultural dynamics stimulated by outside cultural politics, controversies have grown. Notably, the UNESCO status has stimulated an inner debate regarding their practices, reinforcing the singers' consciousness about the cultural value of their tradition. This self-valuation process became evident in proposals for an inventory, reinforcing the boundaries of what belongs to it and what does not (Tole, 2007). The professionalisation also resulted in an increasing detachment of musical practice from its original social context. Commercial interests entered the game, which in the extreme case of Sardinia even led to a sort of rift which can now be found between the *A Tenore* singers and the other traditional musicians: "a rift

dug by envy, suspects, accusations in particular at the semi-professional level of the performers on stage” (Macchiarella, 2008). The shift between local singers in the villages and self-declared ‘artists’ who appear on stage and on TV screens is growing. Rivalling imaginaries of how one’s own musical practice can be connected to labels of authenticity, local and national culture have been fuelled by the UNESCO declaration while the UNESCO label had its considerable effects on those who practice the intangible heritage. Tourism, on the other hand, remained focused on attracting tourists through mass tourism by focusing on the coastal areas.

### **Sustainable Immaterial Heritage Tourism: The Shpati Case**

The project in the region of Shpati, Central-East Albania, tried to promote an alternative road which took inspiration from *agriturismo* in Italy: to share local everyday life, local culinary culture, being accommodated in the houses of peasants and shepherds. Furthermore, it also tried to connect immaterial heritage aspects with material heritage aspects in order to provide a holistic vision of their traditional culture.

The region of Shpati seemed to be a particularly suitable site for such objectives owing to two important key features. The first aspect relates to the region’s history as a place of retreat for Orthodox people in the Ottoman period. This has resulted in interesting forms of interreligious coexistence between Muslim and Orthodox villages and of cultural practices of both communities (Pistrick, 2013). Moreover, the preserved Orthodox churches in the region give authentic accounts of this.

The second aspect is the preserved pastoral culture of the region with shepherds as bearers of local traditions. Hiking on mules and horses with the flocks of the shepherds was one of the first tourist tours proposed in the region. Such a trip would end up on the summer meadow tasting dairy products, with goat meat grilled in a camp fire and/or *saç* (a metal lid for baking over which hot ash is placed) participating in a singing performance. The focus of this form of tourism was not on ‘observing what they do’ but ‘doing things like they do them’. Using ethnologists’ terminology, it was not “participant observation” but “observant participation”. Moreover, this was applied to immaterial heritage. As singing is a deeply socialising activity, the sonic impression is entirely different whether you listen to a stage performance from a distance or whether you are immersed in a group of singers. If you are a part of their ‘sonic community’; entering such a situation always implies a matter of respect to integrate sonically, to solidarise with what they are doing. This meant practically

that tourists did not ‘order’ performances for *their* occasions, but they were directed to social occasions where singing was obligatory for the local community (weddings, the Feast of St. Mary and so on).

Instead of a ‘presentational performance’, a participatory performance was intended. Such a change of roles requires what Turino calls a “habit change” (Turino, 2008). This habit change eventually is facilitated when local singers or intermediaries/‘cultural translators’ (such as ethnomusicologists) prepare the ground in introducing the ‘unwritten rules’ of immaterial practice, explaining their social foundations and its historical development. An act of sharing, of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld, 1996) should be the ideal outcome of such encounters.

### **Conclusion**

The tourism industry is still working with the principle of a ‘tourism at distance’: looking at, observing, listening to ‘the Other’. What is needed, instead, to open the road for sustainability is ‘doing with the Other’, to create possibilities for intercultural immersion which foster intercultural understanding. The tourism industry also relies on the self-sufficiency of its operating system; outsiders, external experts are not foreseen; but such ‘cultural mediators’ are highly required to introduce situations of ‘cultural intimacy’, of a cultural understanding. Such experts would also work towards an understanding regarding the social contexts, post-modern ambiguities and dangers that immaterial heritage is exposed to. The UNESCO label could, in this respect, be used as a resource that could effectively contribute to local development, to the revaluation of local practices and singers who are not yet organised in professional groups or who have been integrated into commercial circuits. The status of an internationally acknowledged cultural richness can be used in connection with sustainable development agendas so that local musicians stay attached to their original cultural settings and can live a life in dignity, sharing their values and competencies within their own community and with the ‘Cultural Others’. The label of ‘immaterial heritage’ in this sense can become a label of respect for local diversity valuating cultural difference in the context of accelerating ‘glocalisation’ dynamics. Instead of a tourism sustaining the ‘freezing processes’ of music that might be implied by verbs such as ‘to safeguard’, ‘to protect’, ‘to revitalise’, it could promote an understanding of a living tradition in its place of origin and establish a close dialogical collaboration regarding its future.

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