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## SAFEGUARDING CRAFTS AS INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE – 2      **EXAMPLES FROM NORWAY**

Eivind Falk and Dag Feldborg

Traditional craftsmanship is a treasure chest. The many variations and diversities in boatbuilding, traditional costumes, wood carving and log houses constitute a rich material refined through generations – a wonderful gift handed down from our ancestors. Craftsmanship is not only about technique, but also about commitment, ethics, judgment and didactics. Traditional craftsmanship is a complex term to grasp. Next year is an anniversary year in Norway. It is ten years since the Norwegian government ratified the UNESCO 2003 Convention on the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage and 30 years since the Norwegian Crafts Institute was established. The mission of the institute has been to safeguard traditional craftsmanship, one of the domains the Convention addresses specifically. In this article we present a status quo for the safeguarding of traditional craftsmanship, as seen from our viewpoint.

### **What does safeguarding mean in the craft field?**

How does one define traditional craft? Who comes within the scope of the UNESCO 2003 convention on the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in the traditional

craftsmanship domain? How deep do a tradition's roots need be in order to qualify as a tradition?

There is no doubt that the Convention leaves us with a lot of questions and challenges in terms of how to interpret the text. The Convention puts forth a rather loose framework on how to operate within it. In our opinion, the key issues may be condensed in the following statement:

An intangible cultural heritage in the form of expressions and practices need to:

- give a sense of belonging and identity to the *people concerned*,
- be passed on from *generation to generation*,
- constitute a living heritage that *constantly evolves* in response to new contexts.

All three statements engender discussion and need to be interpreted in "the spirit of the Convention". They are valid not only to the domain of traditional craftsmanship, but to the whole array of domains. And they are indeed debatable.

The people concerned are described in the Convention as "... *communities, groups and in some cases, individuals*". This description might be adequate in many countries, but in a highly modernised society, communities and groups are not easily identified. They are numerous and act more like flexible networks without strict boundaries. A modern community, especially in a digitalised world, is not necessarily restricted to a geographic area. A group probably needs to be more than a collection of sole practitioners in order to keep the heritage alive and dynamic. Supporters, enthusiasts, customers and an audience are but a few examples of characters that may also constitute a group or a community.

The notion "in some cases, individuals", however, makes it clear that it is extremely rare that intangible cultural heritage is related to individuals alone, as stated by one of the architects of the Convention (Blake 2006).

The expression from generation to generation may be interpreted in a strict, formalistic way. In the field of folkloristics, the term designates a process consisting of at least three generations, with one generation constituting 30 years. Alternatively, the term may be interpreted as a metaphor for a process of passing on knowledge. Again, in a complex modern society, the term "generation" is not a fixed entity (Berkaak 2010).



IngerSmedrød/NorskHåndverksinstitutt

The craft of plastering is listed as small and vulnerable and is thus monitored by our Institute. Plasterer Peder Aune, Nidaros Cathedral demonstrates at a festival.

Courses in the making of wooden planes have proved to be an eyeopener to the “mystery” of traditional craftsmanship. Course instructor Jarle Hugstmyr (right) discusses functional details with his novice.



HanneBergeth/NorskHåndverksinstitutt



AnneGuriGunnørød/NorgesHustidslag

Knowhow on making rush shoes was on the brink of disappearance but now brought forward to a new generation.



KjellMagnusØkland

The Osellar boat is customized to withstand rough sea at the west coast of Norway, either as a rowing or sailing boat.



Håvard Flaaten

Blacksmith Øystein Myhre started his craft scholarship in 2015 and has still another year to specialize into hand-forging of axes and tapered augers.

One of the items on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2016 was actually a festival that was less than a generation old, starting in 1989. The inscription concerned was the student festival **Mangal Shobhajatra on Pahela Baishakh**, nominated by Bangladesh. The listing represents a significant amount of licence in the interpretation of the term “generation to generation”.

A living heritage that constantly evolves in response to new contexts is a statement that is quite opposite to the philosophy conveyed by the 1972 World Heritage Convention. This convention underlines the necessity of uniqueness and authenticity. In the operational guidelines of the 2003 convention, however, it is stated quite clearly that phrasings referring to uniqueness or authenticity should definitely be avoided (UNESCO 2016).

The understanding of the three key issues are not, as demonstrated, carved in stone. The understanding of the convention is a process, in much the same way that traditional practices and expressions are. In our opinion, the Convention needs to be read with respect and practised with wisdom.

## **Passing on deep knowledge**

The Norwegian Crafts Institute has been a facilitator of safeguarding measures for three decades, several years before the actual convention was brought into being. Its main objective is to pass on methods, techniques and cutting edge know-how from skilled craftsmen, whether they are tradition bearers or masters in their field. This transmittance is organised in the form of *projects*. The projects are a dynamic way of keeping traditions updated, and for most of the projects, in accordance with the old methods of training – namely, the master and apprentice method.

The projects are based on the concept of *action-born knowledge*. The concept underlines how the knowledge is *in* the practice and *in* the action. The term describes, in a precise way, how a living craft is passed on and how this knowledge ought to be transferred (Godal 2007).

In our experience, knowledge *in* is best transmitted in a 1:1 situation, from one professional to another, or to put in a traditional learning frame, from master to apprentice. The tradition-bearer or master is the custodian of knowledge *in* a trade. They are therefore the most important people in the project. It is their knowledge we aim to secure.

Often the knowledge is complex and comprehensive. It can, for example, be to put on a turf roof true to a particular local tradition. To follow the tradition consistently requires a comprehensive knowledge of construction, the quality of materials of clay, earth, wood and botany – not to mention the subsequent maintenance. The difference between knowledge *of*

techniques in the past (that is something one has read about) and knowledge *in* techniques (a living know-how) will be enormous, and is likely to be crucial to whether a roof is built successfully or not. In the worst case scenario, the question is whether water eventually leak through the roof or not?

Safeguarding traditions is thus a sound way of maintaining a store of solutions. They are important not only because of cultural importance, but also because of purely economic reasons. It is smart to base decisions on something that has been proven to last. It is expensive to replace a roof after two years.

Sometimes a project starts with only one tradition bearer, but it develops gradually over time. This might happen because the project is spoken about in a geographical area where the project is running, or because it is referred to in the local newspaper, or because someone reflects “Yes, *she* was living there. I think *he* might know something about this! Didn’t *she* and her grandfather cover the walls of the barn with juniper in the traditional way? Was it not *he* who cut down trees in the old way? Was it not *she* who was present when your grandfather selected the materials?”

In this way new information, which was not known when the project began, might be uncovered during the process of the project. It is important to keep one’s eyes and ears wide open while the project is running.

## **Impacts of the Convention**

Implementation is a process that takes time. Ten years after ratification, the national coordinators of the convention, Arts Council Norway, is fully aware of this fact. Nevertheless, a lot of positive outcomes seem to be evolving. One major measure has been the funding of **training-of-trainers courses** designed and administered by UNESCO. The target groups have been influential stakeholders of intangible cultural heritage, encompassing volunteer and non-governmental organisations, museums, academia, Sami people and other minorities, all of them representing different domains. Representatives from the Nordic countries have also participated in the courses.

Traditionally, voluntary and other non-governmental organisations have had a strong standing in Norway. Many of them have gained a strong position in cultural politics and processes.

The courses have thus been fruitful arenas for discussing and comprehending the core spirit of the convention, for the exchange of safeguarding experiences and challenges, and for

reflections on how the convention can support groups or communities in their endeavours to safeguard practices or expressions (Kulturrådet 2015). The mix of different stakeholders and domains has indeed been fruitful and has stimulated a holistic reflection on safeguarding processes. Traditional craftsmanship is not an island of its own; it is in many cases interlinked with other domains.

## **Craft scholarship programme**

As in many other countries, a profound transition has taken place in vocational education. Training has shifted from being focused on traditional materials and methods to having an emphasis on the standardisation of approaches and the use of new technology.

This situation has paved the way for a **three-year fellowship scheme**, administered by the Norwegian Crafts Institute. The objective is to develop deep knowledge in the craft field. The programme is designed for craftsmen who wish to develop their skills beyond the trade level and the standards of trade certification. It has run as a trial project since 1996, but it was acknowledged and given continued funding by the Ministry of Education in 2015. The ratification of the UNESCO Convention has obviously played its role in this positive outcome. So far, 11 craftsmen from different trades have passed through the programme, including practitioners of drystone masonry, carpentry, decorative painting, folk costume tailoring, clockwork repair, and so on.

One rationale for the programme is to comply with demanding tasks in the cultural heritage sector. From this perspective, the craftsman may play an important role. This may be in a practical way, due to the craftsman's in-depth knowledge of the tricks of the trade, or in a theoretical way because she may interpret the tools' traces and patterns left by an artisan who is long gone. She is in a position to provide and complement the disciplines of the ethnologist, curator and architect with knowledge: what kinds of tools have been used? How have they been shaped? How have they been used? Traces and patterns might say something about the use of materials and their quality, or something about the subsequent maintenance.

In old buildings, boats, and other similar things, there is knowledge that only a trained eye can disclose and interpret in a sensible way.

In recent years, particularly in the field of cultural heritage, we have experienced an increasing demand for craftsmen with a deeper expertise in their discipline. At the Norwegian Directorate for Cultural Heritage, the section for Cultural Heritage at the county level and at the museums,



there has been a change of attitude resulting in an increasing demand for craftsmen with a higher level of performance.

## The Red List

The Red List is an awareness-raising activity directed at techniques and skills of traditional craftsmanship that are under threat. The objectives are to:

- revive and pass on knowledge *in* traditional techniques and skills, •  
pass on knowledge *on* handicraft and craft processes,
- make local diversity visible.

The intervention is run by the **Norwegian Folk Art and Craft Association**. They represent a huge number of members, totalling about 24,000 handicraft practitioners, representatives from all parts of the country. Members are encouraged to identify examples of intangible cultural heritage in a local context that are under threat of disappearance. More than 150 projects have been initiated by this campaign. One example of a project is know-how about **shoes made of grass**; while another is concerned with **basket making**.

One effect of the Red List is the capacity building of volunteers. They take responsibility for and monitor techniques that are at risk. It sensitises local communities in a friendly but competitive way.

The Red List is intended to be a dynamic list. The aim is to minimise the list, meaning that practices and skills are revived and do not need to be listed anymore. However, the need for the list will probably last for ever, as there will always be traditions in modern society that lie at the brink of disappearance. Today, knitting is in fashion. Who knows of its status tomorrow?

## The Oselvar project and its nomination

In Norway, the Oselvar project represents a jewel in the crown. In 2014 the Ministry of Culture nominated *“the Oselvar boat: reframing a traditional learning process of building and use in a modern context”* to UNESCO. Two years later, in late November 2016, the nomination was accepted and presented as a **Best Safeguarding Practice** by UNESCO.

The project comprises a long and complex safeguarding process, with several positive outcomes. The Oselvar is a traditional clinker-built boat originating from the west coast of Norway. This style of boat has become more and more obsolete, and in 1980 only two competent boatbuilders were alive that could pass the know-how on, and they were rather old! Because of this rather desperate situation, action was taken to safeguard the production of boats. The *Oselvar verkstaden* institution, among others, was established.

The Oselvar project and its nomination have been a door opener in many respects. It was the first nomination from Norway, and the entire Nordic region as a whole. Other groups of traditional boatbuilders have previously expressed their scepticism towards the convention. It has been considered as another bureaucratic move without output. In recent years, however, this scepticism seem to be slowly evaporating. A national organisation, Forbundet Kysten, is preparing a new nomination to the UNESCO list. This time, the technique of clinker-built boats in the Nordic countries will be the focus. The nomination process has gained support from influential groups all over the Nordic region.

Another side effect of the Oselvar nomination is the number of enquiries from other parts of the world asking tentatively for cooperation on safeguarding boatbuilding in a wider context.

## **A sharpening of tools**

The Convention has definitely had a fruitful impact on the status quo of cultural heritage in Norway. But let us be honest, reading UNESCO documents is often a nightmare, for better or worse. For worse, it is the bottom lines of wordings, concepts and rationales, expressed in such juridical language, which over 100 state parties agreed on.

For better, it is a set of rationales, concepts and wordings that challenge practitioners, other stakeholders and heritage authorities to reflect, consider and rethink the inner meaning of living traditions and the 'what and how' to safeguard. The convention forces reflections ahead and the fact that there are no quick fixes or ready-made solutions in safeguarding.

When seen from a traditional workmanship perspective, this should be inspiring. Concepts are like tools. When they are sharp, they really work. It is our hope that the convention will assist in safeguarding, both as tangible text and as an intangible set of concepts.

*Eivind Falk works as the director and Dag Feldborg as an advisor at the Norwegian Crafts Institute.*

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