



Will ICH Replace Tradition?

Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä

The ratification of the UNESCO ICH Convention by Finland occurred relatively late, in 2013. Following the ratification, the concept of ICH (or “living heritage”, as it is currently referred to by UNESCO) has been disseminated at an astonishing rate within Finnish society. The concept was initially adapted by the Finnish Heritage Agency (FHA), which is responsible for overseeing its implementation in Finland. In 2016, the FHA created a wiki-based open-access inventorying platform (<https://wiki.aineetonkulttuuriperinto.fi/>) to facilitate the documentation of ICH. The Wiki Inventory of Living Heritage was a notable success, with numerous Finnish organizations and traditional communities contributing articles on their respective objects and ideas pertaining to Finnish intangible cultural heritage. The work still continues, as the Wiki-Inventory is a changing document. Moreover, the convention has been incorporated into the Finland’s legislative framework, and the concept of ICH has been employed extensively in the Finnish media since 2016. Initially, scholars in Finland were somewhat skeptical of the concept, viewing it primarily as a tool for heritage administration. However, the number of studies employing the concept has grown rapidly in recent years.

Finland is not the only place in the world where the concept of ICH “plays the strings of people’s souls”, as the Finnish expression nicely describes. ICH is a meta-cultural frame (e.g., Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004) and an intentional tool of transnational cultural politics of UNESCO (e.g., Alasuutari & Kangas 2020) that has been rapidly adopted in numerous regions across the globe (e.g., Hafstein 2024). It is an interesting question for folklorists whether the concept of ICH will eventually supersede the term “tradition”, with all its multifaceted meanings and ontological underpinnings. This question is also related to linguistic areas: for example, in Finnish, the words “tradition” (*perinne*) and “heritage” (*perintö*) share the same etymological root, and thus seem to be used interchangeably in contemporary usage. Moreover, the Finnish agents associated with communities previously regarded as “traditional” have also demonstrated a notable enthusiasm for adapting the conceptual and ontological framework of ICH. The use of the concept is not limited, for instance, to the field of folk music. Indeed, numerous other institutions and individuals in Finland also emphasize the importance of ICH, including the Finnish Lutheran Church, the Finnish Federation of Local Communities, museums, archives, and a number of smaller organizations, even individuals.



Heidi Henriikka Mäkelä

For a Finnish native speaker, the term *perinne* (“tradition”) appears to have acquired a somewhat antiquated quality, something that is a bit old-fashioned, conservative, even “Trump-ish”, at least in institutional contexts. ICH provides an innocent cradle, an allegedly neutral and unpolitical space, in which individuals can congregate harmoniously and collectively commemorate aspects of the past. The same kind of processes occurred in multicultural Sweden approximately two decades ago, where words that began with “folk” became somewhat controversial as a result of rapid societal changes brought on by migration (Klein 2006). The relatively small and homogeneous Finland has been a place of “traditions”, “folks”, and huge and well-organized “folklore” archives up to this day – but now even the Finno-Ugric North has finally faced the ICH-zation of culture and tradition.

Literature

- Alasuutari, Pertti & Anita Kangas 2020. “The Global Spread of the Concept of Cultural Policy”. *Poetics* 82:101445. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2020.101445>.
- Hafstein, Valdimar 2024. “Folklore and Cultural Heritage: Reflecting on Change”. *Journal of American Folklore* 137 (543): 16–22. <https://doi.org/10.5406/15351882.137.543.02>.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara 2004. “Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production”. *Museum International* 56(1–2): 52–65.
- Klein, Barbro 2006. “Cultural Heritage, the Swedish Folklife Sphere, and the Others”. *Cultural Analysis* 5: 57–80.