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Towards a conceptual foundation for documenting tangible and intangible elements of a cultural object

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the concept of intangible/tangible heritage from a documentation perspective, investigating the theoretical framework developed within the various branches of the cultural heritage studies and providing a clear perspective, as well as an alignment, of the various approaches and requirements. The focus provided highlights the prospect of developing a conceptual foundation that would cover the documentation of the tangible and intangible elements of a cultural object. The theoretical assumptions are then analysed from an ontological perspective, and tested using CIDOC-CRM, developing a series of representative mappings, including information about the material, spatial and symbolic elements of a scene in a narrative cycle painted in the narthex of a byzantine church in Cyprus. The result is a formalisation of a set of requirements and a documentation paradigm which help record the tangible and intangible elements of an heritage asset.

1. Introduction

In the second half of 20th century, a series of new studies began to question the nature of cultural heritage, focusing on its identity and its transmission mechanism (Bouchenaki, 2003; Kurin, 2004). What was called at the time folklore or popular culture became the subject of a philosophical and legislative investigation, in an attempt to include it in the current institutional heritage preservation and documentation practices. The great efforts that have been made over the last 50 years, culminated in 2003 when UNESCO, during the “Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage” (UNESCO, 2003) formulated a legislative framework for preserving the so-called intangible heritage. Precedent to the convention was the creation of an index for the registration of the intangible heritage, called in 2001 “Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity” (UNESCO, 2006) and later known as the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists.

Unfortunately, the creation of the list, not only cemented the idea of a tangible-intangible dichotomy but produced an indexing and cataloguing strategy based on such a conception. Adapting and building documentation schemes around this formula has generated a series of issues, mostly in regards to the formalisation of contextual information and the symbolic meanings, which are not yet resolved.

This article aims to create the conceptual foundation for an information structure that would resolve the problems inadvertently generated by this dichotomous view by proving that the recorded data in the tangible and intangible domain relate to the same group of

entities and can in principle be registered under the same semantic framework.

In order to ground the necessary theoretical stance to support this position, section two analyses the tangible/intangible elements that are taken into consideration. Next, Section 3 evaluates the previous literature on these topics, focusing on examples of describing intangible elements using formal systems. The latter half of the article is divided in two parts. Section 4.1 summarizes the ontological requirements and choices available from a documentation perspective for formalizing these elements, while Section 4.2 is dedicated to the analysis of the possible documentation path for the description of the conceptual elements present in a Byzantine icon, and the connections between such elements and a bigger framework of practices.

2. Analysis of the problem

2.1. Tangible and intangible heritage: a theoretical perspective

The declaration of an intangible heritage as the compliment of tangible heritage it has a respectable aim, but also the unfortunate effect of separating the focus of documentation over two apparently quite different and distinct objects, the item and the act. In so doing, the rich network of relationships that exist between the two are artificially bifurcated and thereby obscured.

But, as Hodder (2012) has recently argued, a cultural object has always to be seen as the outcome of the relationships between itself and

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the world around it, such as between an object and another object, between a human and an object, and between the environment and the object. For example, in case of human production, an artefact is the result of the interaction between a person, a set of tools and a technique/strategy, all of which are involved in producing an item during an act. Starting only from these elements, we can easily see how an object is the result of a series of interactions between other physical entities, and it heavily relies on intangible elements, such as a specific techniques and a particular social arena, for its identity. Additionally, the significance of an object is always actively constructed within a context and, consequently, its representation is subjective and a consequence of a knowledge exchange dynamic.

Objects are, therefore, strictly connected to the diverse aspects of social organisation, culture, systems of thought, or actions (Lemonnier, 2013, 2012), shaping the normative behaviour of a group, reflecting in themselves the identity of a social landscape (Miller, 2010, 2005), and acting as communication devices. The meaning can be encoded in the artefact using a basic cognitive process (Fauconnier and Turner, 2003) which constructs a reality throughout the projection of a conceptual model into a new mental space that blends the properties of the two “parents” into a new representation anchored in a material object. The result of the conceptual blending is usually used in a social arena to define a symbolic meaning of its own reality (Hutchins, 2005). For such reasons context and object always exist in a circular relationship (Bal and Bryson, 1991).

Objects should thus be seen as material anchors shaping the normative behaviour and agency of performative actions in a social space, helping to generate new dispositions (as in Bourdieu (Grenfell, 2008)) throughout differentiation in practices, which would themselves later be responsible for associating new meanings to objects or techniques (Lemonnier, 2013; Mauss, 1973). Therefore, in face of a false bifurcation of heritage into two separate halves, we must agree that “intangible culture makes the background of tangible cultural property” (Ito, 2003) and “tangible heritage, without intangible heritage, is a mere husk or inert matter” (Kirshenblatt Gimblett, 2004).

The documentation of events and practices is seen by UNESCO to fall within the domain of intangible heritage. UNESCO classifies these kinds of act as: knowledge and practices, oral tradition and expression, performing arts, social practices, traditional craftsmanship. What is clearly the common denominator in all of the above is that they are types of performance. As highlighted by Taylor (2003) performances include a broad range of cultural behaviours (including phenomena like dance, civic obedience etc.) and are the key factor for transmitting the repertoire, the embodied knowledge of a specific social arena. Performance requires tangible objects, for gaining meaning and helping understand the act throughout their use.

The case of traditional craftsmanship is, to some degree, different from the other practices, because the stress is laid on recording the procedural knowledge used by an artisan. However, instead of recording the knowledge used during the craft, as well as the social significance of the resulting object, what is actually described is only a specific type of performative act, documented just as a procedure/technique. Nevertheless, there is a documented link between certain everyday objects, the technique used for their creation, and the social landscape of reference (Lemonnier, 2012) that should always be clearly mentioned when recording such phenomena.

Some quick examples of the construction of meaning and on the complexity of the relationships between tangible and intangible heritage can be drawn from history of art and literature.

Western art is a perfect example, because it is built on a symbolism that allows us to recognise a particular emotion in play in the painting/sculpture. The symbolism of its motifs (the colour used or the type of poses are typical examples) can be deployed consciously or unconsciously; it is, regardless, the product of the habitus that produces it. Consequently, the transmission of this conventions, considered a typical intangible expression, passes along with the transmission of a

physical object. Moreover, the transmission itself is mediated by schema and vocabularies of the current social space, and therefore the product of the painting process is not a mere reconstruction of reality (as believed by the naturalists), but always a mediated view. The mediation comes from the techniques used to augment the recognition of reality that is a significant base of the pictorial arts. Usually such kinds of pictorial vocabulary arise from the teaching of the masters in ready-made memorisable codes that help both to transmit as well as to define a style (Gombrich, 1994). The use of a set of vocabularies for the depiction of a character/scene is not limited only to the pictorial arts. In literature such phenomena are widely studied taking into consideration not only the motifs (Uther, 2004) used within the stories, but also the possible structure of the interactions within a certain narrative form (Propp, 1971). The recognised units of analysis (both motifs or structural elements) are then, like it happens in the pictorial art, conveyed to a user, who is able to recognise them because the schema embedded in his habitus helps him understand the symbolic power of gestures, phrases etc.

Such considerations make clear the necessity not only not to fall into a false dualism in the documentation of heritage, but also emphasize the fact that the tangible and intangible elements of a cultural object or practice are only properly addressed when they are described and preserved together.

2.2. Tangible and intangible heritage: an information perspective

The cataloguing, organisation and archiving of the information related to cultural objects and practice is constructed throughout the registration of different media items (photo, video, text or 3D reconstruction), which function as an anchor and representative in a digital space of the original object/phenomena. The data is generally structured by the use of metadata (Baca et al., 2006; Lubas et al., 2013), which serves as an access point for retrieving information about a digital object. The result is generally a series of flattened object-centric descriptors which, even if they clearly somehow relate to the same phenomena, fail to fully describe it in relation to its context, providing to the final users only a partial account of its complexity. Moreover, the current approaches in the discipline are deeply informed by, and therefore reproduce, the dichotomy between the tangible and intangible heritage. This results in a failure to create the necessary semantic links between the elements, limiting the understanding conveyed of the interrelationship between performative act, objects and their meaning in a specific context. Addressing the defects of such structures will require, in the first place, dropping the object-centric approach and making a shift towards an event/process-centric representation (Kettula and Hyvönen, 2012), while enforcing the use of semantic systems able to record the relationships between the described entities.

Moreover, as a basic requirement, cultural heritage discourse has always to be considered as shared between different actors, who can themselves understand the specific activity/object quite differently from each other, assigning it different meanings on the base of their social landscape. In this context, it is of paramount importance to fix the recorded assertions within a shared information structure, like a formal ontology, which would help in anchoring, sharing and classifying the recorded propositions. Using a well-founded formal ontology (Guarino, 1998) would allow the assignment of the data attributes asserted by various actors/social groups, providing the shared ground for a group of specialists to enrich and compare with each other's documentation.

Such a shift from flat documentation to an ontologically founded documentation structures provide the prerequisite to the unification of different discourses into a flexible system, able to fully represent the richness of the disciplines involved in the analysis of the object and thus met the challenge of describing objects/practices in their full meaning. Moreover, this method gives the possibility to transforming

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