SUSTAINING CULTURAL HERITAGE:
DEVELOPING STRATEGIES FOR YOUTH INVOLVEMENT

Keynote address delivered at 2021 NHB*-ICHCAP** ICH+ Symposium
31 August 2021
(* National Heritage Board; ** International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region; +Intangible Cultural Heritage)

Introduction

Thank you very much for the kind invitation to present this keynote address. I intend to speak squarely to the theme of the conference, and have thus entitled my talk "Sustaining cultural heritage: developing strategies for youth involvement". This is something close to my heart, being an educator, and dealing on a daily basis with the education of young people. I realise that this second day of the symposium focuses on technology, and apologise that I will only be touching on that in brief.

I will begin by sketching the interconnectedness of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, which explains why I have focused my talk on "sustaining cultural heritage" more broadly, and not on "intangible cultural heritage" exclusively. I will then proceed to highlight the importance of youth involvement in cultural heritage if that heritage is to gather meaning at all for the future. Finally, I will outline four to five strategies for youth involvement, as many as time allows. These ideas draw from an understanding of human needs, and to the extent that these strategies help to respond to the needs, they stand a chance of ensuring that a society will be able to witness the longevity of its cultural heritage.

So, first, the interconnectedness of tangible and intangible cultural heritage

'Tangible cultural heritage' is visible, material and therefore, for most, 'real'. It makes sense to look at physical artefacts, monuments and sites, and talk about maintaining them for future generations. The physicality of artefacts, the materiality of built environments, and the tangibility of products of human creativity render them 'real' and visible. It is unsurprising therefore that they are able to capture attention and interest amongst those invested in preserving, conserving, maintaining and transmitting such heritage intergenerationally in society. They are arguably easier to interest young people too, given that they can visit heritage sites, walk the corridors that past generations traversed, produce replica artefacts and therefore be involved in the "making" and "remaking" of heritage.

'Intangible cultural heritage', refers to 'the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, [and] skills … that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their Cultural Heritage' (UNESCO, 2003). This is, famously, and influentially, the UNESCO definition. Examples of intangible heritage are oral traditions, performing arts, local knowledge, and traditional skills. These are arguably more difficult to grasp than tangible cultural heritage, less visible, and perhaps less accessible. However, they can be rendered visible through the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated with them. In that sense, the tangible and intangible intersect.

The UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, conceived and subsequently ratified in 2003, highlights the interdependence between intangible cultural heritage, and tangible cultural and natural heritage, thus implying that the preservation of the latter can contribute to the preservation of the former. However, preserving the latter only would not be sufficient to preserve the former. UNESCO thus spearheaded the recognition and promotion of living human treasures, 'persons who possess to a very high degree the knowledge and skills required for performing or recreating specific elements of the intangible Cultural Heritage'. This foregrounds the value of people in the expression and transmission of intangible Cultural Heritage.

While intangible cultural heritage finds a material basis in the associated instruments, objects, artefacts and spaces, it should be noted too that tangible cultural heritage is similarly intertwined with the intangible. Sites and monuments, objects and artefacts draw meaning not only from their materiality, but from the ethical values, beliefs, myths and social customs associated with them. These form part of the intangibility of tangible cultural heritage.

Clearly therefore, the interconnectedness of tangible and intangible cultural heritages render their separation more apparent than real. It is a reminder of the need to think holistically and in connected ways about their management and transmission.

Let me now turn to the second part of my address, which is to emphasise the absolute necessity of youth involvement in sustaining cultural heritages.

Young people play a crucial role in the safeguarding of heritage of all kinds. The reasons are obvious. If a society is invested in preserving, conserving, maintaining and transmitting such heritage for future generations, that intergenerationality means nothing if today's intergenerational transfer, if I might put it that way, breaks down. If the younger generation today finds little meaning in such heritage, one might say that the entire raison d'etre of safeguarding is lost. If today's youth are not interested and do not see such practices, traditions, arts, and skills as part of their inheritance, the game, as they say, is over.

Further, why will they even consider passing the heritage on if they do not value that heritage now? Intergenerational transfer will simply not take place beyond this generation. It is therefore critical to involve young people in sustaining cultural heritage if that heritage is to have longevity.

So I turn now to asking what strategies might be useful in involving and interesting young people in cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible.

I will outline five strategies, if time allows. All are anchored in ensuring that cultural heritage is relevant to young people and responds to their personal needs. These strategies draw inspiration from Abraham Maslow, the Russian-American psychologist whose notion of hierarchy of needs has become embedded in the popular imagination. While anchored in human developmental psychology, and therefore framed in terms of stages of attainment, each stage to precede the next, in contemporary thinking, the notion of hierarchy and stage

precedence has been decentred, and overlapping and reversionary needs are now recognised, depending on circumstance and culture. It is this more decentred approach that I adopt in my remarks to follow. While I will be quick to note that there are also other criticisms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, I will not go into them here. Suffice to say that there is a certain level of intuitiveness that makes some of the needs that Maslow identified difficult to dispute. I therefore proceed to use them to frame my remarks on possible strategies to ensure the relevance of cultural heritage to young people, and therefore to have them invested in sustaining and transmitting such heritage to future generations. I would also like to qualify that these needs are not unique to young people, and therefore the strategies are not applicable only to them, though the relative emphases may differ for people across ages. This is an empirical question that needs to be interrogated, but is not the subject of today's talk.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs addresses what he calls deficiency needs and growth needs. Deficiency needs are physiological, safety, love and social belonging, and esteem. Growth needs are cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualisation and transcendence. Using them as starting points, I suggest strategies to address the needs that use cultural heritage as medium. In so doing, cultural heritage becomes directly relevant to the lives of young people. I will not have time to address all of them, but will do as many as time will allow in this session. (Note to self:I will likely address three of the deficiency needs (safety, social belonging, and esteem; and two of the growth needs (cognitive and aesthetic), leaving physiological[1], self-actualisation[2] and transcendence[3] to the audience's own devices.

First, I highlight 'safety' needs that Maslow identifies. By 'safety', he means a range of human needs, perhaps conceptualised around physical safety, economic safety, and emotional safety. Physical safety includes safety from war and violence, for example; economic safety includes job security and financial security, and emotional safety includes safety from abuse. Strategies for youth appreciation of and involvement in cultural heritage can address any of these dimensions. For example, the use of heritage such as childhood rhymes and stories in emotional therapy address emotional safety needs. Opportunities for jobs and careers tied up with the heritage industry can address job and financial security needs. In this way, heritage is weaved into the warp and woof of life, and not sequestered in a separate compartment, unrelated to everyday living. It follows therefore that creating jobs in the heritage industry, offering opportunities for youth employment, and developing arts therapy methodologies that incorporate performing arts and traditional skills are some ways in which young people can encounter, find relevance in and benefit from heritage, such that it is a living heritage.

Second, Maslow identified social belonging as an important human need. This refers to interpersonal needs in which a sense of belonging to a social group matters, and contributes to a sense of well-being. Young people in particular have a need to feel they belong, and being part of a group can counter a sense of isolation and loneliness. Social belonging develops in myriad ways organically but can also be cultivated and nurtured. Clubs at

---

[1] This refers to air, water, food, sex, sleep, clothes, shelter.
[2] This includes, for example, partner acquisition, parenting, utilizing and developing talents and abilities; and pursuing goals.
[3] This refers to spiritual needs or altruism.

schools, associations in the neighbourhood, and other organisations around common interests and causes, can provide a focal point in the lives of young people. They can build a common identity and hence a sense of belonging. Such clubs and associations can centre on heritage activities, attracting those with interest and deepening their engagement, but also draw in those with less initial interest in the subject matter but more interested in being part of an in-group.

Third, an interesting need that Maslow identifies is the need for 'esteem', a need for respect from others, for recognition, and even status, fame, prestige. This is a phenomenon that we can recognise in our own quiet moments: we become more interested and more invested in something which we do well in and are recognised for. When I ask students why they have chosen for further study subject X, often it is not surprising to hear a response like "I did well in it", that is, when praised, recognised, and rewarded for good performance in the subject, one is encouraged to pursue it. Thus, building scaffolds of recognition and reward can further nascent interests and deepen involvement. Awards for documenting heritage, for creative application of traditional skills, for effort and skills in preservation, and so forth, can go a long way to further encourage involvement.

Fourth, we now get into growth needs, as distinguished from the deficiency needs discussed above. Cognitive needs are reflected in curiosity, the desire for deliberation, discussion and brainstorming, which schools are well-placed to address. Activities that raise awareness, encourage dialogue and debate, demand research and exploration will appeal to those whose cognitive needs are strong. Building heritage themes into these activities can constitute a part of the strategies for developing interest in young people, and they need not be confined to subjects like history or social studies. In fact, cultural heritage matters can be embedded in teaching and learning across school subjects from mathematics to design, music, and physics! These can all be powerful ways of nurturing future heritage workers, heritage enthusiasts and heritage supporters.

Fifth, we all have what Maslow calls "aesthetic" needs i.e. the desire for aesthetically pleasing experiences. Aesthetics is a tricky concept and a culturally-inflected experience. It can be influenced by medium. Generally, young people may be assumed to have a preference for popular cultural media over traditional media. This can be harnessed to influence the involvement of young people. Music videos, animation, video games and other types of interactive media can be used to capture cultural heritage content to produce aesthetically pleasing cultural experiences that appeal to a younger cohort.

Let me now close with a brief summary and conclusion.

In these short 20 minutes, I hope to have provided a common-sensical foundation for approaching the question of how to interest and involve young people in sustaining cultural heritage, including both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. I have chosen not to tease apart the latter, as I believe that both are interconnected and find root and expression in the other. I have sought to show that developing strategies for youth involvement might begin with asking what needs youths have, and thinking of strategies that address their needs, embedding cultural heritage in that process. Thus, if cultural heritage is embedded in addressing the safety, belonging, esteem, cognitive and aesthetic needs of an individual,

then that cultural heritage becomes relevant to a young person's life, and the challenge of interest and longevity does not arise. As an educator, I am partial to embedding cultural heritage in education – in formal lessons across a range of disciplines and co-curricular activities, but also in informal education beyond the formal educational institution – through neighbourhood activities, and those of other social, cultural and economic organisations. Heritage then becomes living heritage, relevant to everyday lives because they connect with everyday needs.

Thank you.