Intangible Cultural Heritage, Diversity and Coherence

by Lourdes Arizpe

An internationally renowned anthropologist, Lourdes Arizpe (Mexico) held many scientific positions including that of director of the National Museum of Popular Cultures and of the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), before she joined UNESCO in 1994 as Assistant Director-General for Culture. She was a member of the Word Commission on Culture and Development and president of the Scientific Committee for the UNESCO World Culture Reports (1998 and 2000). She has been president of the International Social Science Council (ISSC) since 2002.

One of the most valuable contributions of the Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is that it preserves the integrity of meaning of each activity selected. It is not only the objects used or the singular events that are recognized, but also their historical evolution and the agency of those who create, perform or display them. Such holistic recognition becomes a tribute to contemporary cultural agency in whichever particular cultural context it may be found. It leads the way, then, to building a new ‘cosmoculture’, that is, a global perspective of constantly evolving human creation and communication.

UNESCO’s Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity has already had a significant impact by drawing the attention of governments and civil societies to the need to safeguard this heritage. As has happened with other international conventions related to culture, however, new definitions and mechanisms must slowly be developed to ensure that specific objectives are attained in this safeguarding.
A particularly important aspect to highlight is the relationship between intangible cultural heritage and cultural diversity. To foster this new understanding we need to introduce the notions of time and space into our thinking on this relationship. Firstly, we must acknowledge that all human achievement stems from intangible cultural heritage, for it is ideas, desires and interests that drive people to create tangible or performative heritage. Yet individuals do not work alone. They work within sets of linguistic, cognitive and normative values that construct social and political contexts which influence their will and their capacity to create culture. These contexts, however, are defined and delimited according to core representations. That is, the creativity that gives meaning to cultural heritage in each generation is coupled to procedures of representation of cultures and their heritage in specific settings. The Nōgaku theatre, the Kunqu Opera and the Khutiyattam come from a common framework of performative art but have acquired, down the centuries, styles that represent Japanese, Chinese and Indian cultures. In some cases, as in that of the Rituals of the Day of the Dead in Mexico, two strikingly different cultures were blended into a new, meaningful ritual that represents Mexican culture. It is the resonance and blending between cultures that leads to great masterpieces of human ideas, skills, exchanges and co-operation. In fact, most intangible cultural heritage is the result of long series of historical experiences and influences from other cultures. At the same time, they may hold meaning for peoples from neighbouring cultural communities while, nevertheless, having a cultural distinctiveness of their own.

In this perspective, the sense of flow inherent to intangible cultural heritage is the best representation of the interrelatedness of cultures around the world. This perception of reality is altered when culture becomes ‘objectified’ in international discourse in order to give form to the very disparate and time-bound cultural phenomena evolving in today’s globalization. All cultural groups create a sense of identity by defining themselves towards other groups: they may celebrate their cultural kinship or descent, or they may decree their opposition or enmity towards the other group. Cultural diversity as a human construct, then, reflects the cultural relatedness of all groups around the world. If we celebrate cultural diversity, we celebrate the recognition of every group’s connectedness with other groups.

This historical process creates cultural coherence within each culture that adds value and meaning beyond the sum of separate cultural fragments. A very interesting parallel can be made with the way quantum physics now explains the physical world. It is made up of energy that, at a given point in space and time, is articulated by four forces into creating the physical, visible world. In the same way, one could say that cultural energy has been flowing between all human groups since the dawn of history, but it crystallizes in distinct cultures and great achievements at given times in history and in geographical space.

In this perspective, the distinctiveness of cultures comes from deliberate, conscious choices of groups to assume an identity by defining themselves in certain ways towards other groups.
If greater cultural interaction really led to homogenization, then the whole of Eurasia would have much more homogeneous cultures. Cultures, civilizations and empires have come and gone in history, yet the will to appear distinct, because a certain cultural coherence is necessary for social and psychological well-being, especially for children, is reinstated in each generation.

A very different process intervenes when this distinctiveness lends privileges or disadvantages in given political settings. At present, as I have argued elsewhere, cultural globalization has advanced more rapidly than economic globalization and this has altered the world political structures put in place in past centuries. Given the lack of support for the development of new political philosophies, cultures and religions have increasingly been taken up as political ideologies. We have already witnessed the high cost of this in events in the last few years. But the point being made here is that this helps explain why globalization has been accompanied by so many cultural relocations, that is, actions by groups that want to re-instate or reclaim their place or to carve out a new place in the global politico-cultural cartography on the basis of their culture, ethnic tradition or religion. Within this global cultural cartography, some elements of the cultures they choose to identify with, are displayed and highlighted, while others are played down and still others are simply discarded. The choices implied in this complex process have a specific outcome: a new representation of that particular culture – or, indeed, ethnic group or religion – in the new global cosmopolis.

Cultural interactivity and the risk of trivialization

The dialogue between cultures is so pervasive in today’s world that it is best understood as a permanent cultural interactivity. A few recent data give an eloquent picture of the speed and scale of such cultural interactivity.

In 2001, according to the International Telecommunications Union, there were 1.595 billion television sets in use around the world, in 1.048 billion households, in the year 2001. With an average of three persons watching each television set, it means that half the world’s population, at least 3 billion people, watch television. Furthermore, taking into account that migrants and refugees are linked to networks of people, it could be said that approximately 1 billion people are affected by these movements with at least 1 billion also affected by tourist movements. The new electronic means of communication, the Internet, was estimated in January 2003 as having 171, 638, 297 websites and estimates of web pages run from 18 to 25 million.

Such permanent, daily interactivity among people bearing different cultures inevitably produces a cultural overload, similar to information overload, but with greater risks of fostering personal anxiety, since cultures provide the nucleus of individuals’ personalities and norms of behaviour. It must be made very clear, however, that the enemy here is not cultural interactivity itself propitiated, irreversibly, by the global reach of audiovisual communications, and travel. Tyler Cowen argues that, in fact, it provides people with new freedom to escape ‘the tyranny of place’ by offering them more cultural ‘menus’. But Kwame
Anthony Appiah, on the other hand, warns of the ‘new tyrannies’ in the form of newly asserted identities that can tyrannize by eliminating the claims of other identities which we may also have reason to accept and respect. Appiah says ‘in policing this imperialism of identity … it is crucial to remember always that we are not simply black or white or yellow or brown, gay or straight or bisexual, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist or Confucian but we are also brothers and sisters, parents and children, liberals, conservatives and leftists, teachers and lawyers and automakers and gardeners … let us not let our racial identities subject us to new tyrannies’.4

Given the speed at which the new spaces created in communications and the media have to be filled, and new representations have to be presented, the new enemy is cultural trivialization. It becomes apparent when the most visible parts of cultural actions are extracted and emptied of meaning. They then become, precisely, one more consumption item whose meaning is exhausted practically at the moment it is bought. This is not a minor aspect that must be given attention in debates on intangible cultural heritage and cultural diversity.

The framework for this debate is the question of whether cultures can be reduced to the number of their components. For many years, anthropologists tried to list these ‘culturemes’, in a similar way to how linguists reduce language to phonemes, but were finally forced to conclude that cultures were more than a sum of their parts. Therefore, they cannot be thought of as items on shelves in a supermarket from which individuals simply choose whatever mix of products they may feel like, to build their own identities. Such a practice leads to what I would call ‘cultural dissonance’ associated with the deleterious effects of cognitive dissonance for psychological well-being. A case, then, can be made for keeping a basic cultural coherence, albeit one that, as Mahatma Gandhi would have said, does not close the windows of ‘my’ cultural home to other cultures.

Indeed, wanting to conserve cultures and their heritage must not lead to a cultural conservatism that creates ‘new tyrannies’. Rather, as Amartya Sen has recently placed it: ‘…denial of cultural liberty, exclusion from social interactions, rejection of one’s sense of identity or lack of recognition of one’s cultural priorities can figure prominently in the deprivations that human beings have reason to resist and want to remedy…in placing cultural issues within the broad framework of human freedoms and valuations we can see the promise of a well-founded, rather than ad hoc, appreciation of the cultural dimension of human lives.’5

Instead, conserving intangible cultural heritage and cultural diversity implies preserving a certain harmony, a kind of ‘golden cultural proportion’ whereby people safeguard intimate cultural roots, whether originally ascribed or adopted, while feeling free to embrace whatever they have reasons to value from other cultures.

This coupling of coherence and freedom must also be understood in terms of scale. In a world in which the global sphere is reference for everyone at the local scale one cannot be part of a
single culture or religion. Indeed, as Craig Calhoun argues, ‘monolinguality and religious orthodoxy have been taken as normal, and multilingualism and religious syncretism or variation as deviant cases to be explained. Yet in these and a range of other ways, it does not seem obvious that people usually live in one social world at a time, but rather that it is now, and throughout human history often has been, common to inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously and even to grow as a person by the ability to maintain oneself in connection to all of them. This means that anyone’s horizon of experience, to borrow the phenomenological term, is unlikely to be fixed by a single collectivity or categorical framework.’

To make every single one of these cultural domains separate realms will only lead, as Breckenridge argues in a recent book entitled *Cosmopolitanism*, to ‘a League of Nations with ten thousand fractious and anxious expansion teams…’, and she ends, ‘this is not a good way to organize human life.’

Identities from different domains, cultural, ethnic, religious, professional, national and so on, we have seen, criss-cross in individuals’ lives. But I would insist that these multiple allegiances do not all occur on a single plane. To think in this way is to fall into the ‘flat culture syndrome’ as I have called it elsewhere. Instead, allegiances may belong to different scales.

In fact, a multi-tiered system of multiple allegiances, built in the last centuries, is still very much in place around the world. In societies, individuals have, firstly, *place-based identities* which may coincide with or be superseded by language, cultural or religious identities, secondly, *nation-state based identities*, and thirdly, *regional* [*i.e. the European Union*], *subcontinental* [*sub-Saharan Africa*] or *broad cultural identities* [*the West*]. Nation-based identities are nowhere near to disappearing as had been forecasted some years ago, as the present situation in the United States now attests. New regional identities will only override national identities if the possibility exists of a political union expanding democratic rights to citizens of all countries in that bloc, as is the unique case of the European Union at present. Otherwise, cultural diversity must, for the next coming years, still be understood within a multi-tiered system of cultural identities, religious affiliations, nationalities and broader cultural allegiances.

The challenge for international organizations such as UNESCO, is that all individuals or societies must be provided with the enabling conditions to re-present and to negotiate their cultural location within this new *multi-tiered cultural cosmopolis*.

UNESCO’s strong leadership in the last few years in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage goes hand in hand with its work in not only recognizing and celebrating cultural diversity but in helping develop new policy models. These must protect *cultural coherence* but not fall into the trap of cultural conservatism. Therefore, it is important to emphasize the development of cultural freedom. Indeed, freedom to create, as highlighted at the 1998 Stockholm Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development, is still very much our cultural guideline for the future.
NOTES

1 According to the IOM World Migration Report 2003, migrants worldwide numbered 175 million in 2000, and, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were 20.5 million refugees worldwide as of 1 January 2003, a movement which is on the increase, since the figure for the year 2000 was 15.8 million.

2 Estimates of the number of websites worldwide vary greatly depending on the source and methodology. This is an example taken from the Internet Domain Survey compilation by the Internet Software Consortium for January 2003.


5 Ibid.


25. The Oruro Carnival, Bolivia. It is vital to create and support the social spaces where this dialogue and creative expression can take place.