

How intangible cultural heritage adapts to a changing world

Rahul Goswami

Intangible cultural heritage expert and trainer in the Asia-Pacific region, and government consultant on agriculture, sustainability and development, India

A fisherman checks his nets in the man-made lake under Sigiriya rock, at the Ancient City of Sigiriya (Sri Lanka).





The crew of a ceremonial snake boat approaches the shore to participate in a commemorative temple feast that celebrates rice grown in the wetlands. This practice, on the River Pamba in Kerala (India), binds together village communities along the river.

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Soils and humus, with grasses or cultivated, water whose form may be a hill tarn or a great tropical river, all these have been the expression and renewal of intangible cultural heritage. Whether in the Himalayan hill districts of northern India, the central province of Sri Lanka with its hydraulic wonders, the great basin of the Tonle Sap in Cambodia whose bidirectional water flow is the basis of both ritual and an aquacultural livelihood, or the highland *aldeias* (villages) of central Timor-Leste, in which an age-old institution that bans exploitation of the forest continues to be respected, the biophysical foundation on which so much intangible cultural heritage depends has remained plentiful and as reliable as the seasons.

But no longer, for new disturbances have shaken this relationship and they are all at once depleting these fundamental materials and altering their very nature. The new uncertainty is undermining communities' intimate knowledge of natural processes in their specific locations, such as inter-annual variations in weather or the cycles

of certain plant and animal species. The protection of such knowledge is of critical importance – not only in consideration of its role as cultural heritage, and the wealth of accumulated and transmitted knowledge – but also because it provides keys to living with change, and especially with the effects and impacts of climate change.

Living with the effects of climate change

These questions touch upon ways and means to reduce the harmful effects of climate change, and the identification of forms of behaviour that allow us to live in relative harmony with these effects – effects that have moved to the centre of the scientific and technical debate about climate change. In these circles, however, this is known as 'mitigation' and 'adaptation', words and concepts that can scarcely be rendered in the languages and dialects spoken by the bearers of intangible cultural heritage and the holders of traditional knowledge.

What is known on the ground is the realization that the rate of change is

reaching at times beyond the capacities of communities, the strength of their intangible cultural heritage and the depth of their local knowledge. Yet it is not 'climate change' alone that is the villain, for the effects that endanger communities are practically always the amplification by a changing climate of existing environmental degradation, over-exploitation of a natural resources base, urban and industrial encroachment into ecological commons that have long survived because of the cautious thriftiness of its human stewards.

IPCC report 2014

The fact that considerations of this kind found verbose mention in the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2014 indicates that the formal earth sciences have learned to look with a new respect at their very much older, and very much more experienced, forebear – cultural heritage with all its expressions, knowledge systems and methods of safeguarding. The AR5 (as last year's voluminous report is called), has several times referred to sociocultural



Women members of a village institution in Himachal Pradesh (India), at a meeting. When cereal crop staples failed under new conditions brought about by climate change, they revitalized the cultivation of traditional varieties of upland millet, and kept alive the knowledge associated with its cultivation.

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resilience and has linked this quality directly to 'vulnerability under conditions of environmental change'. Of much interest and concern to the IPCC scientists and authors has been what they call adaptation limits: environmental, political and sociocultural. When these adaptation limits are crossed, communities and settlements suffer. And so, in order to avoid crossing the line, they need to be recognized early enough. This is a role that intangible cultural heritage and local knowledge can easily assume, provided there is social willingness and political support.

When both are present, especially at the level of local administration, the benefits are apparent. In the district of Pathanamthitta, in the state of Kerala, south India, several sacred groves are revered by the residents of the villages along the River Pamba, whose source lies high up in the Western Ghats. 'Here we maintained sacred areas of forest and established rules and customs to ensure their protection,' explains Kummanam Rajasekhar, a social activist who has successfully led a public movement to protect the wetlands of the district.

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'These rules prohibit the felling of trees, the collection of any material from the forest floor, and the killing of all animals. Because of these protective restrictions, faithfully followed over generations, our sacred groves are now havens of biodiversity.'

When this verdant and water-rich district of south India is hit by the effects of a changing climate (in which monsoonal variations become more volatile, rainy spells more intense and dry ones more frequent), its storehouses of communally-maintained biodiversity are invaluable. They harbour medicinal plants essential to village communities for their treatment of illnesses, they also contain wild relatives of crop species that can help to improve cultivated varieties, and many sacred groves include water resources such as ponds and streams

upon whose flow cultivation (large tracts of paddy downstream in Kerala) depends.

Use of natural resources in listed heritage

To date, 364 elements have been inscribed on the Lists (and Register) of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and my estimate is that no less than 80 per cent of these are dependent, directly or indirectly, on the use of natural resources by their practitioners. Where intangible cultural heritage is expressed through art and performance then musical instruments are made from these materials, rituals and customs require objects that are both common and sacred and fashioned from the produce of local biodiversity, culinary



A shore fisherman in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka, explains the spartan but complex craft. Experienced fishermen blended several streams of knowledge: on the habits of near-shore species, seasonal sea and monsoon conditions that determined choice of fishing technique, and how to maintain the sustainability of catches so that households could be fed without depleting fish stocks.

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intangible cultural heritage relies entirely on crops, herbs and horticultural produce whose cultural significance can only be guaranteed when that produce has been cultivated organically, from seed that has been locally saved, 'process' intangible cultural heritage – a community's means of recognition of its relationships with the habitat, and the terms under which that community sustainably exploits that habitat – is entirely circumscribed by natural resources.

When the qualities and characteristics of those natural resources change, or when their typical habitat can no longer support them and they begin to wander (as plants have tended to do to escape climatic stress), or even when they face new predators or invasive species that were formerly foreign and unknown, then the natural resources that intangible cultural heritage is linked to and depends upon becomes unsuitable or scarce and in turn weakens that heritage, at times even terminally endangering it.

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Local potential for problem-solving

This change in typical habitats and the threat to ways of living is often included (at times implicitly) when 'climate change impacts' on people and communities are described and debated. These impacts, states Abdhesh Gangwar, Programme Director of the Centre for Environment Education Himalaya (an institution supported by India's Ministry of Environment), 'are already visible in the lives of many people in South Asia, particularly the poor, vulnerable groups, and especially women'. He sees climate change currently being addressed mostly as a technical and political issue and

advocates that 'all measures related to adaptation and mitigation should start from the local people's potential and needs, respecting their dignity and right to development'.

Yet all too often, local potential for problem-solving, which rests upon the application of methods rooted in intangible cultural heritage or traditional knowledge, is overlooked by administrative mechanisms. In coastal zones, especially in countries that are either experiencing or aspire to high economic growth rates, the competition for land involves communities that have used such land with care, urban and peri-urban settlements that are expanding and industry.



Preparing portions of fresh produce for sale in a local market in Covalima (Timor-Leste), an elderly cultivator keeps her goods in woven baskets, preferring these to commonly available containers made from plastic. Aesthetically pleasing and also requiring extensive knowledge of the properties of cane, such baskets continue to find household utility in rural Timor-Leste.

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These communities have almost always included fisherfolk, whose knowledge of the ways of water is unparalleled. It is in the use of littoral land that their intangible cultural heritage lies, for theirs is an understanding of the means with which to live with an ocean's gifts but also with its ferocity. Hence they are coastal engineers too, for between their settlements and the sea always lay a variegated buffer of fields, bunds, protective vegetation on dunes, sandy dunes, mangroves where there is no sandy verge, mud flats and reed marshes. All these features were maintained by coastal villages, each in its own fashion, and together they formed a coastal defence that absorbed the cyclonic tidal surges and the powerful winds.

What happens when the very morphology of that coastal zone begins to mutate under the effects of climate change? Today, there is not a single Indonesian region or province whose ecosystems – coastal, forest, mountainous, wetland, agricultural – are not under pressure from

rapid social and economic changes. Their histories all point to the extensive (usually total) use of traditional knowledge to find a balance between using the ecosystems and maintaining them well. Among those who have done so are the Buginese, whose intergenerationally transmitted knowledge of the marine ecosystem is extensive. Their complex arts of navigation and the piloting of fishing and trading vessels have developed synchronously with a detailed coastal terminology. The specific vocabulary used by the Buginese for features such as the vegetated border above the beach, the inner reef, a reef with sea grasses, a reef with corals, the reef crest, the outer reef, patches of corals less than about 10 m deep, patches of corals over about 10 m deep, and so on is an extension of the dense intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge concerning the use of these features, or their importance in daily and seasonal life. When the effects of climate change alter these features, even erasing some entirely, then that heritage becomes orphaned.

The traditional supporting the modern

In the South-East Asian region, among those who have reflected at length on these knowledge systems and the changes affecting them now – whether changes that occur naturally or through the offices of the state – is Demetrio do Amaral de Carvalho, of the Haburas Foundation in Timor-Leste. He emphasizes that traditional ecological knowledge can support modern marine and coastal resource management. 'However, the way in which natural resource managers indoctrinated with scientific knowledge incorporate local knowledge, to improve and strengthen management systems, must be based on an understanding of circumstances (why is local knowledge the way it is?) and also whether people (the community) choose to follow or submit to the guidance of local knowledge,' he says. 'If this is not done, the processes that they believe will strengthen natural resource management will actually become processes for the destruction of



The margin of a large sacred grove in central Kerala, south India. Usually associated with a temple, such groves also include an adjacent water body, such as a pond or flowing stream, reinforcing the connection between forest biodiversity, the need for unpolluted water sources and community observance of their protection.

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the intangible cultural heritage and create conflict within communities.’

It is to forestall such conflict and to ensure against misunderstanding that intergovernmental agencies – such as the United Nations Environment Programme’s World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, and the mechanisms of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) – work to promote respect for local and traditional knowledge at national and provincial levels. In the commons of climate science, itself a subset of earth observation sciences, indigenous knowledge and cultural practices have long been recognized as sources of information and insight that are without parallel.

In-depth indigenous observations

In domains such as traditional medicine, forestry, the conservation of biodiversity and the protection of wetlands, it is intangible cultural heritage practitioners and the communities they belong to who observe and interpret phenomena at scales much finer than formal scientists are familiar with, besides possessing the ability to draw upon considerable temporal depth in their observations. For the scientific world, such observations are invaluable

contributions that advance our knowledge about climate change. For the local world, indigenous knowledge and cultural practices are the means with which the effects of climate change are negotiated so that livelihoods are maintained, ritual and cultivation continue, and survival remains meaningful.

Yet it is just as important to recognize that in many regions, it is a combination of factors that weakens or threatens intangible cultural heritage. In the Indian Himalayan region, I was told by Vaneet Jishtu, taxonomist and conservationist, the profusion of medicinal herbs that are used in Ayurvedic traditional formulations was rich until the turn of the 19th century. He is growing a group of eight of these herbs, which together form the basis for a popular immunity-boosting elixir called *chyawanprash*, for not only has their occurrence in the hills dwindled precipitously, local communities have begun to lose the ability to recognize them in the wild. In this case, climate change is forcing the herbs to shift to more congenial altitudes in the hills, but at the same time they are facing hitherto unseen competition in forest undergrowth and meadows from new plant species, a shrinking of their habitat because of expanding settlements and infrastructure projects, and finally over-exploitation of these species by commercial manufacturers of Ayurvedic medicines.

A word for every nuance

Coping with the effects of climate change is a daunting challenge, just as much as confronting the effects of destructive change such as resource extraction, over-exploitation of biodiversity, and the conversion of commons into settlement. Societies that harbour intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge are also those in which knowledge is regarded in ways that differ fundamentally from the scientific norm: over the seasons each practitioner learns more about insects, animals, soil types, weather patterns and myriad natural aspects as a profound systems-based understanding of the world in which people appreciate their own place within the environment.

This learning relies upon an extraordinary linguistic diversity which UNESCO must be exercised to the utmost to help safeguard. The ability of intangible cultural heritage bearers to marshal the resilience needed to adapt on their own terms rests upon languages through which bodies of knowledge and streams of learning emerge – the very names of natural cycles, of medicinal or agricultural preparations, of the qualities of water or the sequence of spiritual observances. There were, not two generations ago, more words for ‘forest’ than there were dialects in South and South-East Asia. How many survive? When they do, so do the means to live sustainably, with a light footprint, alongside climate change. 🌀