

# Intangible cultural heritage will revolutionise the future

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Sometimes the best way to see the future is to look far enough into the past. From the perspective of current and future-oriented heritage work in Finland, the latter end of the 16th century as well as the 17th century were especially interesting periods for the field. In 1630, when Finland was still a part of Sweden, the Crown established the post of state antiquarian, and in 1666 Sweden founded the antiquity collegium and published a royal decree on the protection of antiquities, titled *Placat och Påbud, Om Gamble Monumenter och Antiquiteter*. Other European states would later follow suite. (Swedish National Heritage Board 2018a; Swedish National Heritage Board 2018b; Finnish Heritage Agency 2019; Vilkuna 2009.)

The decree of 1666 was used to protect the remaining ruins of castles, fortifications, manors, ramparts and cairns, statues and rocks that featured runic inscriptions, graves and family tombs that, at the time, were thought to be linked to previous kings, and church and abbey effects. The decree also mandated that all old documents were to be declared to the kingdom's official authorities. (Vilkuna 2009.)

What I found particularly startling was the similarity of this list to the list of targets included in the UNESCO *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* of 1972. The list includes, for example, especially universally valuable monuments, architectural works, works of monumental sculpture and painting, elements or structures of an archaeological nature, inscriptions, cave dwellings and other targets, groups of buildings, such as groups of separate or connected buildings, and sites, such as works of man or the combined works of nature and man, and archaeological sites which are of outstanding universal value from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view. (UNESCO 1972.)

For over 300 years, similar tangible sites and objects have been classified as *antiquities* and cultural heritage that are to be placed under protection. In the early modern period – during the Nordic Reformation and the age of the Swedish Empire – these antiquities represented novelties that exemplified longevity and stability (Vilkuna 2009). They survived the industrial revolution and the changes in

power structures that occurred in the 19th and 20th century, where they were imbued with new layers of meaning. However, the idea that certain tangible antiquities are in need of protection and preservation has remained very stable since the end of the 16th century (see Siivonen 2008a).

Serious attention has been paid to the idea of intangible cultural phenomena, which is evident in for example the strong role that folk poetry and folk music inhabit as national symbols, especially since the 19th century. However, Johanna Björkholm asserts in her doctoral dissertation that it was only through the protection or safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage that the statutes of cultural heritage were extended to these fields. Tentative discussions on the protection of intangible cultural features were initiated at the end of the 20th century, and the first statutes for intangible heritage were established in the 21st century. (Björkholm 2011.)

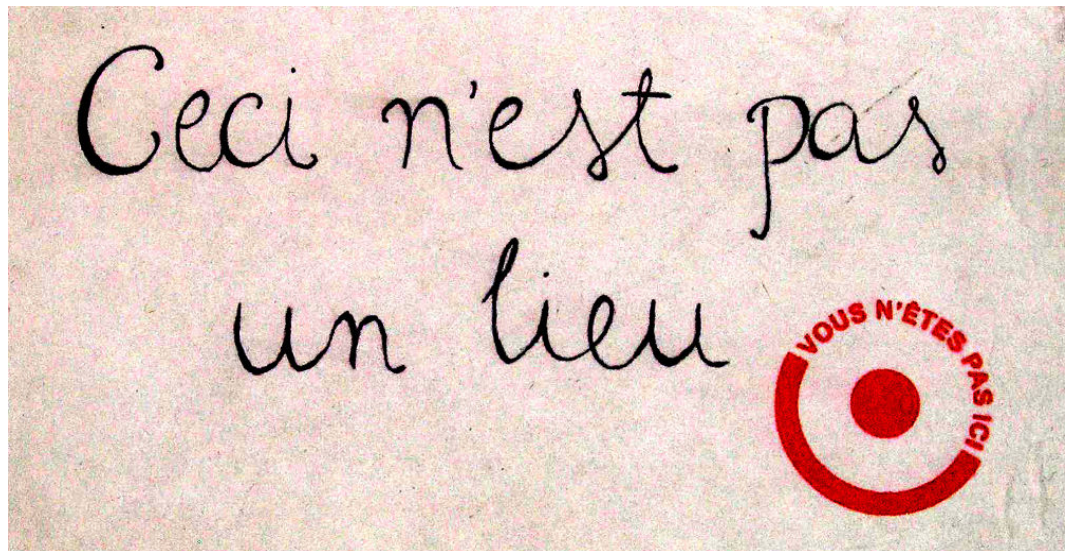
## An intangible future

It was only through the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2003) that real concrete change to this multi-centennial continuity was achieved at the beginning of the 2000s. Simultaneously, a stronger consensus began to emerge among the experts in the field on the essential role of intangible cultural heritage for tangible cultural heritage and the enforcement of the treaties related to it. Finland ratified the 2003 UNESCO convention in 2013. According to the convention, intangible cultural heritage represents “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” (UNESCO 2003.)

This definition is fundamentally different from the one presented in the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 1972). This current period of change has brought about changes that have revolutionised the understanding that we have on the aspects of culture that must be protected. I posit that we do not yet even fully comprehend the contents and significance of this period or the changes that it has brought with it.

Today, as in previous periods of change, there has been a radical increase in the intensity in which ideas, people and goods move. Technological novelties have accelerated the movement of each of these during periods of major change. At the same time, novelties also generate changes that affect everyday practices and values as well as social institutions and power structures. (Siivonen 2008a.)

This current period of change is highlighting new characteristics of intangible culture and linking them to new types of societal roles. The national importance of intangible cultural heritage is diminishing. Different local and individual features



*Observation in a moving train, in a toilet on a way to fieldwork.  
Photo Katriina Siivonen.*

can be compared with one another in cross-cultural encounters and discussions arranged in global information networks. New contexts have been discovered for to acquire new meanings. During any period of great change, one can feel as if the world is going through a series of startling and inspiring changes. But these changes can soon turn into a mundane part of everyday life. While all of this is happening, most people will try to keep up with and also occasionally complain about the constant stream of kaleidoscopic changes in new customs and the meanings of different cultural characteristics.

Museums have already begun to transform at a rapid pace during this current period of change, and this development has been highlighted by Kristiina Ahmas in her doctoral dissertation, for example. Museums are moving away from serving as institutions that collate, document and collect cultural heritage from people to acting as partners that seek to collaborate with their visiting public. Today, cultural heritage experts are keen to relinquish their hold on the field and allow communities to define what should belong under the umbrella of cultural heritage. (Ahmas 2014; see also Siivonen 2017; Hario et al. 2017.) At the same time, new statutes are increasingly directing museums towards intangible cultural heritage. One can say that currently the focus is shifting, at least partially, from the preservation of tangible heritage to the co-creation of intangible cultural heritage.

In my opinion, this change is even more radical than one might think at first glance. Intangible cultural heritage represents the living actions, skills and thoughts present in and between individuals. Intangible cultural heritage cannot be separated from humans and interactive networks, nor can it be stored in museums in any living form. Intangible cultural heritage represents a form of activity that is both purposeful and unconscious of its end goal and that contains the power to

change the world. In the information age, this power has shifted further towards individuals and changing, partly momentary communities (Siivonen 2008b).

### Co-creating future everyday life in museums

It is my belief that, in this current period of change, museums will transform into spaces that are both physical and virtual in nature, where people can collaboratively experiment and create new types of everyday futures and jointly share the information and values related to them. Cultural heritage will transform into heritage futures, a concept whose key characteristic is the intentional co-creation of new types of futures. Museums can become institutions that help people jointly manage disruptive changes in everyday life; places where people – along with the help of intangible cultural heritage that serves as heritage futures – can analyse their personal goals to jointly outline intentional changes that can be used to create new types of futures. This process will cause museums of cultural history, natural history and art to move closer to one another and redefine themselves. This, in turn, will allow them to tackle current global problems – the environmental crisis, the tensions arising from the new interdependencies between people, communities and organisations in this current period of change, and technological upheavals (Kiiski Kataja 2016) – in a more efficient manner.

Nothing about this process will be easy. However, museums have always used cultural heritage to help create a new and better world. During this time of change, this goal will be impossible to achieve without creative communal collaboration.

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