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UNESCO CONCEPT OF UNDERSTANDING AND ORGANIZING OF THE CULTURAL HERITAGE: ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND CRITICAL REVIEW

Abstract: The paper will bring out some thoughts which do not go in favor of the current approach of the UNESCO model of management and understanding of cultural heritage. In fact, numerous reviews of criticisms on cultural heritage policies have been published so far, and the main critics were mostly professionals in the field of ethnology and anthropology. However, as an irony, one of the key protagonists directly involved in the current trends of cultural heritage management is the world-renowned French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss.

Key words: UNESCO, tangible, intangible, movable, immovable, world cultural heritage.

Today *culture* and *cultural heritage* represent terms which attract global attention. The largest global organization whose interest, among other things, is the culture and cultural heritage is UNESCO. As a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN), UNESCO aims to protect the cultural heritage worldwide. According to its definition, the term *cultural heritage*, actually represents “the physical artifacts, but also intangible attributes of a group or society, that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and preserved for the benefit of future generations”.¹ So, in general, according to UNESCO's perception, from the aspect of *the materiality* the cultural heritage encompasses two types of heritage, that is - *tangible* (*movable* and *monumental* or *immovable cultural heritage*) and *intangible cultural heritage*. This is a globally accepted

¹ UNESCO is an abbreviation of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

classification, which not all heritage researchers approve, and it is exactly due to its long-standing constancy and stereotyping, that it has been exposed to much criticism by researchers.² The tangible and intangible distinction, accepted and promoted by UNESCO, reflects the existing criticism to the western heritage, which most often includes, first of all, the buildings and the natural environment.³ So, the list of European and North American World Heritage is dominated by fortified cities, cathedrals, palaces, movable artifacts and national parks, while, on contrary, the heritage of Africa and Asia is most often seen through the intangible forms of traditional and contemporary, or folk culture that includes languages, music, play, rituals, food and folklore in general.⁴ In order to reduce this *tangible-intangible dichotomy* of the heritage, *East - West or North - South*, the whole policy regarding the heritage seems to be unjustly simplified. Namely, almost all contemporary and wealthy societies contain both types of heritage, even in cases when the balance between them can fluctuate spatially, but this is not always accepted by UNESCO.⁵ In this context, Susan Wright⁶ is convincing when she talks about the fact that there are many examples where UNESCO as an organization is directly involved in, what she calls - *politicization of culture* and all that enters into those spheres. Wright actually elaborates the UNESCO report called *Our Creative Diversity*⁷, which she emphasizes as being in the service of the global liberal-capitalist democracy. According to her (alluding, first of all, to the participation of the world famous anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss in the preparation of the Report) even the anthropologists, involved in the creation of the cultural policies along with politicians and with councilors, have been using and still use the culture as a tool that serves the politics⁸. Wright points out that this way, with the help of anthropologists, the culture enters a new domain,

² Tomas Hylland Eriksen, "Between universalism and relativism: a critique of the UNESCO concept of culture", во: Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Bénédicte Dembour, and Richard A. Wilson, (eds.), *Culture and rights - anthropological perspectives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, 127-128.

³ Brian Graham, "Heritage as knowledge: capital or cultural?", *Urban studies*, Vol. 39, Nos 5-6, 2002, 1004.

⁴ *Idem*, 1004.

⁵ Даворин Трпески, *Кој го поседува минатото? Културната политика и заштитата на културното наследство во постсоцијалистичка Македонија*, УКИМ, ПМФ - Институт за етнологија и антропологија, Скопје, 2013, 31.

⁶ Susan Wright, "The politicization of culture", *Anthropology Today*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Feb., 1998, 7-9.

⁷ Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development, *Our creative diversity*, UNESCO, Paris, 1996. Достапно на: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0010/001055/105586e.pdf>.

⁸ Susan Wright, "The politicization of culture...", 8.

where it can ruthlessly serve someone's interests. In this respect, cultural heritage is often the "victim" of the policies, guided by such politics.

Given that UNESCO is an organization founded by the great powers, it is largely in service of their interests. This organization, among other things, has the goal of providing protection for the cultural heritage which is owned by the founding member countries, but does not originally belong to them, and they have "taken it" from its former colonies, now commonly referred to as third world countries. Thus, the justification of the existing classification of the cultural heritage into *movable* and *immovable* is only in favor of the fact that *movable* is the cultural heritage that they could take away and move to their museums, and *immovable* cultural heritage is the one they "unfortunately " could not take, so they had to leave it in colonies (however, there are cases when even the heritage that, according to the UNESCO definition, belongs to the category of immovable, is still transmitted to some of the world's famous museums). In order to justify the cultural heritage that has been "taken away", it is commonly defined and declared by UNESCO as *world cultural heritage*⁹, which "should" be kept in the largest and most renowned European and North American museums which, in turn, "can provide the appropriate protection". For this reason, Tomislav Šola¹⁰ identifies such museums as books illustrated with many three-dimensional trophies, which are the result of conquests and atrocities committed by Western civilization towards other cultures. Of course, today artifacts that are kept or located in the countries in which they were found are also named as *world heritage*, but these are mainly artifacts that are not found "on time" or, for various reasons could not be transferred to Western European and North American museums.

Although the UNESCO policy, which on the other hand relates to the intangible cultural heritage, that is, the concept of its protection, seems completely new and contemporary, in fact, this approach exists even since the emergence of the development of ethnography and anthropology. In addition, the concept of registration and recording of certain elements of culture can be noticed with the predecessors of ethnology and anthropology - on the territory of Macedonia they are the collectors of folk arts who, with special interest and fervor recorded the customs and rituals of the people in Macedonian regions, trying to protect them from oblivion. Worldwide, in the period of romanticism in Europe, large number of collectors wrote many stories and songs that today are considered as intangible cultural goods. In this sense, travelogues, missionary reports, and other similar texts written by travelers, seafarers, philosophers and researchers are also particularly important. In fact, the descriptions of people,

⁹ UNESCO, *World heritage*, <http://whc.unesco.org/en/about>.

¹⁰ Tomislav Šola, *Marketing u muzejima ili o vrlini i kako je obznaniti*, Zagreb, 2001, 6.

their way of life, the customs, the rituals, the unusual techniques and knowledge of people, the practices related to religion, mythology, cosmology, represented descriptions of what is nowadays called intangible cultural heritage of the various nations throughout the world. Once recorded, all these segments of the cultural heritage were protected from oblivion. Since the XIX century, this process of collecting and description evolved into a discipline, rapidly growing to cover all nations of the globe up to this day. Whatever you call this discipline (ethnography or ethnology or anthropology), it has since been involved in artefacts.¹¹ They are taken from different parts of the world and exhibited in museums based on different concepts, such as the specialized: ethnographic or anthropological museums (for remote and exotic cultures from Western European perspective), but also the complex museums – state or national and/or local museums (which portray people at the same time as peasants, i.e. as nation in the central European and other countries, which established museums in the period of romanticism).¹² This discipline dealt with knowledge, skills, technologies, the ways societies are organized, which was also unraveled through the collected artifacts. So, ethnography or ethnology or anthropology as a discipline dealt with everything that today's current concept of intangible cultural heritage should protect. So, regardless of whether the anthropologists dealt with exotic and distant cultures or with their own surroundings, with the distant past or with the present, the essence of every ethnography as product of the work of the anthropologists, was the description and understanding of the various individual aspects of life of the researched, especially those who differed from the researched in Europe, but belonged to the middle class. Because of this, the exotic objects, as well as the exotic customs (the bigger the difference with the Western customs the better), were at the center of interest of the developed West, which in a sense did not change much to this day.¹³ Perhaps, for these reasons, the current UNESCO concept of culture and protection of cultural heritage insists on highlighting the diversity, and not of the possible similarities and connections between cultures, which are considered as fully separated entities. Meanwhile, anthropologists have abandoned the concept of exotic as a subject of research. The discourse was completely changed, so instead of the different forms of exoticism, the everyday situations, which might seem ordinary, became focus of interest of the anthropology, although the study of the relationship of "We" and "Others" is not abandoned.

¹¹ Лилјана Гавриловић, „Потрага за особеношћу: изазови и дилеме унутар концепта очувања и репрезентовања нематеријалног културног наслеђа“ во: *Нематеријално културно наслеђе Србије*, бр. 1, Центар за заштиту нематеријалног културног наслеђа, Београд, 2011, 51.

¹² *Idem*, 51.

¹³ *Idem*, 51.

The idea of valuing cultural heritage and the past is highly humane in its essence. In this context, it can be noted that UNESCO has set itself a goal that does not really work in favor of the Western, i.e. the liberal democracy. However, certain goals and ideas corresponded to the period when this global organization has been established. Over time the practice shows that the 21st century is a period when new approaches should be introduced, which will give a new mark to the time we live in and will overcome the perceptions and prejudices that characterized the 20th century. To abandon the so-called *tangible-intangible* and *movable-immovable* dichotomies that merely emphasize the superiority and colonization of the West towards the East might be one of these new ideas.

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