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A definition of cultural heritage: From the tangible to the intangible

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this work is to analyse the evolution of the concept of cultural heritage in West European states. In the last decades of the 20th century, the term "heritage" was characterised by expansion and semantic transfer, resulting in a generalisation of the use of this word, frequently used in the place of another, such as, monument and cultural property. However, all these terms are not able to cover the same semantic field. Starting by the reflection on the semantic evolution of the notion of cultural heritage in France, we approach to the international definition of heritage given by the directives, charters and international resolutions in order to define a global outline of the meaning of heritage that is not just limited to a particular national dimension. From a purely normative approach, one went to a less restrictive approach, one based on the capacity of the object to arouse certain values that led the society in question to consider it as heritage and therefore, to a further step in which heritage is no longer defined on the basis of its material aspect. This development has also made it possible to recognise intangible cultural heritage, which was ignored for a long time, as heritage to be protected and safeguarded.

1. Introduction: The semantic evolution of cultural heritage in France

In the last decades of the 20th century, the term *patrimoine*[1] was characterised by expansion and semantic transfer, resulting in a generalisation of the use of this word, frequently used in the place of another, such as, *monument*, *héritage* (inheritance in English), cultural property. However, all these terms are not able to cover the same semantic field.

According to André Desvallées,[2] [1] five periods must be distinguished in the history of the term *patrimoine*: 1790–1791, 1930–1945, 1959, 1968–1969 and 1978–1980, at the end of which a new semantic valence can be noted.

In the modern meaning of the term, *patrimoine* was first used on October 4, 1790 in a petition aimed at the Constituent Assembly by François Puthod de Maisonrouge, who was trying to convince the emigrants of the need to transform their heritage from family to national. This use is particularly strange if one considers that until the end of the mid 20th century, the term "monument" was commonly used to indicate testimonies of the past that were worth preserving.[3]

From the legal point of view of *patrimoine*,[4] the goods inherited from the father or mother, indicating a concept of personal heritage, after the French Revolution, one comes to a broader concept as the common heritage gradually starts to be taken into consideration. The heritage of the nation, consisting in the goods and property of the king, was nationalised and therefore considered public goods, the ownership of which was public.[5] This nationalisation process, which was a sort of public appropriation, was at the same time a process of secularisation, and the symbolic order to which preservation and memory had been devoted to in the *Ancien régime* was shattered.

It was during the second period, 1930–1945, in the context of international institutions, that the concept of *patrimoine* became a complete part of the cultural dimension. The expression of artistic heritage, used for the first time by Euripide Foundoukidis[6] at the Athens Conference (1931), was then commonly used in the documents of international organisations.

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[1] In this context, the word *héritage* as *patrimoine* had to be understood for heritage. The French language distinguishes more than the English one.

[2] A. Desvallées, Emergence et cheminements du mot patrimoine, Musees Collections Publiques France 208 (1995) 8.

[3] Desvallées reminds us that the use of the term monument became common practice after it was used by Roger de Gaignières in a record of 1703 and by Bernard de Montfaucon in the work, *Monuments de la Monarchie française* (1724–1733).

[4] From the Latin *patrimonium*, *pater monere*, what belongs to the father and family.

[5] It is interesting to note that in texts from the revolutionary period, the term *héritage* is much more frequently used than that of *patrimoine*.

[6] General Secretary of the Organisation of International Museums and the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC).

While the French language uses the term *patrimoine*, in texts translated into English, one can find other terms such as "property" (stressing possession and property) and "heritage" (stressing the inheritance process). The latter became the most commonly used term internationally. It must be pointed out that the French language also has the term *héritage*, but its meaning differs considerably: it encompasses the same dynamic concept of transmission, but it must be pointed out that in this case, only part of the goods inherited are indicated, and not the additional ones of the person who inherited.

In the concept of "heritage",[7] the vision is vertical but limited to what is being transmitted, while in that of *patrimoine*, which has a more social meaning, the vision is horizontal, in the sense that it can be of a much larger dimension, and able to encompass more than just the simple inheritance.

The third passage is that of the adoption of the expression of *patrimoine culturel* (cultural heritage) by André Malraux in the decree 59-889 dated July 24, 1959. From this period on, the term *patrimoine*, which was already being used by international organisations for some years, was also used in political and administrative circles. In some cases, it was used with a meaning that limited it to national property, or to artistic property, encompassing everything that traditionally belonged to the fine arts. These limitations in the use of the term *patrimoine* continued until the end of the 1970s.

The last stage took place in 1978–1980 when the term *patrimoine* was consecrated by both the administration and public.

If one takes into consideration the meaning of *patrimoine* in the 19th century, the concept has been expanded. Eugène Ollivier[8] speaks of a separation process of the concept of historic monument in favour of that of heritage; the elite concept of historic monument was therefore encompassed in the more universal one of heritage. This process is based on the substitution of an objective logic characterising the historic monument with a subjective logic of heritage.

2. The heritage of directives, charters and international resolutions

In the aim of proposing a univocal and objective definition of the concept of heritage, the charters, directives and resolutions[9] that can be universally applied will be studied in more detail.

If one excludes the Athens Charter (1931), which takes into consideration the conservation of artistic and archaeological heritage without defining it,[10] the first text that gives a definition of the concept of heritage is the International Charter of Venice (1964). In the introduction, a first definition of heritage is given: "Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity is found".[11]

In article 1, the definition of historic monument is given, specifying that: "[it] applies not only to great works of art but also to more modest works of the past which have acquired cultural significance with the passing of time".[12] In the Venice Charter, the issues that were proposed were to be at the object of discussion for the years to come. In this regards, mention was made of value, evaluation, evidence that are of artistic and historic interest, cultural interest and interest of cultural property.

From the beginning of the 1950s, from a typological and geographical point of view, there was an expansion of the basis concepts in international documents regarding the conservation of heritage.

The concept of cultural property, used in various countries to mean heritage, appears for the first time in the Hague Convention of 1954, regarding the protection of cultural heritage in the case of armed conflict. The Convention states that it is necessary to protect the cultural heritage of all humanity. In 1956, in New Delhi, the Unesco Recommendations defined the principles regarding archaeological excavations that must be applied to all remains, the preservation of which is of public interest from an artistic and historic point of view.

The successive development was that of the Unesco Recommendations of 1962, stating the need to safeguard landscapes, natural environments and those created by man, which are of cultural of aesthetic interest or, which form a natural harmonious whole.

The documents following the Venice Charter concentrate on two different issues: the definition of the general principles for the identification of new fields of conservation (the 1971 Unesco Convention on the safeguarding of wetlands; the Charter of the Council of Europe in 1972, which proposes the soil as heritage, understood as a limited and fragile resource), and the attempt to integrate the principles of safeguarding with the control systems of the territory and of economic and social development.

In the Unesco Convention on the protection of world, cultural and natural heritage (1972), the expression 'cultural heritage' appears, including the monuments, the wholes[13] and sites, which are of "exceptional universal value from the point of view of history, art or science".[14]

This normative approach in the definition of cultural heritage can also be seen in another international document: the European Charter of architectural heritage of Amsterdam (1975).[15]
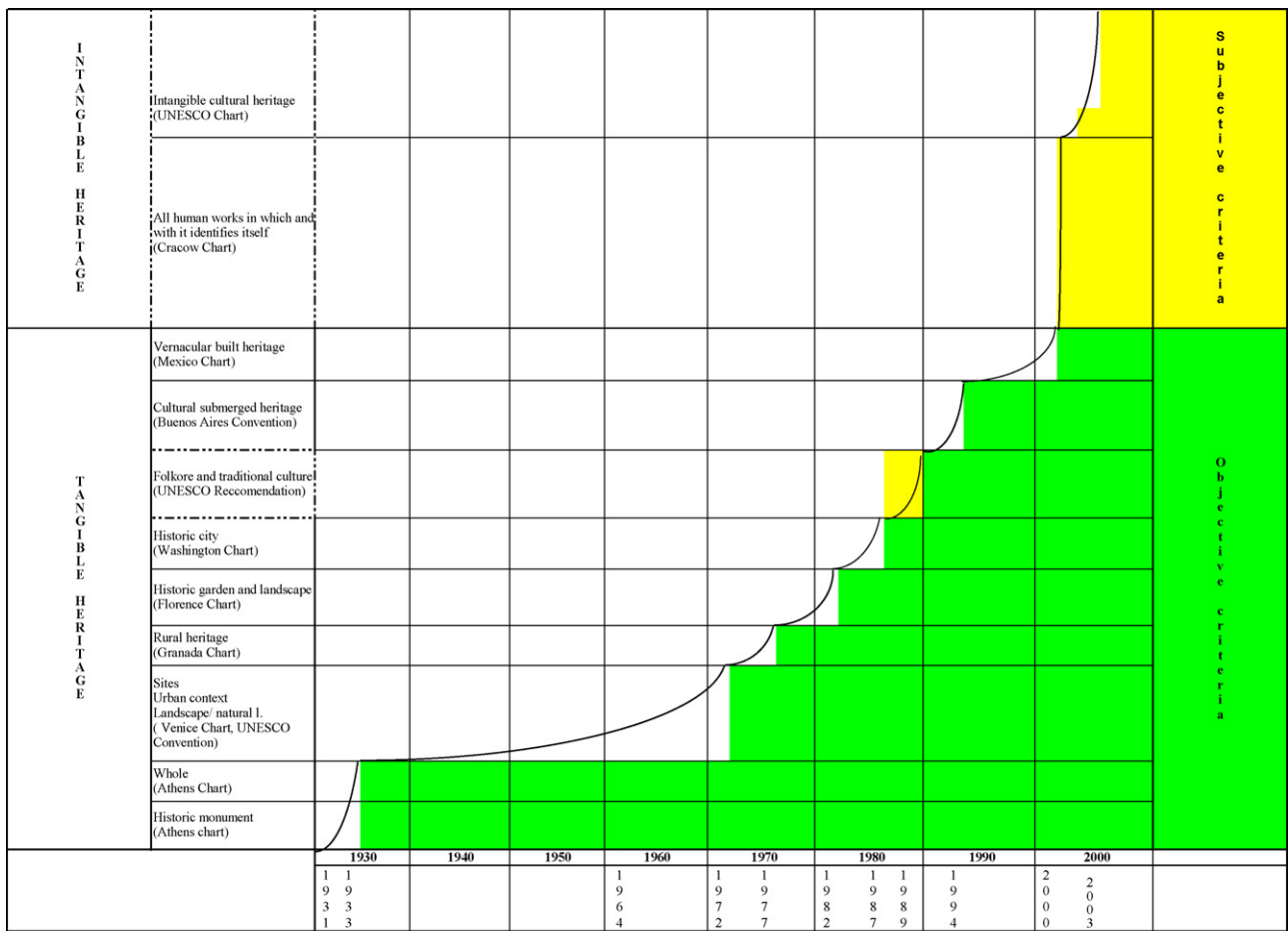
These definitions of a normative nature can be found in more detail in the Grenada convention for the protection of European architectural heritage (1985).

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[7] Cf. Desvallées, *art. cit.*, p. 14.

[8] Ivi, p. 21.

[9] The conventions are the documents that are officially adopted or ratified by the member states with the aim of having a legal value, while the recommendations are reference directives for the development of more specific regulations and instructions.

[10] Above all, mention is made of conservation of artistic and archaeological heritage and later of historic monuments, works of art but without going into the concept of heritage in further detail.

[11] International Charter on the conservation and restoration of monuments and sites, Venice.

[12] Ibidem.

[13] According to Georg Germann, this idea of a whole is not entirely new. Indeed, in 1578, Camillo Bolognino, an architect from Bologna, observed that "we can consider the Church of San Petronio as a building in itself or as part of the environment in which it is situated (G. Germann, *Einführung in die Geschichte der Architekturtheorie*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1980, 148; quoted from R. Recht, Penser le patrimoine. Mise en scène et mise en ordre de l'art, Hazan Paris, 1998, 85 [2]). In 1889, Camillo Sitte concretises this concept of the whole in his work Urbanistica, according to artistic principles, in the past and present, and underlines the need to consider the environment as a whole. Taking into consideration the typology of squares in Europe from the Renaissance on, Sitta tries to understand the buildings in the morphological relationships that are created between them.

[14] Convention regarding the protection of world, cultural and natural heritage of Unesco (1972). It is interesting to point out that in this convention, as in the list of Unesco world heritage, a distinction is made between natural and artistic heritage, and both are equally important.

[15] It briefly states that European architectural heritage "consists not only of our most important monuments: it also includes the groups of lesser buildings in our old towns and characteristic villages in their natural or manmade settings" This document outlines the concept of integrated conservation, or rather conservation that is closely linked to planning (Convention for the safeguard of the architectural heritage of Europe, Grenade, 1985).

INTANGIBLE HERITAGE	Intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO Chart)									Subjective criteria
	All human works in which and with it identifies itself (Cracow Chart)									
TANGIBLE HERITAGE	Vernacular built heritage (Mexico Chart)									Objective criteria
	Cultural submerged heritage (Buenos Aires Convention)									
	Folkore and traditional culture (UNESCO Reccomendation)									
	Historic city (Washington Chart)									
	Historic garden and landscape (Florence Chart)									
	Rural heritage (Granada Chart)									
	Sites Urban context Landscape/ natural l. (Venice Chart, UNESCO Convention)									
	Whole (Athens Chart)									
	Historic monument (Athens chart)									
		1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	
		1931 1933			1964	1972	1977 1979 1982	1987 1988 1989 1994	2000 2003	

Source: elaboration of the author.

Fig. 1. The chronologica evolution of the extention of heritage concept following the international Charts, the Reccomendations and Conventions.

The Charter for the Protection of historic cities (Washington Charter 1987, ICOMOS) follows a similar line, stating the need to protect historic cities, because of their role as historic documents, and because they embody the values of traditional urban culture. These values are represented by both material and spiritual values and by the relationships they create between the city and its surroundings. This document is innovative because it recognises both tangible and intangible values as the object of protection.

Starting in the mid 1970s, international documents were drawn up in an attempt to define the general criteria, with the aim of codifying in all the documents, tangible or intangible expressions of human action which, having acquired a value, need to be protected. This tendency to expand the typologies of property protected by respecting their cultural identity was confirmed in many other documents (Palermo Charter 1990, Tlaxala Declaration 1982, Paris Recommendation 1989, Oaxaca Declaration 1993).

3. From tangible to intangible heritage

Another interesting document on the subject we are dealing with is that of the Burra Charter (ICOMOS, 1982) since it proposes to protect the conservation of the cultural significance of a site, due to its aesthetic, historic, scientific or social value. According to this approach, tangible and intangible heritage that stimulate the recognition of certain values in man are to be protected. This selection, which for over a century was undertaken on the basis of lists, can now no longer be founded on the intrinsic quality of the object but on our ability to recognise their aesthetic, historic, scientific, social values, etc (Fig. 1).

From this perspective, the same concept of authenticity undergoes a new definition (Nara Document, 1994, Declaration of San Antonio 1996). Indeed, it is no longer closely linked to the physical consistency of the object in a more restricted sense, and of heritage, in a broader sense. This is a concept that cannot be defined univocally and on the basis of fixed criteria, since it is always necessary to consider the differences that exist between the various cultures into consideration as well.

The next step is the awareness that conservation can no longer be based on the object's intrinsic quality. It must be founded on our ability to recognise its aesthetic, historic, scientific, social values etc., or rather, it is society, the community that must recognise these values, upon which its own cultural identity can be built. Gradually, talk is about a heritage that is not just tangible but also intangible, and therefore is not closely linked to the physical consistency of the heritage.

In the Krakow Charter (2000), a monument is defined as "a clearly determined entity, the bearer of values, which represent a support to memory. In it, memory recognises the aspects that are pertinent to human deeds and thoughts, associated with the historic time-line".[16]

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[16] Krakow Charter on the principles of the conservation and restoration of built heritage, in [3].

It must be remembered that material heritage is of limited importance in many cultures, for example, in African cultural heritage it is a mere 20% [4]. The Vodoun temples in Africa are rebuilt regularly; these temples, of recent origins, are built with simple materials and regularly moved in the city; they do not have the forms that make them the object of aesthetic valorisation. According to the Sinou [5], they are the perfect example of an antimonument in the western meaning of the term.

On the other hand, many cultures that manifest little consideration for their heritage have developed the ability to conserve their material culture. For example, Japanese culture is not at all interested in the material of the monument, preferring the culture of knowledge linked to its creation. The Japanese temple of Ise, the greatest of the temples of the Shinto religion, is made of wood and has completely preserved all its perpetuity, thanks to an identical and integral renewal process. Every 20 years, that is, generation after generation, the temple has been completely reconstructed for more than twelve centuries. The temple remains the same, using the same type of wood but it is continually renewed without undergoing any material or spiritual changes.

This approach depends on the cyclic vision of history, characteristic of oriental civilisations, which allows a sort of reversibility of time. While the western philosophical approach as regards conservation manifests itself in the preservation of the historic monument, the oriental one tries to use the monuments to preserve the very spirit they represent.

According to Tomaszewski [6], these two approaches are not only derived from religious consideration, that is also cultural, but also from concrete physical conditions. On the one hand, the western conception "is applied to resistant materials and temperate climatic conditions".

In 2001, Unesco included 19 new masterpieces classified as cultural goods associated with orality or the immaterial dimension, thus recognising the importance of oral and immaterial heritage [7] (the Nôfaku theatre in Japan, the Jemaa el-Fna Square in Marrakech, Morocco, inscribed because of its storytellers and snake charmers, or the paths of San Giacomo di Compostela).

The immaterial, which has difficulty in becoming part of the western concept of heritage, is however, the nucleus of the definition of identity of some societies such as that of Japan, where the legislation protecting cultural goods encompasses individuals. From 1955 on, this legislation makes a distinction between immaterial cultural goods (theatre, music, dance) and art or artisan professions, and the individuals endowed with this knowledge and with the task of transmitting it.

Created in Japan in 1950 and rapidly diffused in other countries, the system of living human treasure Unesco[17] regarded it as an instrument to concretise the 1989 Recommendations.

The extension of the Convention of world heritage to the immaterial in 1994 is the tangible sign that there is a new attitude towards the many-sidedness of the expressions of cultural heritage.

The affirmation of new types of heritage highlights how heritage is a concept that cannot be defined beforehand. It is the result of a cultural process that must be thought through and carried out not just on a European but world basis. It must be enriched with approaches and concepts of heritage that differ from those conventionally recognised in Europe.

4. Conclusions

The concept of heritage has been characterised by a three-fold process of extension: a typological-thematic extension since objects that were not part of the traditional, chronological and geographical concept of heritage have been given the statue of heritage; furthermore, the monument is no longer considered alone, but also in its context, thus meaning the adoption of an integral approach towards heritage.[18] [19]

Parallel to this extension process, the selection criteria of cultural heritage have also changed: while initially the historic and artistic values were the only parameters, other additional ones have now been added: the cultural value, its value of identity and the capacity of the object to interact with memory.

From a purely normative approach, of an objective and systematic nature – the recognition of cultural heritage of an object depended on its being included on a list – one went to a less restrictive approach, one based on the capacity of the object to arouse certain values that led the society in question to consider it as heritage and therefore, to a further step in which heritage is no longer defined on the basis of its material aspect.

This development has also made it possible to recognise intangible cultural heritage, which was ignored for a long time, as heritage to be protected and safeguarded.[20]

This acknowledgment of the importance of immateriality and orality can be interpreted as a step in the direction of overcoming a Eurocentric perspective of heritage, accepting cultural diversity as a source of enrichment for the whole of mankind.

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[17] Cf. [8]. More specifically, the system rewards people who embody specific skills and techniques in such a way that they can continue to carry out their activities and expand them, involving the younger generation, who will then be able to take this material culture over.

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[18] X. Greffe, La gestion du patrimoine culturel, Paris, Anthropos, 1990, 28–29 [9].

[19] See also F. Benhamou, Is increased Public Spending for the Preservation of Historic Monuments Inevitable? The French Case, Journal of Cultural Economics, 20 (1996) 117–118 [10]. Commenting on the increase in the whole of monuments classified over the last decades, Benhamou states the reasons for this increase: the historic addition, more and more monuments are being classified, being the national heritage of the future; and the typological extension since gardens, cafés, original decorations in restaurants, swimming pools, are all part of the category of national heritage.

[20] Cf. S. Gruzinski, Protection of the intangible cultural heritage: Survey and new prospects, Doc. CLT/ACL/IH, 2nd April, 1993 [11].