Roundtable: Answers by Chiara Bortolotto

Chiara Bortolotto
June, 2017

For more than ten years I have been exploring UNESCO policies in the field of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). My interest spans from the uses of culture as property, to the anthropologization of heritage categorisation, the influence of bureaucratic logics and geopolitical forces in the definition of new modes of conceiving cultural transmission. I focus on the agency of international and national civil servants, diplomats, experts and NGOs in the establishment and implementation of international policies, the role of international heritage technologies in the representation of "local traditions", the impact on these traditions of international recognition and global visibility, etc. In this framework I did the usual ethnographic research: attended the international negotiations leading to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, observed the meetings of the intergovernmental Committee which monitors and guides the implementation of the Convention at the international

level, attended international expert meetings and interviewed many key actors within the international arena, national institutions and local communities.

During this time I was also actively involved in the implementation of the convention at different scales: I participated in the ICH inventory campaign launched by the French Ministry of Culture; in the preparation of Italian and French nominations to the International Lists established by the Convention and in the design of regional or national ICH inventories. I have been trained by UNESCO to be part of the UNESCO network of facilitators in charge of “capacity building” activities in the field of ICH and I subsequently engaged in several of those activities in Europe. Since 2012, I also regularly participate as an expert in the committee established within the French Ministry of Culture to advise the Minister on issues regarding the implementation of the UNESCO Convention in France.

In this process I engaged with the policies I was observing and positioned myself outside the comfort zone of the “hands-off” approach. Two main reasons explain this active commitment with my research object: First, engaging with ICH came as a “natural” step for an anthropologist because ICH elements (oral traditions, rituals, craftsmanship, etc.) correspond to the conventional research objects of the discipline. Indeed, many of my interlocutors at different scales of the implementation of the UNESCO Convention are anthropologists: UNESCO civil servants and consultants, State or NGO delegates attending the meeting of the governing organs of UNESCO’s conventions, etc. Undeniably my own interest in the ICH apparatus was initially sparked by my curiosity for “traditional” cultural expressions re-baptised “ICH”. Second, the uncertainty of my academic position depending on short or medium term, often non-consecutive, research contracts led me to consider non-academic job offers coming from heritage agencies looking for expertise or applied research on the implementation of the UNESCO ICH Convention. Not planned from the beginning, this involvement was prompted by casual opportunities and by my familiarity with UNESCO procedures and ICH programmes and was considered on a case-by-case basis.

This multipositionality (Sapignoli 2017) provided me with first-hand experience of "studying sideways" (Hannerz 2004) working "with others, who are patrons, partners, and subjects of research at the same time" (Marcus 2006: 7) and therefore with the opportunity to question conventional anthropological assumptions on a fundamental distinction between self and other. At the same time, assuming multiple professional identities endowed me with plentiful dilemmas having to do with double binds and accountability to the academic audience and to the heritage "epistemic community" (Haas 1992) I belong to.

Are these developments, usually condemned as corrupting us as scholars and leading to the death of pure research, introducing some kind of innovation vis-à-vis established academic work?

In my case, the need to design my research taking into account practical constraints like the fact of contributing to the entries of ICH inventories as a "culture expert" and broker was indeed frustrating because it did not allow any articulation with critical research. It furthermore did not permit the systematic and structured work that I would have done if I were only considering my research interests. If I had had this freedom I would have probably focused on the impact of the inscription of a particular element in one of UNESCO's ICH lists, as other colleagues were doing.

However, these constrains had serendipitous consequences. In fact, designing my fieldwork by sewing together and trying to articulate a consistent research object, multiple successive experiences as an expert on the one hand and academic short time positions on the other, naturally led me to frame my object in a different way. I emphasised the importance of the situations and events, usually not easily accessible to outsiders that I habitually joined as an expert. Since these situations are "contact zones" where UNESCO governance principles are translated, discussed, contested or appropriated by national or local heritage actors, I directed my interest on translation processes "in the making" rather than on the effects of the implementation of an international norm. I was therefore conducted

to see the global/local dialectic as a “creative friction” (Tsing 2005) that at the same time globalises and localises an international standard, rather than just the dichotomy between international principles and local logics.

Does existential and professional uncertainty have epistemological potential?

In my case, uncertainty entails the coexistence of multiple identities and roles and the flexibility to switch from one to the other. This requires an unavoidable effort to articulate research and expertise in a mode that is meaningful for both the academic community interested in unpacking global policies apparatuses and the epistemic community involved in global policy design. This constrain entails the adoption of a mode of knowledge production which aims at contributing to science and action at the same time. Even if the expert and the research work may not be overlapping in time, the two modes intersect in my existential approach as the critical anthropologist does not stop to think analytically when engaging in heritage intervention and the expert does not cease to consider the practical and operational consequences of scientific investigation. This could be regarded as an epistemological potentiality of the coexistence of multiple professional identities triggered by current academic uncertainty. However, this overlapping involves also many risks: loosing sight of the specific interests and priorities of academic and professional audiences, adopting the wrong language to address them, hurting research interlocutors using an analytical language which is needed in academic contexts but perceived by them as objectifying. Another danger is that of adopting a normative stance and formulating recommendations which are not considered a valid scientific contribution by the academic community but rather a “quick and dirty” job that may oversimplify complex issues (Bennet 1996: 49). In short, having multiple identities looks suspicious both for academics and institutional agents, two groups that usually beware of each other or, at best, ignore each other.

What are the restrictions and weaknesses of ethnographic multipositionality imposed by neoliberal research conditions?

Engaging with heritage policy-making and implementation involved for me a shift from “imitative participation” to “full productive participation” (Knox 2005) to the goals of my interlocutors, namely implementing safeguarding programmes consistent with international “good” governance principles. Articulating collaboration with policy-making and implementation bodies and anthropological analysis of this process triggers schizophrenic feelings, imposes restrictions on the modes of expressing critique and entails coping with suspiciousness.

Critical analysis is often possible, and sometimes even requested by my research interlocutors. However radical critique would be a risky choice. Navigating in neoliberal research means in fact not only articulating multiple roles in expertise and critical research but also facing the projectization of research. This project-based approach and the contradictions of academic entrepreneurship flourishing alongside it impose specific constrains on the modes of formulating critical analysis. In particular, it strengthens the dependency on non-academic research partners and sponsors, making of plain critique, often considered a fundamental prerogative of free scholarship, a counterproductive option. In my case, however, avoidance of stark criticism is not simply or primarily a strategy for professional survival or a limitation. On the one hand familiarity with the constraints and complex situations faced by heritage policy-makers and implementers provides me with a nuanced opinion on their action. On the other, the obligations toward my research interlocutors trigger the need to engage with alternative, creative and collaborative critical endeavours which are often more likely not only to be accepted but also to have an impact on them and on their action.

Being at the same time actor and observer of heritage policy-making and implementation inevitably recalls ambiguity and conflict of interest. In fact, collaborative approaches that have become canonical in the exploration of the worlds of marginal, dispossessed or dominated interlocutors inspire different

feelings when the subjects in question are powerful organisations. We know how useful it is to study the centres of power but engagement with governmental agendas and dominant institutions exhumes anthropology's skeletons in the closet, raising difficult questions about ethics and power. While collaboration is increasingly regarded as an ethical requisite in studying down, engaging with powerful élite is perceived as a form of collusion, especially if funding depends on such powerful research partners. Conflict of interest is a real issue that researchers deal with in different ways according with their methodological, ethical principles and, probably, material needs. Yet, the ethical concerns beyond our choices stay often implicit and this inevitably maintains suspiciousness on the reliability of our research results.

Are the dilemmas faced by casual researchers distinct from those experienced by their tenured colleagues and, if so, how?

Dilemmas on how to deal with embeddedness and collaboration with research participants have undoubtedly been a longstanding issue for anthropologists and already emerged and were largely tackled in development anthropology and in its critiques since the 80ies (Escobar 1991). Today, they concern both new generations of "flexible" researchers navigating the neoliberal academic job market and stable academics established in research institutions. These dilemmas do not depend on professional status but on the shift from an "ethnography of initiation" to an "ethnography of negotiation" "where rapport is recast as alliance" thus putting the political neutrality of the anthropologist at risk (Clifford 1997: 41).

However, the current scarcity of pure research opportunities makes collaboration not only a choice and a strategy to access fieldwork, but, very often, the only condition for doing remunerated research work altogether. Contrary to day jobs that all generations have known as a transitional stage eventually evolving into "proper" research positions, working with governmental or non-governmental organisations requires highly specialized competence and provides material and

symbolic capital. More importantly, this is likely to be a permanent condition, lasting throughout the entire career for researchers working on and off as experts, consultants or embedded anthropologists. In this framework, collaboration entails the establishment of particular bonds and obligations to research partners, which are particularly strong in case the latter are powerful elites.

→ Back to the roundtable