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Making Intangible Heritage

A Critique on Valdimar Hafstein

Intangible heritage has gradually become an important topic of research in critical heritage studies. The Icelandic ethnologist and folklorist Valdimar Hafstein was one of the first to criticise UNESCO's listing system. His criticism, now broadened to a general criticism of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage, has now been summarised in a book under the title *Making Intangible Heritage*.

In this review article, I want to argue that Hafstein does not do enough justice to what is happening under the banner of the UNESCO Convention. I also want to look for an approach 'beyond critical heritage studies', in which intangible heritage professionals engage with heritage in a critically reflective way.

We know Valdimar Hafstein as a tireless critic of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Hafstein became involved when he once attended a UNESCO meeting in Paris. Hafstein was then surprised by the lengthy discussions on whether the inventories of intangible heritage, as called for in the convention, should be called 'register' or 'list'. There was, of course, a deeper question behind it, namely whether to strive for a 'list of masterpieces of the intangible cultural heritage' or to prefer a less hierarchical approach, not a ranking of 'showpieces'. As we all know, it was finally decided to reject the idea of masterpieces, something that folklorists/ethnologists also insisted on. Hafstein was then a member of the Icelandic delegation that took part in the discussions (in which, incidentally, I find it remarkable that he does not mention his own interventions, if any, anywhere in his book). As he shows in his book, he felt like a stranger in this world, who could only watch the discussions with astonishment. It was a different culture for him, literally, which is already expressed, for example, when he contrasts his own style of dress, somewhat sloppy and informal as befits a good scientist, with the more formal dress code of the diplomats. As he humorously recounts, to make matters worse, the zip on the only pair of proper trousers he had with him broke, so he was forced to wear his shirt hanging loose to mask the fact that his zip was permanently open during the meetings that week. In retrospect, we can say that this was very symbolic of Hafstein's views on the UNESCO Convention!

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Foto uit het besproken boek.

As a member of the Icelandic delegation, Valdimar Hafstein attended several UNESCO meetings.

An indictment

Whereas Hafstein soon dropped out after his first UNESCO meeting, I myself became more involved with this Convention and have attended many UNESCO meetings since. Sometimes with surprise, but at the same time with appreciation for the approach of this Convention, of which the essence for me is the empowerment of communities, groups and individuals who practice and want to give a future to immaterial heritage. Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland, the centre where I work, is responsible for the implementation of the convention in the Netherlands.

Hafstein's story reads like an indictment of all the negative developments surrounding the heritageisation of the culture of everyday life, which Hafstein sees as a great danger. Because he bases himself primarily on the one UNESCO meeting that he once attended, Hafstein describes the period long before the Convention came into force. This is also a criticism of his book. If you are looking for the discussions that are currently being held within UNESCO, discussions in which not only state parties but also NGOs and Hafstein's colleagues are involved, this book is not for you.

Dangerous

What are the dangers according to Hafstein? In his book, Hafstein deals with five major topics:

1. Making heritage, making threats', in which he describes the history of the UNESCO Convention;
2. Making lists', in which he discusses the proposed listing system;
3. Making communities', in which he critically examines the central role of communities in the UNESCO Convention
4. Making festivals', in which he wants to show that the UNESCO Convention is a new phase in the folklorisation of the culture of everyday life;
5. Safeguarding as treatment', in which he critically examines UNESCO's safeguarding paradigm.

Hafstein treats all his subjects in a polemical style, as a critique of the UNESCO Convention. He wants, as it says on the back cover, to make a report that 'peers beneath the official account, revealing the contexts important for the UNESCO as an organisation (...) inviting the readers to witness the diplomatic jostling behind the curtains'.

Illustrative is Hafstein's treatment of the history of the Convention. In the 'official' UNESCO story, it is stated that it all started in Marrakesh, Morocco, with the Spanish writer Juan Goytisyo who drew attention to the imminent demise of the local market on the Jemaa el-Fna square. Because of the planned new construction, the local 'folklore' of market stalls and all kinds of artists were in danger of being lost. He decided to speak to his compatriot Fredrico Mayor, who at the time was director general of UNESCO. If we are to believe Hafstein, this request came as a godsend to UNESCO, enabling it to acquire a new *raison d'être*. The subject had in fact been around for some time. The request followed an earlier letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Bolivia, dating from 1973, which asked for attention to be paid to the threatening commercialisation of traditional cultures, in which, for example, folk songs are exploited by international companies such as Sony. In the opinion of the Bolivian minister, this called for copyright protection for the traditional songs. This in turn was in line with a broader discourse in which attention was drawn to the threat of globalisation and commercial exploitation by large companies from the northern hemisphere. The Convention was thus successfully portrayed as an emancipation battle for the poor South. It was mainly Asian countries like Japan and Korea that shaped the new Convention and invested a lot of time and money in it. Japan, with Koichiro Matsuura, provided the new Director-General of UNESCO, for whom this new Convention was a piece of prestige..

Deconstructive approach

Typical of Hafstein's approach is the deconstructive one. He points out the importance that fascist dictatorships always attach to colourful folkloristic manifestations in support of their own regime, and that the intervention of the Bolivian dictator Hugo Banzer Suárez should be seen in this light. That Japan and Korea subsequently took the lead

in the design of the Convention, Hafstein 'unmasks' as 'their own bid for hegemony' (p. 163). In his unmasking goal, Hafstein shows himself to be a firm supporter of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). More interestingly, Hafstein links the question of copyright to a penetrating discussion of the Simon & Garfunkel hit *El Cóndor Pasa*. For who actually holds the copyright to this song, and can it be pinpointed accurately? It is generally assumed that Simon & Garfunkel based their work on an older, traditional folk song. Or was it originally a composition by the well-known composer Daniel Alomía Robles (1871-1942)? All this apart from the fact that in the case of traditional folk songs, the Western copyright principle, which seeks to bind the original composition to one particular person, seems difficult to apply. Hafstein is at his strongest in this kind of analysis, although it does lead to the question of whether the commercial exploitation of these kinds of songs is not a real challenge, not only for the UNESCO Convention. The chapter 'Making lists' builds on the discussion Hafstein witnessed in Paris: should we call it a register or a list. For Hafstein, it does not really matter. Whatever you call it, if you make it a list it automatically leads, according to Hafstein, to a hierarchisation of habits and customs, which should be out of the question. Whatever you call it, a list is a list with which you set things apart. In addition, according to Hafstein, the nominating states use the lists mainly to attract tourists. With apparent satanic pleasure, he describes a second, unintended consequence of this quasi-innocent list-making: it attracts not only tourists, but also terrorists. On 28 April 2011, Jemaa-El Fna was hit by a terrorist attack. Something that is sacred as heritage to one person is a motive for 'desecration' to another. It is the same with material heritage. We all know the example of the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyan by the Taliban.

Communities under guardianship

In the chapter on 'Making communities', Hafstein continues his indictment. In the official UNESCO discourse, more attention is asked for a bottom-up approach, with a central role for the communities, groups and individuals who make intangible heritage and want to give it a future. Personally, I find this one of the great innovative aspects of the Convention, in line with participatory and democratising approaches to heritage, which are also pursued in sectors other than that of intangible heritage. Hafstein sees it differently. He sees the community approach of the state parties as a way of bringing these communities under control, especially where cultural minorities are concerned. It is a way for state parties to put communities in an administrative hold in order to control them. In the words of Hafstein: 'their interventions transform the cultural space into a resource for administrating populations, a resource through which communities can police and reform themselves' (p. 95).

Here again, Gramsci's voice is heard (and that of later Marxist thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse, who introduced the concept of 'repressive tolerance').

Folklorisation

In the chapter 'Making festivals', Hafstein interprets the UNESCO Convention as a renewed attempt at folklorisation, the transformation of the culture of everyday life into a spectacle for tourists, taking the culture of everyday life out of its proper context. It turns popular culture, according to Hafstein, into something artificial, part of a cultural programme that is only intended to attract tourists. Hafstein cites the example of the Vimbuza healing ritual in Malawi, which instead of being simply a healing ritual has now been turned into a 'heritage', a festival for tourists. He could also have pointed to certain wedding ceremonies that are endlessly re-enacted for tourists. It is a process that the ethnologist understands better than anyone, with Hafstein pointing to the pioneering work of German folklorists in particular, such as Hans Moser and Konrad Köstlin. In his treatment of the concept of 'safeguarding', Hafstein also emphasises the articulateness of this type of approach. Hafstein sees 'safeguarding' as the greatest danger that can befall the culture of everyday life, as in the example of the Vimbuza healing ceremony in Malawi, about which he states that 'safeguarding measures emerge as the greatest threat to Vimbuza's continued practice' (p. 156), whereby, as he observes a few pages later, 'local actors are asked to surrender to experts and councils and administrators to control over their cultural practices' (p. 158). Hafstein reproaches governments and heritage professionals wanting to interfere and try to steer traditions in a particular direction by means of cultural programmes. In doing so, he does not spare his own colleagues, the so-called public folklorists, who participate in bottom-up projects in the field, intended to empower communities, but whom Hafstein describes as 'systematic cultural interventions, designed to bring about cultural change' (p. 147).

In search of authenticity

All in all, Hafstein suggests that the UNESCO Convention is designed as one big conspiracy of fascist dictatorships to control their own people, especially the minorities, complemented by countries such as Korea and Japan, which would seize upon the Convention in their quest for global hegemony. Something similar also applies to Hafstein's aversion to cultural programmes and to the role of cultural brokers, who are supposedly out to keep communities administratively under their thumb. That UNESCO thereby reduces communities to static, unchangeable quantities is a complaint that I do not share in general. Since the work of Zygmunt Bauman, scholars have become accustomed to seeing communities as more than just a static entity.

fluid, as temporary alliances of groups or individuals organised around a particular form of heritage. In the European FARO Convention, the word 'heritage communities' is used for this purpose, a notion that has also found increasing acceptance in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In his aversion to cultural programmes to secure intangible heritage for the future, Hafstein comes dangerously close to the notion that 'safeguarding' would pose a threat to the original, 'pure' folk culture. It sometimes seems as if for Valdimar Hafstein folklore is still 'a quest for authenticity', as Regina Bendix once characterised the history of folklore in her 1997 study *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*. Why else does he speak so often of the threat and danger of artificially controlling traditions? Contemporary ethnologists have long ceased to believe that a distinction can be made between something like 'fake' and 'real' folklore, as the American folklorist Richard Dorson once claimed. Culture is always evolving, and processes such as folklore and festification are part and parcel of this. You can moralise about it, but I think it is more fruitful to think about how to deal with it. It is somewhat ironic that Hafstein's own colleagues were the first to set folk culture apart in the nineteenth century, as a separate category in need of protection. Ethnologists today are aware that 'heritage development' involves processes in which many stakeholders are involved, including commercial parties and, why not, governments. Why Hafstein wants to exclude governments from this process is not entirely clear to me. Possibly he is a supporter of the proposition of the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, who once stated that 'Zwarte Piet is not a government issue'. But for some reason, I suspect that Hafstein might be in favour of government intervention on a subject like this.

Where Hafstein, in all his chapters, puts the verb 'making' at the centre ('making lists', 'making communities', etc.) he seems to forget that UNESCO also sees intangible heritage as a process of making, in which many parties participate, not in the least the communities themselves who make intangible heritage and want to pass it on to future generations. My biggest objection against Hafstein is that he can only see communities as unwilling pawns in a power game of malevolent state parties and not as acting actors, who want or are able to think about the future of their traditions themselves. Of course, there are always interests, not only of states but also of economic parties, who want to use the intangible heritage for their own purposes. It is to the credit of the UNESCO Convention to provide some counterweight to this and also to give a voice to the creators of intangible heritage. This aspect is not sufficiently highlighted in Valdimar Hafstein's book.

Beyond critical heritage studies

Intangible heritage is just something to study and not to engage with, seems to be Valdimar Hafstein's thesis, ignoring

Recent theorising around public folklore and the discussions around a concept like 'cultural brokerage'. Especially within public folklore, the role (and ethics!) of the cultural broker is the subject of extensive reflection.¹ The theorisation within this domain shows that another approach is also possible: 'beyond critical heritage studies'. Hafstein likes to position himself as the critical outsider, who merely observes. It is illustrative that he once had a seat in the Icelandic delegation that helped to decide on the future of the UNESCO Convention, but that he does not elaborate on his own interventions, if any at all. Some critical self-reflection would have been appropriate. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett once characterised the supposed opposition between 'pure' and 'applied' forms of science as a 'mistaken dichotomy'.² Ethnologists can criticise from the sidelines and reject everything as an 'artificial' intervention. They can also think about the great social questions of our time and help find solutions. How, for example, to deal with diversity and difference? With pressing questions about the all-important tourism? And how to give the communities a voice and include them in the active process of creating intangible heritage? These are questions I want to work on, of course in a critical, reflective way. The toolbox developed for this purpose within the American public folklore tradition offers useful starting points.³

1 M. Jacobs, J. Neyrinck en A. van der Zeijden (ed.), 'UNESCO, Brokers and Critical Success (F)Actors in Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage', in: idem, *Brokers, Facilitators and Mediation. Critical Success (F)Actors for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Themanummer *Volkskunde* 115:3, 2014, p. 249-256.

2 B. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 'Mistaken Dichotomies', in: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 101, No. 400 (Apr. - Jun., 1988), p. 140-155.

3 Robert Baron, 'Public folklore dialogism and critical heritage studies', in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 22 (2016) 588-606.

PERSONALIA

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