

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

Nurture in the Philippines

Intangible: *adj.*

Incapable of being perceived by the senses; of being realized or defined ; incorporeal; imprecise or unclear to the mind; essence; formal cause of things; that which makes a thing what it is.

It is the unseen that makes palpable things more cogent realities; or those that are in themselves essentially abstract; or in transience, expressed in perceivable things; existing in the mind, or in the conceiving of things. By its very essence, intangible cultural heritage is always undergoing transformation, being a process in nature. Therefore, it is in danger of disappearing if not nurtured or if allowed to become incompatible with the way the culture-bearing society functions. It is impossible to think of anything that does not have an intangible aspect. There are even times when it is all there is to it. It can be the language of a people that might recede into oblivion when overwhelmed by the dominance of others; or a chant in the rites of an indigenous religion of a society slowly being subsumed into Christianity or Islam; or a lullaby that remains only in a mother's lingering memory; the intricacies of a dance while transcending; the rituals of an offering to an anthropomorphized deity; the knowledge of the constellation of stars that mark the season of planting; or the process of weaving a blanket in colors appropriate to wrap one's self in against the cold or the oncoming of death.

These are the things that define the ways of life of a people in a contiguous and circumscribed environment and make them distinct from all others. These make up social identity which, although constantly in flux, maintains a continuity that makes recognizable terms that constitute a

separate culture. Actually, these are generic norms made up of individual expressions that vary from one another but still form a canalized stream recognizable as a single identifiable whole – just as all the voices in a chorus, raised in one symphonic song, reflect the personalities of the different singers. When a conductor raises the level of interpretation and transforms the piece from a lyrical sylvan tone into flamboyant jazz, the song is altered and yet remains the same. So it is that through the ages a continuity of change stream out altering expressions of faces that remain the same. Changes are just as important as the immobility and preservation of the status quo, because these indicate the vibrancy of living cultures. Safeguarding the changes that allow these to remain viable permit cultures to develop in accordance with the needs of the culture-bearing society.

Societal changes take place in the marginal areas of society where new values are generated. These are later absorbed by the larger masses of the population and become the established norm when found to be compatible. This is not always the case, however. When the new value created is too distant from the existing ones to be immediately absorbed, or due to inertia, lack of attention, or when it is otherwise undervalued – it is relegated only to memory where it fragments. Care becomes necessary to nurture the value back to life so that the culture may benefit from its vibrancy.

There are myriads of these new values constantly emerging, contributing to evolving norms in a single society. That there are different cultures within a single society makes it more complex. In the Philippines, there are at least eighty major ethno-linguistic groups. Not one of these groups

is composed of only one culture, but many. The Manobo of Mindanao alone has no less than eighty-two sub-groups; the Tuwali, one of the two major language groups of the Ifugao, has eighteen cultural variations recorded, and maybe more. With all these cultures continuously evolving, the complexity of Philippine cultures is more than enough to unsettle the mind, if one were to consider the intangible aspects alone.

Culture: *noun*

The totality of socially transmitted behavioral patterns, arts, belief systems, institutions and all other products of human work and thought.

The predominating attitudes and behavior that characterize the functioning of a group or organization.

Intellectual and artistic activity and the works produced by it.

Development of the intellect through training or education; enlightenment resulting from such training or education.

A high degree of taste and refinement formed by aesthetic and intellectual training.

The total of the inherited ideas, beliefs, values and knowledge, which constitute the shared bases of social action.

The total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions which are transmitted and reinforced by members.

The artistic and social pursuits, expressions and tastes valued by a society or class, as in the arts, manners, dress, and the enlightenment or refinement from these pursuits.

Everything learned and taught.

Way of life.

The “culture of the Philippines” is made up of a multiplicity of cultures that characterize all the different ethno-linguistic groups that make up the entire population. All these individual cultures vary from one another in different degrees. Some gravitate closer to one another due to environmental and social factors, creating what may be discerned as amorphous culture areas. Examples are the “Cordillera culture” constituted by groups like the Ifugao, Bontoc, Kalinga, Ibaloy, I’wak and Apayao; the “Lumad” groups of Mindanao like the T’boli, Mandaya, Mansaka, B’laan and Manobo; the Islam-practicing groups in northwestern Mindanao composed of the Maranao, Maguindanao, Iranun, Tausug and nominally, the AA Sama; and the central Philippine Visayan grouping composed of the Cebuano, Waray, Ilonggo and others. Depending on the degree of perspective, other groupings may be recognized.

Through the centuries, these cultures evolved and diverged dramatically from one another perhaps, after the Paleolithic times. The circumstances that created cultural differentiations brought about by different subsistence strategies adopted by individual pockets of population started in the Neolithic Age. All these are apparent from archaeological records. The same records show the beginning of a gradual convergence of cultures about the time of the Metal Age around 500 A.D. An intensification of this convergence became noticeable near the 10th century A.D., when evidence showed increased long distance contact within the Asian region. Interactions with the West sustained the introduction of societal leveling factors further. These include new religious belief systems, governmental structures, educational

systems and a market system that reduced domestic economy. The latest policy of adopting a national language is probably the gravest abrasive that will erode the cultural boundaries that separate ethno-linguistic groups in time, although perhaps not to a final point.

Already, some ethnic cultures have gone with the disappearance of the culture-bearing group or their absorption into major populations, like the Adam of northwestern Luzon, a group in the northwestern corner of Cagayan Valley in the north, or the “Sinaunang Tagalog” of Tanay in Rizal province. It is certain that other groups have been integrated into mainstream society painlessly, undocumented through the years. The pattern of convergence at present shows groups exhibiting a generalized form of culture, hardly indistinguishable from one another, identified only by their language, otherwise speaking a lingua-franca. This creates the truism that in the Philippines, the knowledge of Tagalog, Ilocano and Cebuano languages is sufficient in order to be understood all over the country.

When one speaks of Philippine culture, this is usually an identification of a generic kind, depending on the cultural perspective one is speaking from. Knowledge of a particular culture is not conscious; since a person, unless he is of an analytical nature, is not fully aware of the deliberate practice of his own culture. Actually, he exercises his own interpretation of a generic kind of culture, which may deviate from the practice of another individual in the same culture. He practices it as a matter of course, altered through time and context, but always true in its own time.

Heritage: *noun*

Any attribute or immaterial possession that is inherited from forebears; “the world’s heritage of knowledge”; an abstraction belonging to or characteristic of an entity of social heritage; previous experience or training; properties acquired during formative years; that which is inherited; that which passes to the heir on the death of the owner; inheritance; transferred possession, transferred property – a possession whose ownership changes or lapses; bequest, legacy – a gift of personal property by will, birthright, patrimony; an inheritance coming by right of devise (law); a gift of real property by will; hereditary succession to a title, an office or property.

That culture can be inherited is seen in the individual and the population levels. In the population level, it is generic in form. Because of this, there is an assumption that all members of a population will belong to and practice the same culture. This leads to the misconception that an item of intangible heritage will be the same throughout the whole population. In fact, it may not be shared at all within the population. Not all individual members may even be aware of its existence. Only a few may, in reality, practice it or even be knowledgeable of its existence. In the individual level, this results in differences between people due to the variance in the practice of their own culture. Individual development, even of highly heritable cultural traits, depends on a range of environmental factors, both physical and social. Heritability refers to the degree of variation between individuals in a population.

Cultural heritage is highly variable since it is the individual that practices and benefits from the legacy. It is received according to the manner of the receiver, depending on his personality factors. This results in variance among individual bearers. This is why the epic poem of the Sulod of Panay Island in central Philippines is chanted in various ways by chanters, although remaining the same as a whole. Its title may even vary, but retain the same meaning. This is why so many chants vary, even though in essence there is only one, but with many versions. Variance is true for all the other aspects of intangible heritage.

Philippine Intangible Cultural Heritage Domains

The inventory of intangible cultural heritage in the Philippines is in its initial stage since the focus was previously on tangible cultural properties. Documenting ephemerals has inherent difficulties since their parameters are not easily established. No systematic cataloguing of the intangible aspects of things has been done, except in passing, until the United Nations Educational,

Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) broached the concept, and the Philippines became a signatory to the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The tangible collections of the National Museum of the Philippines, for instance, go back as early as 1904, but intangible cultural heritage started consciously only in 2001.

With the passage of Republic Act 10066, the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009, there is now a mandate to undertake a national inventory of cultural property, defined as both tangible and intangible. Even before this law, an inventory of intangible cultural heritage has been initiated but most of the information was culled from published ethnographies. This skewed the enumerations toward social processes, with the least attention given on the domain of knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe. Not all of those inventoried are included in this initial publication. The distribution of items in the five domains established by the UNESCO reflects the composition of the intangible cultural database made thus far.

Jesus T. Peralta
Editor-in-chief