

Sometimes, the authenticity of culture is simply unsustainable

Descrizione

In 2024, UNESCO introduced 66 cultural phenomena to the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. These are very diverse experiences, ranging from Arabian coffee (United Arab Emirates - Oman - Qatar - Saudi Arabia - Jordan), to the Craftsmanship of traditional woven textiles Kente (Ghana).

The UNESCO Web Site describes quite effectively the vision that led to the recognition of this particular kind of cultural heritage.

Cultural heritage is not only monuments and collections of objects but also all the living traditions transmitted by our ancestors: oral expressions, including language, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festivals, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional crafts.

This intangible cultural heritage is crucial in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of globalization, and its understanding helps intercultural dialogue and encourages mutual respect for different ways of life.

Its importance lies not in the cultural manifestation itself, but in the knowledge and skills that are transmitted from one generation to the next.

Intangible cultural heritage, therefore, reflects, consistently with contemporary sensibilities, a broader cultural interest that focuses not only on what we're used to considering as art objects, but also on the set of cultural practices, beliefs, and rituals that characterize a more everyday dimension of people's lives.

This shift reflects the recent emergence of public history and public archaeology, which focuses on the living conditions of normal people.

This issue of Tafter Journal focuses on two different kinds of intangible cultural practice: on the one hand, the aggregative practice of sports understood as a social practice, based on the experience of Spartak Lecce (Italy); on the other hand, the rituals and performances of traditional Okpe marriages (Nigeria).

In both cases, the articles analyze phenomena that fit well into the paradigm of bottom-up cultural expressions reflecting a set of values shared by all participants.

These are dimensions that, like many cultural expressions that are based on phenomena of spontaneous adherence, face an extremely delicate condition for their survival: on the one hand, the risk is that, by remaining unchanged, they risk becoming the expression of an increasingly small group of people; on the other hand, the risk is that organizational growth, or a more widespread recognition of their relevance, will lead to a process of progressive institutionalization. Such institutionalization, or organizational growth, would certainly allow for the achievement of greater sustainability criteria, but on the other hand, it would risk losing the authenticity of which, to date, such an expression is a real embodiment.

Okpe marriages, for example, will live as long as such ritual expressions are perceived as relevant to the community in which they are established. Major social and cultural changes may therefore reduce the number of people who adhere to such rituals. Conversely, the acknowledgment of such marriages as a cultural expression is likely to create a sclerosis of the dynamics in which such marriages are performed. A mass-touristic appreciation of these ceremonials could empower the economic relevance of such activities. Condition that could lead to a gradual loss of their representativity, and a tendency to lose their degree of authenticity.

Similarly, a potential expansion of Spartak Lecce, would undoubtedly lead to the realization of organizational processes and to a greater relevance in the social and political context of reference. This could lead to an increase of the relevance for the organization of “diplomatic” and “political” activities, with the risk that such actions, based on the concept of representativeness would tend to shape the entire organization, thus reducing those spontaneous stimuli of belonging.

The concept of economic sustainability is a key element in the development of cultural and social activities that can have a concrete impact on citizens and territories. Economic sustainability is, in fact, an essential condition for the survival of organisations. The survival of such organisations is, in turn, a necessary condition for territorial and cultural development, since cultural action often requires a much longer latency period than other dimensions of human action.

On the other hand, however, the pursuit of such survival through economic sustainability could lead to a loss of authenticity, and this would invalidate the very *raison d'être* of the organisation itself.

Maintaining a balance between growth and authenticity is one of the most difficult stages for any organisation (cultural or otherwise). In the case of spontaneous expressions, however, it is perhaps fair to accept that some of them will escape this logic, without creating exogenous interventions (such as UNESCO activities) to keep them artificially alive.

Campi meta

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