Diving deeper into the concept of 'cultural heritage' and its relationship with epistemic diversity

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Abstract: First, the article illustrates the concept of 'cultural heritage' as traditionally meant, namely relying on a historically consolidated narrative. Next, it undertakes a broader conceptual analysis and deals with three distinct issues: (i) the fact that the conceptualizations and uses of heritage largely depend on long lasting dichotomies (e.g. tangible/intangible, natural/cultural); (ii) the way in which cultural backgrounds shape the dynamics of valuing and approaching heritage; (iii) the temporal framing of heritage, which today, in the Anthropocene, also points towards how to deal with a future of uncertainty. Lastly, it introduces the notion of epistemic heritage, i.e. the existence of multiple cultural ways of knowing, investigating its implications for both how cultural heritage is conceived and the future approached.

Keywords: cultural heritage; cultural construction of heritage; heritage in the Anthropocene; epistemic heritage.

1. Introduction

The notion of 'cultural heritage' is complex, nuanced, and liable to multiple readings. Its meaning has changed over the decades and could also vary depending on one's cultural background. Even the meaning of its component terms, i.e. 'culture' and 'heritage', is highly debated and subject to ongoing evolution (Smith and Campbell 2017), showing its intrinsic conceptual thickness. Focusing on the conceptual analysis is crucial not only for the sake of semantic clarity, but also to pinpoint the field of heritage, whose theorization is still in progress (Byrne 2008).

In this article, I begin by providing a historical overview of the notion of heritage, mainly relying on its normative interpretation. Then, I engage in a broader conceptual

analysis, focusing on three aspects: (i) the way in which dichotomic classifications (e.g. tangible/intangible, natural/cultural) affect both conceptualization and use of heritage; (ii) the existence of different cultural approaches to heritage; (iii) the temporal framing of heritage, which today, in the Anthropocene, also regards how to cope with a highly uncertain future. Finally, I consider the notion of epistemic heritage, here intended as the plurality of still existing cultural ways of knowing, and scrutinize its implications for both conceiving cultural heritage and building the future.

2. A historical overview of the notion of 'cultural heritage'

According to Vecco (2010), one of the very first definition of cultural heritage was included in the Venice Charter (1964, Introduction), which emphasizes its role as a living testimony of ancient traditions:

> 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.

Earlier approaches focused on the materiality of heritage, while the selection of the assets was mainly based on historic and artistic criteria, as advised by the UNESCO Recommendations of New Delhi (1956). The following UNESCO Recommendations (1962) stressed the need to preserve natural settings, landscapes, and man-made environments, which have a particular cultural or aesthetic meaning.

The Convention Concerning the Protection of World, Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention, WHC), adopted in 1972 by the General Conference of UNESCO, merged in one single document two existing trends, regarding the preservation of cultural and natural assets.

'Cultural heritage' includes monuments (e.g. archaeological assets, monumental sculptures, architectural works), groups of buildings and sites that are of 'outstanding universal value' from the historical, artistic, anthropological or scientific point of view.

'Natural heritage' encompasses natural features (i.e. physical and biological formations), geological and physiographical formations, as well as areas representing the habitat of threatened species, together with natural sites, all of which are also of outstanding universal value from an aesthetic, scientific or conservational point of view.

The approach underlying the World Heritage Convention is grounded in an institutional and normative (i.e. codified by international law) understanding of heritage; it refers to universal values and criteria, and leads to identify the 'official' view as disseminated by experts, in line with scientific knowledge and methods. This is the fundamental logic of the Word Heritage List and Sites, which calls for a collective protection of heritage as a legacy for future generations.

The Convention attributes a key role to the Intergovernmental World Heritage Committee, established within the UNESCO and formed by experts in the field of cultural or natural heritage, which represent all the different regions. States Parties should identify and submit to the Committee an inventory of cultural and natural assets located in their territories, which are suitable for inclusion in the World Heritage List. The sites enrolled in this List are then subject to the application of management plans, which establish preservation and monitoring measures.

It should be noted that WHC's approach, although it heavily contributed to create a commonly shared understanding of heritage, has been criticized by many, and depicted as Eurocentric (Byrne 1991; Cleere 2001; Labadi 2013); in particular, some scholars stressed the fact that it focuses only on the materiality of heritage, presumes universality

of criteria, and relies almost exclusively on the judgments of professional experts (Cleere 1996; Omland 2006).

Over time, novel interpretations of heritage took center stage. The Washington Charter (1987) and the Paris Recommendations (1989) referred to both tangible and intangible assets, both to be considered and safeguarded. Besides, whereas at first historic and artistic criteria prevailed, the Burra Charter (1982) and the Krakow Charter (2000) focused more specifically on the cultural significance of objects. Rather than valuing them for their intrinsic features, sites and monuments should be preserved because they are carrier of particular sociocultural meanings, e.g. acting as catalysts of memory and identity.

To be true, the focus on intangible heritage begun in the 1950s, when the international community searched for tools, such as intellectual property, able to protect those peculiar forms of heritage typified by collective creation and oral transmission. In 1989, the UNESCO General Conference adopted the Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore. [1]

According to same commentators, such as Vecco (2010), the acknowledgment of the importance of immateriality and orality was a significant step beyond the Eurocentric understanding of heritage. Vecco mentions that in other cultures, e.g. in Africa, tangible heritage has less relevance, whereas in others, especially those endorsing a cyclic vision of history, rather the materiality of the artifact, the focus is more on preserving the cultural knowledge related to its creation. For instance, the buildings of the Shinto shrine at Ise Jingu (Japan) are reconstructed every 20 years, reflecting the Shinto view of the impermanence of all things and continuous cycle of transformation. Together with the reconstruction, the twenty-year renewal tradition, called Shikinen Sengū, also

involves transmission of building techniques and specialized knowledge from one generation to another.

A pivotal step in the recognition of intangible heritage has been the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention, ICHC), adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 2003, and created with the purpose of providing a legal, administrative, and financial framework to safeguard this kind of heritage.

In the context of the ICHC, intangible heritage encompasses, among others, knowledge systems, arts and crafts, rituals, and social practices, together with tangible items like instruments, objects and living spaces, which are linked to their accomplishment. It is acknowledged that many instances of this heritage are today at risk, especially due to globalization and cultural homogenization, thus requiring to be safeguarded before to be lost forever.

The Convention explicitly mentions that safeguarding should concern processes and conditions rather than specific, material 'objects' per se (e.g. a historical monument). It is thus vital to support patterns of cultural reproduction, which often take place through the means of real-life experience. For instance, the ICHC recognizes the importance of oral traditions, as transferring knowledge, skills and values frequently depends on word of mouth. What counts is not interrupting the chain of transmission across generations, safeguarding the role of traditional practitioners, who possess highly specialized expertise and are the real carriers and custodians of collective memories. Many indigenous people managed their heritage for centuries, without the help of any external cultural policy, in this way. In their view, heritage is embodied in people, and its creation and maintenance depend on the social structure (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004).

What would be the point of safeguarding, for example, the kusiwa designs of the Wajãpi, an indigenous group in Brazilian Amazon, if those with the knowledge to make and interpret this practice are not secured too? [2]

Returning to the ICHC, State Parties commit to safeguard intangible heritage existing in their territories, and to nominate candidates to the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is then an Intergovernmental Committee who decides what assets should be included in such Lists and the financial assistance and safeguarding measures to enact.

As a preparatory step, the identification of heritage expressions and the consequent implementation of inventories is required. Together with governments and NGOs, the Convention urges the Countries to include local (e.g. indigenous) communities in this process: these communities have played a key role in creating and nurturing heritage, and then a parallel role in safeguarding it should also be ensured. Local communities are, for example, called to give their consent to inventorying practices, and may decide to exclude specific items, or to require that they are made public under some restrictions; in certain settings, secrecy, as linked to the sacred, is essential to maintain the sociocultural integrity (Harding 1999). Local communities could also indicate what should not be preserved or revitalized as heritage, having lost meaning for them, thus being natural its disappearance and transformation into new forms of expressions.

One of the ICHC 's key concerns is, in fact, to maintain the vitality of the cultural systems and do not 'freeze' them.[3] Particular attention should then be paid to avoid the risk that preservation measures, unwantedly, open the way to fossilizing cultural expressions, practices, and values as something belonging only to the past (Akagawa

2014; Brosius and Polit 2011). [4]

With respect to the WHC, the ICHC represents, in theory, a novelty especially for three reasons: (i) it challenges the common sense definition of heritage and its inherent value as material: both tangible and intangible features come to be recognized (Aikawa-Faure 2009; Kaufman 2013); (ii) it partially challenges the role of professional expertise as the only legitimate in approaching heritage, acknowledging the importance of local communities' standpoints (Blake 2009; Silberman 2014); (iii) it focuses, as said earlier, more on the cultural system of production rather than merely on the products.

On the other hand, the ICHC also shows some internal contradictions. First, it is true that it recognizes an interdependence between intangible and tangible heritage (Munjeri 2004), assuming that some heritage features and values are not reducible to materiality; yet it is also true that, as I will discuss in the next section, materiality is still privileged, as intangible values are seen as intrinsically resting on material elements (Smith 2006).

Second, is true that it recognizes the key role of local communities at multiple levels; yet it is also true that it is still the Intergovernmental Committee to take key decisions, e.g. about what items should be included in such Lists or financial assistance. What really counts are the judgments of professional expert bodies, still following a 'top-down' approach to heritage (Harrison 2013). [5]

Third, it is true that it is recognized the importance of preserving, rather than single heritage manifestations, the sociocultural patterns from which they originate; yet it is also true that the ICHC continues to replicate the 'list and inventory' approach, as if it were possible to just 'collect' intangible items or would suffice to just preserve a 'record' of a disappearing tradition. As pointed out by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004, 57),

the list is the most visible, least costly, and most conventional way to 'do something' – something symbolic – about neglected communities and traditions

However, such an approach also contributes to the commodification of heritage (Byrne 2008): cultural elements come to be objectified and reified, e.g. viewed as 'objects' of preservation, reflecting a more general trend of modern capitalist societies to commodify everything. A reductionist way of dealing with the issue, which inevitably isolates and decontextualizes heritage items from their own milieu, is embarked on, taking little notice of the complex interconnections that form the inside fabric of a tradition. [6]

3. Diving deeper into the notion: three axes of analysis

In this section, I will deepen the conceptual analysis. What immediately stands out is that the notion of cultural heritage is broad and vague. For instance, the Oxford Learner's Dictionary (https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/heritage?q=heritage) defines it as 'the history, traditions, beliefs, arts, buildings and objects that a country or society has had for many years and that are considered an important part of its character or important for its history and culture'. Thus, the notion refers to the dimension of cultural legacy, but actually it also involves a *way to engage* with the past, including patterns of selection, interpretation, and preservation that relate it to present purposes (Smith 2006).

This focus on the discursive feature of heritage is, of course, an important contribution from Critical Heritage Studies (e.g. Smith 2006; Harrison 2013). Rather than intrinsic, the meaning of heritage comes to be understood as emerging in conversational settings. Critical Heritage Studies warns us to keep tight vigilance on what, at first glance, might

appear innocuous discursive practices, to remain 'suspicious' of them (Harrison 2015). Discourses always do political work: the way concepts are built and employed is not neutral, but contributes to validate or invalidate particular judgements about heritage. It is then important to unpack the underlying assumptions embedded in the 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith 2006), e.g. highlighting the impact of rhetorical constructs like 'the heritage of the whole humanity' or 'outstanding universal value'; or considering the fact that specific views and values are taken for granted and uncritically adopted, even if they include exclusionary elements and contribute to normalize enduring injustices (Harrison 2015).

In what follows I will scrutinize how the idea of heritage is today conceived, depending on more fundamental underpinnings. I will focus on three axes of analysis: (i) how the conceptualization and use of heritage depend on a number of well-grounded dichotomic classifications; (ii) how the reasons for valuing depend on multiple criteria and reflect the existence of different cultural perspectives on heritage; (iii) how the approach to heritage depends on its temporal framing, which today also focuses on the way to engage with a highly uncertain future.

Heritage and dichotomies

Dichotomic classifications are integral part of how heritage has been conceived. WHC distinguishes tangible cultural and natural heritage; ICH makes instead a distinction between tangible and intangible heritage. These divides are arbitrary and should not be taken for granted; on the other hand, they are still an expression of the philosophical underpinnings of Western culture.

Dualism has been inherited especially by Descartes' distinction between psychic reality

(*res cogitans*) and physical reality (*res extensa*), which can be seen as the root cause of both the divide between mind and matter and between man (or culture) and nature. Nature came to be seen as an 'external' reality and object of exploitation, e.g. a source of potential commodities (Merchant 2003). Dualism also combines with an atomist view that, stimulated in the modern age by Newtonian physics, depicts the universe and every matter existing in it as composed of indivisible particles that are separated from one another. Dualism and atomism have both played a key role in determining the Western mindscape, also integrating with classic bivalent logic, which supports the reading of reality under the lens of multiple irreducible opposites (Morin 1986).

Conceptual opposites are usually understood by projecting a pattern of separation and disjunction. However, in the light of a different framework of understanding, these opposites could be seen as interpenetrating and complementary: they are distinct but not separated, being intrinsically linked in a relation of mutual specification. For instance, without the inside there is no outside, without the outside there is no inside; without the system there is no environment, without the environment there is no system. Actually, to go beyond dualistic characterizations in the field of heritage too, there is the need to work on the broader conceptual ground.

Let us first consider the tangible/intangible divide, which replicates and reinforces the dualistic view (in terms of mind/matter). After the ICHC's promulgation, this divide became hotly debated among heritage Western specialists (Smith and Akagawa 2009). Many still regard intangible features and values as unreliable, often linked to the judgements of non-experts. They are depicted as ephemeral, only approximately measurable and, in reason of their inherent mutability, difficult to preserve. They also separate us from material things (Beazley 2009), which instead are self-evident and stable, as represented by the idea of 'stoniness' (Solli 2011).

In Smith and Campbell's view (2017), intangible heritage tends to be misrecognized due to its placing into the dominant discourse, including that of Conventions. As already mentioned, this discourse is still grounded on materiality, and the notion of intangible heritage is formulated

> as apolitical, de-personalized and abstracted from its social and cultural context, and made material and manageable, and more easily subject to the regulation of policy-makers and professionals (Smith and Campbell 2017, 39-40).

Now, scholars of the Critical Heritage Studies are right in making this criticism. On the other hand, when they say that 'there is no such thing as heritage' (without intangible heritage) (Smith 2006, 13), they risk contributing to reinforce the tangible/intangible divide. Such a statement seems to imply an anthropocentric view according to which the material dimension does not possess meaning per se but only when man-made ideas and values are projected into it. Heritage would thus be intrinsically intangible, although it manifests in tangible elements.

Other scholars (e.g. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004) reply that if it is true that tangible heritage without intangible elements is some sort of inert matter, it is also true that intangible heritage is always 'embodied', as it exists in connection with some material and social realities. Once again, what is crucial to consider is the interdependence between the tangible and the intangible dimensions (Munjeri 2009), which is also part of the view of several non-Western cultures (Harrison and Rose 2010).

The man/nature and the related nature/culture divide are still other expressions of the aforementioned dualism. Today, many scholars (e.g. Harrison 2015) recognize that also in the heritage field man and nature should be seen as interweaved and co-evolving together, rather than as segregated into distinct spheres (e.g. Haila 2000). For instance,

the features of many sites on the World Natural Heritage list still depend on the human interaction with the natural environment (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). It is also acknowledged that such divides do not make sense in many non-Western cultural contexts. Take once again indigenous cultures, which in many cases hold an 'ecocentric' view, according to which nature and the human realm are experienced with a sense a unity and mutual belonging; the land is featured by a genealogical network, whose relationships are based on reciprocity and mutual linkage; no member of such a network is allowed to dominate, each is 'subjects' in its own and takes part in a society of persons.

Besides, the indigenous sense of heritage often originates from a cultural process of giving values to particular natural places and species (Figueroa and Waitt 2010), which are seen as inheritance from ancestors and containing vestiges that link people to stories of their past. The logic behind the safeguarding of certain aspects of the natural environment is thus that they provide very specific meaning to the ways of living, becoming the embodiments of the indigenous historical and cultural identities (Scoville 2013; Thompson 2000).

The dynamics of valuing and multiple cultural approaches to heritage

Let us turn now to the dynamics of valuing, i.e. why one values some X item in the heritage arena. Establishing a heritage means establishing what is particularly significant and deserving of being remembered, safeguarded, restored, and displayed, according to some moral, aesthetical, scientific, or sentimental criteria. Therefore, the reasons for valuing should be investigated in depth, especially the fact that specific (in a sense 'local') conditions, often combined, are required to hold them: for instance, having some specialized knowledge and expertise; or also a particular geographical

location, nationality, ethnicity, religion, or historical position. Scheffler (2010, 37) speaks about 'positional valuing' for describing the array of conditions that ground reasons for valuing a thing, specifying that 'only those who occupy the right position in relation to the thing are capable of valuing it, or of valuing it in a certain way'. Considering these conditions is important to scrutinize the 'evaluative scope' of heritage (Matthes 2015), an issue on which two opposing views, i.e. another divide, are often contrasted: the *universalist*, which claims that all persons, independently of their sociocultural or historical belonging, have reasons to value some heritage, as reflected in the notion of 'outstanding universal value', and the *particularist*, which instead claims that the attribution of value depends on the viewpoint and interests of specific groups. The universalist view is still compatible with the idea of positional valuing, assuming that the aforementioned local conditions, although occasionally sufficient, are not individually necessary to have reasons for valuing. On the contrary, what features the particularist view is precisely the fact that these reasons *necessarily* depend on some local conditions. [7]

The universalist view is reflected in the official Western approach illustrated so far, which follows UNESCO's and scientific principles, and usually takes a 'representative' fashion (Harrison and Rose 2010), i.e. the portrayal of heritage bases on 'masterpieces' and special assets (e.g. museum pieces). The identification of the World Heritage sites and the symbolic gesture of creating the correspondent lists arise from selecting and ranking first particular aspects and values that, despite their possible 'local' significance, come to be read as having a trans-local or universal meaning. Today, this approach also well integrates with the inherent logics of globalization (Labadi and Long 2010; Meskell 2013).

Here, I will discuss the particularist view paying special attention to the existence of

multiple cultural ways of heritage making, i.e. both heritage's physical shape and meaning are driven by the views and actions of specific cultural groups.

Interesting examples are the indigenous models of heritage that, as already mentioned, challenge the 'orthodox 'view and many of its dichotomies. First, heritage is understood in a much more 'integrated' fashion, as entangled with the fabric of everyday life. Rather than focusing on extremely 'special' items, confining and isolating them, they emphasize what contributes to create a sense of community and belonging to the same roots; usually, this corresponds to very specific ways in which tangible assets, belief systems, and sociocultural practices interlink together (Harrison and Rose 2010).

Second, they also ground on non-dualistic cosmologies, which deeply differ from the Western view. Together with ecocentric, they are also 'panpsychist': mind and agency are everywhere; animals, trees, rocks, waters, and the land as a whole are all seen as sharing duties and potential owners of knowledge (Pierotti and Wildcat 2000). Another long-standing divide, i.e. human/nonhuman, here comes to be challenged, [8] together with the Western anthropocentric idea of heritage: the processes of remembrance, caretaking and transmission are not only a human affair (Sterling and Harrison 2020); in indigenous perception, a multitude of sentient beings contribute to them: humans, animals, plant species, extra-ordinary beings (e.g. totemic spirits), sentient places, have all taken care of the land, generations after generations, while the latter has nurtured and supported them. The value of heritage comes indeed to be ascribed especially to the traces of care left by the actions and presence of all these subjects.

This second aspect makes it clear why the possibility to fully grasp the sense of indigenous heritage necessarily depends on being embedded in their cultural worlds. It is very hard for Western heritage specialists to understand their shared sense of

stewardship of the land (Whyte, Brewer, and Johnson 2016) or the spiritual and kinship connections that might lead to experience the loss of a tree as a heritage loss. [9] In indigenous view, the land is indeed full of symbolic meanings, which are almost invisible or incomprehensible to outsiders. These meanings are encrypted in multiple layers of signs, which risk to be irremediably lost when Western specialists ask indigenous people to translate them into scientifically understandable concepts (Byrne 2008).

On one side of the spectrum, cultural heritage may thus assume very local features, i.e. the reasons for valuing are not shared with many others, in line with the particularistic view. But let us now consider items that seem to deserve more universalistic claims. One common assumption regards older things, i.e. the more we go back in time, the more universal their value is. For example, human paleontological sites and ancient skeletons may be attributed of a culturally independent value, being part of the global history of mankind and linked to the human common ancestry:

> Ancient skeletons are the remnants of unduplicable evolutionary events which all living and future peoples have the right to know about and understand (Turner 1986, 1).

This quote refers to the case of the 'Kennewick Man', the skeletal remains of a prehistoric Paleoamerican man which were found, in 1996, on a bank of the Columbia River in the Washington State (USA). Many scientists believe that ancient human remains 'belong' to everyone, and that our shared humanity gives reasons to value the history of our species and its explanation; it would be scientifically and ethically unjustifiable to assume that one particular group or culture is in the position of having exclusive legal or moral rights to use and control such remains (Brown 2003; Thompson 2013). [10] At any rate, it is still a scientific judgment to establish the universal

significance of what relates to our (biological) origins. The issue here is not the rightness of the statement, rather its underlying one-sidedness, which takes into little consideration that one could come to dignify items related to ancestry and origins from radically alternative perspectives.

Apart from the related scientific and legal controversy, the case of the Kennewick Man is exemplary. [11] Once again, the problem did not lie in the fact that anthropologists asserted the right of studying human remains, but in their inability to make sense of why Native Americans opposed to the idea to transform their 'Ancient One' into an object of scientific inquiry. Perhaps, they undermined the fact that two different cultural worlds and sensibilities were involved; or worse, they did not realize that, by asserting their right and disparaging indigenous one, they tacitly assumed the superiority of their view and criteria, even for what might concern issues of another culture. It is in fact clear that indigenous people find their reasons within a specific cultural framework, according to which particular places and objects are inherently sacred due to their spiritual genesis (Byrne 2008). Here, the 'ancient ones' do not simply epitomize 'evolutionary events'. The world was created through archetypal events and the involvement of ancestral cosmogonic figures who, together with generations of human ancestors, still inhabit the land, making it worth to be cherished (Whyte 2017).

What I have discussed so far shows how giving the role of arbitrators of cultural meanings to international institutions and scientific experts alone risks to overshadow what alternative cultural views and bodies of knowledge have to offer. Actually, when one argues, as the ICHC does, about the importance of preserving cultural diversity, it should also be stressed how such a diversity might impact the heritage field. The way in which heritage is understood can change as the cultural observer's position changes, as

it depends on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological underpinnings one adopts.

In other words, not only heritage (including cultural diversity) is something (e.g. an objectified item) that one observes through the lens of the dominant approach (thus under scientific scrutiny), but it also provides alternative lenses (through the perspectives of multiple cultural groups) to observe things, which lead to different ways of approaching heritage itself.

Such a recognition would lead to a 'perspectival' understanding of heritage, which distinguishes the conditions required for judging and the result of such a judging. In a nutshell, this view can be summarized as follows: the value as heritage of some X item cannot be attributed independently of any particular perspective; there are multiple cultural perspectives, which lead to multiple ways of conceiving heritage; the condition of cultural belonging is, in many cases, necessary to ground reasons for valuing; yet it cannot be excluded a priori that different perspectives still converge on value attribution.

The temporal framing of heritage

Let us now consider heritage within a temporal horizon. Novel studies emphasize heritage's role in shaping the future, in the belief that what we choose to transmit to next generations will contribute to open up given possibilities while occluding others (Harrison et al. 2020). Thereupon, it is important to ponder questions like

> Who is involved in decision making processes of inheritance and care for the future? How is this future defined and articulated? What 'pasts' are given priority in the present, and whose histories are obscured through such work? How might alternative and marginalized concepts of nature and culture challenge familiar methods of preservation? What stories are waiting to be told about the past, in the

present, and what is their role in shaping future worlds? (Sterling and Harrison 2020, 27).

Especially when we look at the notion of heritage from the perspective of the Anthropocene, we start to conceive it differently (Harrison 2015). The planet itself may be conceptualized as heritage, since we are gradually realizing that we live potentially catastrophic times (Stengers 2015).

We normally think of heritage as how to preserve the tangible and intangible assets created by generations and societies that have disappeared (Holtorf and Fairclough 2013); but it is now time to think that *we*, or our children and grandchildren, may be part of such disappearing generations and societies. Humans might be, as argued by Yusoff (2013), 'fossil-to-come'.

We should take seriously into consideration the possibility of a dystopia. The future scenarios of the Anthropocene are such that the Earth itself might become an unrecognizable and inhabitable place, where one gets disoriented. Hence, it is important to look at people who have already experienced the annihilation of their material and cultural world. People, like the Native Americans, whose voice comes directly from the smoking ruins of their heritage (Whyte 2017). Together with many other cultural groups hit by colonization, [12] they have already experienced the condition of 'solastalgia' (Albrecht 2005), i.e. being unsettled in their own homeland, which is no longer the same. Something similar is occurring in contemporary Western societies too: a deep feeling of deprivation is increasingly experienced due to the fact that several places and things to which we give special importance are vanishing or already lost.

Here, we are also led to ponder how the notion of heritage juxtaposes with the idea of ark, reasoning on what should be saved and passed down to build new beginnings in

possible post-catastrophic times. As argued by Scranton (2015), the notion of arks does

not only concern the genetic and biological level, but also the cultural sphere: the

multiple ways in which heritage manifests; the many instances of 'endangered wisdom':

> The library of human cultural technologies that is our archive, the concrete record
> of human thought in all languages that comprise the entirety of our existence as
> human beings, is not only the seed stock of our future intellectual growth, but its
> soil, its source, its womb (Scranton 2015, 109). [13]

The discussions on future and heritage are indeed interlinked. In the light of the

irreversible transformations of the Anthropocene, the range of possibilities for the future

does not seem anymore limitless. Moreover, the forces of globalization are transforming

the world at multiple levels. We live in an increasingly interconnected reality –

economically, socially, culturally, and politically – under the influence of patterns of

ever-increasing homologation. The territories of the future risk to become progressively

narrower, e.g. the space traced by a single trajectory.

In this framework, we should nonetheless pay attention to the 'images of the future' we

employ. Especially when conceived in a deterministic way, they have a great persuasive

power, and might contribute to establish the sense of a single direction, towards which

the whole humanity is moving or should move (Polak 1973). It is for such a reason that

is crucial to develop alternative visions of the future, recognizing the role of human

agency and environmental unpredictability, as well as the fact that the idea of the future

might change depending on the cultural perspective.

Here, once again, one should look at heritage in two distinct fashions: (i) as something

to be preserved in view of the future, and (ii) as a means to rethink the future (Dator

2005). In order to succeed in this last purpose, a deeper, philosophically grounded way

to look at cultural diversity is, however, required. It should be considered that cultural

diversity could also involve a genuine epistemic diversity, i.e. multiple pathways to knowledge (e.g. Harding 2015; Santos 2014). Such a diversity is, in my view, a hugely important form of cultural heritage. It forms the ground upon which different conceptions of heritage and views of the future are formed. Most importantly, it is an essential cultural resource on which our cognitive resilience as a species, especially in view of the challenging times of the Anthropocene, depends:

> The wealth of humanity and its capacity for future adaptation come from the diversity of its cultures, which are so many experiments in ways of worthily inhabiting the Earth (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 71-2).

4. Epistemic heritage

I suggest using the term 'epistemic heritage' to capture the plurality of ways of knowing (e.g. knowledge pluralism) that are expressions of different yet still existing and vital socio-cultural niches.

Such a heritage has a double value: (i) for the content of its specific embodiments: a plurality of cultural vantages points, cognitive and aesthetic styles, conceptions of heritage, as well as empirical methods and practices, which are important for the local communities holding them; (ii) for epistemic diversity as an overall 'emergent' feature: just like bioecological diversity, such a feature ensures a greater adaptive ability to the entire humankind; we do not know what awaits us around the corner and what types of knowledge could be strategically useful in the future.

Many forms of this epistemic heritage are disappearing, threatened by patterns of cultural homogenization and epistemicides. They are also threatened by environmental deterioration, e.g. due to climate change, which affects knowledge and practices, whose

existence depends (as in the case of craftsmanship and medicine) on the existence of particular materials and species, or on feelings of attachment towards particular places.

As mentioned earlier, the ICHC includes 'knowledge' and 'skills' among the expressions of intangible heritage. Of course, the issue of knowledge pluralism cannot merely be addressed through a heritage convention. Still, one might say that, *indirectly*, the Convention recognizes the link between cultural diversity and the multiplicity of knowledge pathway. To put it in more philosophical terms, it somehow admits that members of different cultural groups can possess different approaches to knowledge, thus *internally* using distinct epistemic norms to justify their claims. This can be called the 'descriptive' thesis of knowledge pluralism.

Here I would also suggest to assess the value of pluralism, which is a form of diversity, as depending on three conditions: (i) its actuality, i.e. the 'constituent parts' are genuinely different, for example in the sense that they have developed somewhat independently and are not reducible one to another; (ii) its legitimacy, i.e. their functioning equally match some criterion of cogency and internal coherence; and (iii) its usefulness, i.e. the existence of this plurality is advantageous with respect to some purpose.

Now, the descriptive thesis, *prima facie*, only grounds on the suitability of the first condition. Although valuable at the time of globalization, there is still nothing revolutionary in this weak type of pluralism. Assuming the plausibility of the second condition would instead mean to suppose that the aforesaid epistemic norms are themselves epistemically justified and capable of conveying epistemic warrant. This idea of multiple *valid* standards for reliability would enable us to move towards a stronger thesis of knowledge pluralism, i.e. its 'normative' version. It would lead us to

expect that there are different ways of being epistemically successful, [14] as ostensibly supported by the fact that, at the very least, they allowed different societies to endure in their own environments.

Embracing this stronger thesis would also mean to avoid approaching the multiform spectrum of ways of knowing being entrapped in an inferior/superior scheme. For instance, using geographical metaphors, opposing 'islands' to the 'mainland of the continent': on one side, there are remote corners of the planet and their exotic belief systems that, in the words of the current rhetoric, are 'the remnants of a world that is disappearing', and actually perfect destinations for cultural tourism; on the other side, there is the place that holds the privileged vantage point (i.e. the West and its scientific approach), whose authority should never be questioned but rather used to make sense of the islands' features or to establish the proper preservation measures. It is instead important to maintain the sense of a polycentric space, i.e. an archipelago made of multiple epistemic islands: there are multiple epistemic traditions, which all are *legitimate* and credible in their own right; each has, in principle, equal possibility to know and rights to speak; each is a microcosm that might 'decenter' the others; all together they form the overall epistemic heritage.

Regarding the third condition, i.e. the usefulness of (epistemic) plurality, I will now look at the issue from another vantage point, i.e. how such a plurality relates to the existence of multiple cultural expertise. Notably, each tradition has developed particular skills and specialties and has its own specific type of expertise (Wylie 2015). I have already illustrated how the indigenous cosmologies lead to particular heritage conceptions. Here I will instead briefly mention the ecological significance of indigenous knowledge.

Many communities around the world are living reservoirs of ecological information and holders of refined techniques and practices – methods for biodiversity conservation, weather forecasting systems, strategies to cope with natural hazards, etc. – which are the result of centuries of observation and interaction with the environment, evolving and adapting to changing circumstances.

What most counts here is, however, showing the importance of the overall cultural framework inspiring indigenous approaches. Depending on the mindset, each cultural knowledge specializes, in fact, on mastering particular sets of natural relationships (Mazzocchi 2018). For instance, driven by dualistic tenets, Western science seeks an understanding of physical reality in a way that mainly enables manipulative and predictive power. This has given us an unprecedented ability to transform nature by technological means, which has yet also resulted in a perilous exploitation beyond control. In indigenous environments, the priority is instead knowing how to behave in line with their perspective of unity and relationality – all elements of the universe are interlinked, interdependent, and immersed in relations of reciprocity – living in balance with natural and social surroundings (Hester and Cheney 2001).

Indigenous expertise is indeed a genuine, cultural expertise of long-term sustainability. Even if indigenous practices and experiences directly apply to local contexts, the principles informing them have a broader relevance. In this case, by means of the collective epistemic heritage, one has thus access to highly valuable inputs, i.e. ideas and practices that might be crucial to develop, in the Anthropocene, a deeper view of sustainability (for a discussion on this, see Mazzocchi 2020).

5. Conclusion

In this article I critically assessed the notion of cultural heritage. I examined its

historical development, discussing how long-lasting dichotomies impacted the conceptualization and deployment of heritage. I also highlighted how these same dichotomies do not make sense in different cultural settings and their approaches to heritage, as in many indigenous cases.

In dealing with these subjects, I explored different dimensions of heritage, indirectly touching the issues of what parts of culture might be considered as heritage and are worth to be preserved. Depending on the viewpoint, there could be different answers to these questions: from single items in reason of their exceptionality (e.g. monuments) to overall conditions (e.g. cultural and knowledge diversity); from products (e.g. tangible artefacts) to the mechanisms producing them (e.g. the holders of specific expertise and techniques employed) or even lifestyles and gestures of ordinary people. The key to approach heritage lies in linking together all these different dimension and aspects.

I then focused on the temporal framing of heritage, suggesting how considering it in light of the Anthropocene might open up new conceptions. Here, engaging with heritage requires not only looking at the past, but embracing the challenge to rethink it in view of the future.

In this respect, I put forward the notion of epistemic heritage, which involves multiple cultural perspectives and knowledge pathways, as linked to different meaningful ways of living. Such a heritage is a fundamental means of cognitive resilience, on which both our ability for adaptation and the chance to shape alternative futures depend. What counts for its preservation are not only 'direct' measures focusing on this or that cultural form, but also the overall philosophical approach, which should aim to endorse the value of epistemic pluralism.

Notes

1. The term 'folklore', as today intangible heritage, is used to refer to diverse forms of traditional and popular culture, which have been transmitted orally or by gesture, and maintained through processes of social recreation.

2. In 2008 oral and graphic expressions of the Wajapi have been included in the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

3. The ICHC only applies to intangible heritage that is still existing, supporting endangered but still living traditions. Manifestations and expressions that are no longer in use are seen as part of cultural history, but not as heritage in terms of the Convention.

4. Taking this to the extreme, it could be said that even speaking about preserving the system might be misplaced, as it implies an active intervention, which may interfere on how cultural groups relate to their own cultural history (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). At least in certain situations, rather than intervening, it would be more appropriate to *enable* the natural cycle of a tradition.

5. On the contrary, 'bottom-up' approaches are more capable to catch common people's attitude towards heritage, which is less inclined to grand structures (e.g. Macdonald 2013), while seeking to preserve the 'sense of place' (e.g. Harrison and Rose 2010); they also help to acknowledge the existence of 'unofficial' forms of heritage, often disregarded by the official account, which mostly have a regional basis or correspond to the heritage of minorities (e.g. migrant groups) (Harrison 2013).

6. This also contributes to create conditions under which it becomes easier to bypass key cultural norms or to trivialize and misrepresent cultural expressions, e.g. through the diffusion of stereotypes and caricatural portrayals (e.g. Matthes 2018).

7. Matthes (2015) distinguishes two subcategories of universal reason, which partially mitigate the divide between these two views: (i) *monistic* universal reason, i.e. everyone has the *same* single reason to value the same thing, and (ii) *pluralistic* universal reason, i.e. everyone is warranted to value the same thing, and yet this is not due to a single shared reason; rather, the reasons to value the same thing differ, for example owing to the fact that diverse forms of positional valuing overlap.

8. The human/nonhuman divide is today a highly debated topic in Western contemporaneity too (e.g. Haraway 1991).

9. In the most extreme cases, the death of the tree could even elicit the death of people who used to live in strict entanglement with it, as told by many Aboriginal stories (e.g. Harrison and Rose 2010).

10. Issues like these intersect the discussion about cultural property, and whether specific rights and restrictions should be admitted, in response to the claims of particular groups. The

question, on which internationalists and nationalists clash (e.g. Merryman 1986), cannot be properly understood unless geopolitical matters and power distribution among cultural groups are considered too.

11. First it was recognized that the Kennewick Man had the most genetic similarity with modern Native Americans, including the tribe living in the region where the skeletons were found; subsequently, the possibility to establish a reliable link between the Kennewick Man and any of the Native American tribes came to be denied; finally, the existence of such a link was scientifically proven, and the skeletons returned to the tribes for reburial in line with their traditions, as ruled by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).

12. Colonization might take the form of cultural appropriation, i.e. exploiting cultural resources that belong to other cultural groups. This could also involve the abolition of key cultural practices (Coleman, Coombe, and MacArailt, 2012) and the silencing of traditional performers, whose cultural expertise is denied or not given chances for expression (Coombe 1993; Hladki 1994). The overall result is cultural assimilation and erosion (Rogers 2006). This issue intersects the more general question of epistemic justice, as discussed in various philosophical works (e.g. Dotson 2011; Fricker 2007).

13. Several ongoing initiatives actually reflect the spirit of the ark. For instance, the Arch Mission (www.archmission.org), which has the purpose to create data storage archives (i.e. the *Arch Libraries*) for preserving knowledge; such archives are designed, by means of advances technologies, to last for many millennia and survive on Earth as well as across the solar system. Another is the Memory of Mankind (www.memory-of-mankind.com), which has instead the purpose to collect stories about human life in its multiple expressions and ordinariness, and to record them in enduring ceramic tablets; the latter are then stored deep underground in the Hallstatt's salt mine, the oldest in the world.

14. My stance here should not be mistaken with relativism. Whereas I admit, in principle, multiple legitimate sets of epistemic norms, I am still committed to avoiding a number of relativist implications: (i) considering all epistemic systems as equally good, aprioristically and irrespective of their content, and (ii) thinking that reality imposes no restrictions upon the array of epistemic activities one can successfully undertake (Mazzocchi 2018; for a critical discussion on the thesis of epistemic pluralism, see instead Boghossian 2006).

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