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Interrogating Discourses of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Title: Interrogating Discourses of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Abstract:

Since 2003 understandings of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) appear to have been strongly influenced by the UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention (WICHC) (Munjeri, 2004). While it might be acknowledged that this Convention explored the notion of ICH providing a working definition, it seems to have “normalised” the understanding of ICH. In other words, this Convention is, arguably, the main body of knowledge and point of reference for the study, understanding, and management of ICH.

Drawing on insights from the Foucauldian dyad power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980), it is suggested that the 2003 WICHC has contributed to the creation of an object of knowledge that, in turn, has established a binary opposition between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Exploring this binary opposition can provide insights on the power relations behind this “consolidating order” (Butler, 2004), as well as an understanding of how ICH is interpreted and represented. Furthermore, given the ontological nature of representation and the discursive construction of space, the analysis will also acknowledge how a discourse of ICH shapes spaces for tourism (Inglis & Holmes, 2003).

Tangible and intangible cultural heritage and the way they are represented are of central importance in tourism, where they are used as unique selling propositions through the exploitation of their distinctiveness. Understanding the power/knowledge relations behind processes of representation is critical because it will have an impact on the image of the destination that will, in turn, circulate and reinforce a specific discourse of the destination and its inhabitants. Research in this regard will fill a gap in literature where more attention to Foucault’s notion of power in tourism is advocated (Ong, Ryan, & McIntosh, 2014).

Against a universalizing definition, countries that are in the process of ratifying the 2003 UNESCO WICHC are called to interface with their own representations of ICH. Thus, a critical examination of the process of ratification of this Convention is a useful way to interrogate ICH discourses. The purpose of this work is to highlight, through a Foucauldian inspired discourse analysis, the mechanisms used to talk about, and to represent, intangible cultural heritage in two exemplar countries: Sardinia (Italy) and Scotland (UK). The notion of World Intangible CH is used in the context of this study as one that transcends the national boundaries where both Italy and the United Kingdom play a role: Italy has ratified the 2003 WICHC, and Sardinia is the region with the majority of listed WICH expressions. The United Kingdom has not yet ratified the Convention, but Scotland aims to do so, and several initiatives have been conducted in this regard. Taking this into account, the aim of this study is to examine two key institutional documents related to ICH in both countries in order to understand the underlying mechanisms through which a notion of intangible cultural heritage is constructed in the two regions, and also what narratives about intangible cultural heritage are normalized and represented as ‘truth’ and what narratives are excluded and deemed to be unthinkable about ICH in Sardinia and Scotland.

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