Intangible heritage and its role in the formation of social and personal identity

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ABSTRACT: The rapid changes in cultural demographics, technology, education and the impact of globalization and multiculturalism demand a re-assessment of the processes that tend to isolate contemporary life from its heritage, named in the paper as cultural distancing. In view of the named dilemma, this paper explores the importance of the intangible heritage and its contribution to the formation of contextualized social and personal identity. The heart of the argument suggests that the nurture of the intangible heritage connects with the hub of identity formation. In support of this position, this paper adopts and modifies Stobbelaar and Pedroli's existential and spatial identity quadrant by expanding the meanings to horizontal and vertical dimensions of life's experience. The proposed model demonstrates that in the context of spatial dimension, the affective component of social identity, coined with the elements of reflexivity ingrained in the cultural memory, contributes to the reconstruction of relevant social and personal identity. Further, in this context, intangible heritage provides visionary inspiration and motivational drive. With this impetus, it drives the formation of the contemporary identity to discover a higher and future oriented purpose. Finally, the paper shows that in such a framework, identity thrives with a passion and contextualized vision, as long as, individuals take the time and effort to nurture, revive and recreate the memory of the living heritage.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the significance of the intangible heritage and its role in the formation of social and personal identity. For this purpose, it follows the definition of the intangible heritage outlined by the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

> The 'intangible cultural heritage' means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognized as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2009).

The commonly used phrase, the living cultural heritage, refers more specifically to modes of expressions that transmit the essence of the communities or groups worldviews and cultural self-understanding. Such transmission does not occur only through cognitively expressed images. According to Costa (2011, 49), it is also transmitted through "the intangibility of its contents, feelings and emotions it provokes". Therefore, more specifically intangible heritage includes inter alia "oral traditions, language, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events and more so importantly knowledge concerning the nature and the universe" (UNESCO at 60). The listed modes of creative expressions contain a plethora of dynamic and fluid memories (Trim,

2011,11). Ingrained in the textures of the expressed memories one finds the pulsating lifeblood of identity.

Further analysis of the definitions points the notions of continuity or rather connectivity between the past and present. It suggests that such living heritage provides a sense of ongoing identity on the proviso individuals engage actively in the process of continual recreation of the cultural heritage (Smeets, 2004, 45). In other words, to maintain its ongoing vibrancy and influence, intangible heritage needs to be in a state of continual interaction with the changing nature of social and cultural environment. It applies being "relevant to its community, recreated and transmitted, from one generation to another" (UNESCO, Safeguarding without freezing). Van Ginkel (2004, p.24) links the relevance of cultural connection and identity formation to show the closely-knit relationship between the social and personal identity. He argues, "Cultural heritage is one of these defining factors of a person's identity". McLean (2006, p.3) reinforces this point stating, "Heritage has an identity-conferring status."

However, rapid changes in cultures, trends, demographics, technology and education coined with globalization and multiculturalism demand a re-assessment of the processes that tend to isolate contemporary life from its heritage. Kim (2007) observes that while the vast array of global changes seemingly closes the gap of the cultural differences, paradoxically the same forces contribute to "a deep fractious and unsettling landscape." For this very reason, recent years unfold a growing interest in the study of intangible heritage and identity. Van Ginkel (2004, p.24) sees this relationship as a necessary channel "to help us maintain our roots in the midst of lives that are characterized by mobility and change." In view of the existing divide between the past, the contemporary life and the progressive nature of global changes, this research argues that the preservation of the intangible heritage, namely as something we have to care about and simultaneously to care for, links with the hub of identity formation. In this context, caring does not apply, as commonly referred, to a process of preservation, conservation, safeguarding and replicating. The named factors lock the intangible heritage to static patterns of traditions detached from relevance to the contemporary life. Rather, this paper aims to explore the elements that permeate the intangible heritage with lasting dynamism of flexibility and plasticity. It also aims to discuss how these in turn empower the contemporary generations with images that enhance the formation of social and personal identity, yet retain a connection with the past.

2 BEGINNING OF THE JOURNEY

Heritage represents the history. Howard and Graham (2008, p. 2) refer to the constructionist view of the heritage in which "selective past materials becomes cultural, political and economic resources for the present." Such a view discards the deeply ingrained interplay of emotions that form part of human responsiveness to life experiences. The narratives, songs ballades, social practices, rituals and festival are more than static vestiges of the past to be admired. Trim points out (2011, p.12), "It is the way the past is represented, both by and to the community, shaping how the community sees and understands itself." As such, the images of the past remind us of the life once lived in all fullness. According to Costa, (2011, p.50) such records transmit "emotions and mental concepts," and it may be added, it unfolds the dynamic story of human search for meaning, purpose.

These spaces include the totality of human responsiveness to life's journey "emotions, perceptions, conceptions, mediations, performances, materialization" both in its social and personal construct (Russell, 2007). Stobellar and Pedroli (2011, p.322) refer to such spaces of interactive creativity as landscapes. They define the identity of the landscapes as the "perceived uniqueness of a place." They argue that people's identity moulds within the confines and interaction with many elements such as, "social class, religion, ethnicity" and "interaction with the physical world" (Ibid., 323).

There is a common agreement that personal identity germinates in the context of such social framework (Trim, 2011; Graham and Howard, 2008; Cipolla, 2008; Halas, 2010; Poole, 2008). As part of the process, it is subjected to the impact of "communicative memory" defined as "varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications" (Assman, 1995, p.126). Referring to the pioneering work of Halbwachs, Trim (p.11) highlights the value of social frameworks for memory. "It is the degree that our individual thought places itself in

these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the art of recollection." The close interactively functional tie between the social and individual memory suggests as affirmed by Van Ginkel that the social and cultural background is "one of the defining factors of a person's identity"(Van Ginkel, p.24). According to Sibellar and Pedroli "people derive a significant part of their identity from the landscape in which they were raised and lived" (p.323). They define such landscapes as existential identity.

This paper refers to it as a *horizontally directional dimension of life's experiences*. It includes all the experiences confronting people in the context of their social, cultural and geographical, space and time. The processes leading to the formation of the individual "I-feeling" and the social/cultural "we-feeling" identity are never static (Ibid.). They are subject to changes. In other words, identity does not retain a perpetual quality. In order to remain relevant to its time and place, personal and social identity is always subjected to modification and renewal. It simply exemplifies the flowing process of changing life. Van Ginkel comments, "living beings change over time, physically and mentally, and so does culture change." He supports the notion that "No culture is static" but "evolves constantly, usually as a reaction to exposure to, and interaction with other cultures". In this process, identity is exposed to flux of changes and notions of continuity and discontinuity. The interaction within the social context coined with the pressures exerted by the process of change that according to Kim (p.241) "renders the individual an emotionally significant aspect of individual self-concept". In this case, the proposed view of "existential identity" seen by this study as a horizontally directional dimension of life's experience highlights the reality of the cultural gap caused by elements of time and change.

The issue that demands discussion relates to the emerging problem of cultural distancing illustrated in diagram 1. The individual landscapes (A & B) provide a nurturing framework for the formation of identity. In each framework, the three characteristics of social identity, namely the cognitive, evaluative and affective dimension (Guijarro, 93) shape the distinctive boundaries of the perceived uniqueness of a place. The named characteristics play a significant role in helping individuals to recognize and define the specificity of its uniqueness.

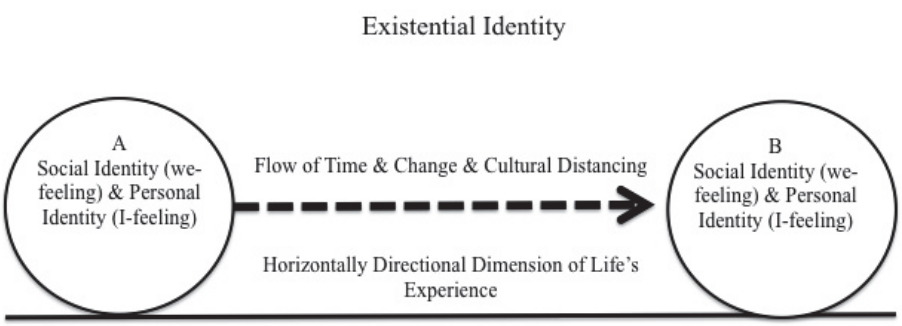

Diagram 1

However, as pointed by Bauman (2004,11) and Graham and Howard (2008,5) identity is not "secured by a lifelong guarantee". Rather, in order to remain relevant to its time and place, it is subjected to continual modification. With passing time, the pulsating elements of the collective social memory, referred to as a living communication transition to an "objectivized culture" (Assmann, 128, Trim, p,11,12). This study refers to the named transition as *cultural distancing*.

3 IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGE – THE POINT OF TRANSITION

The named cultural distancing includes a transitioning journey from commemorative to cultural memory. This process alters the interactive dynamism of identity formation and transforms it into fixed vestiges of memory spaces locked in the framework of time. What once was a space of vibrant, interactive and dynamic uniqueness, a place of noise, sound, colour and smell changes into a relic, a memory of experiences in time passed by. Hence, events such as festivals, rites, epics, poems and images, transform into, so called, memory islands or as suggested by Trim "traditions" (p.12). He argues "This kind of memory is, at its heart, how culture or community 'lives with or against its past'." (Ibid.)

With passing time, nostalgic sentiments prompted by the ongoing search for meaning and relevance, spark off into action the three elements of social identity. However, in view of the existing cultural distancing, the *cognitive*, *evaluative* and *affective* elements, which play an active role in the ongoing process of identity formation, tend to assume a retrospective function. Here, the *affective* element of the social identity, namely the feelings of emotional attachment to the group (Guijarro, p.93) is driven by the emotion of nostalgic attachment to the past, rather than elements of creativity towards the future. In that sense, the links with the past heritage are viewed from the retrospective angle of recreating the past. Smeets (2004, 44,45) recognized the growing challenge of cultural distancing by pointing out, "Elements of intangible cultural heritage are disappearing, or deteriorating at an increasing pace". At the same time, he sees the link with the past as "heritage that is constantly recreated by communities and groups."

In contrast to the notion of recreation of the past, this study suggests that the *horizontally directional dimension of life's experience* ties closely with the *vertical dimension of life experience*. In this context, to recreate the heritage means much more than to replay the past. It means to recapture the elements within the past processes of identity formation applicable to the ongoing process of the journey.

4 RETROSPECTIVE REFLECTIONS – CONTINUITY OF THE JOURNEY

This raises a question regarding the role intangible heritage plays in the ongoing formation of contextualized social and personal identity. What elements from the past continue to exert a formative influence on one's self-understanding in the contemporary culture? To answer this question, this study modifies Stobbelaar and Pedroli's concept of existential and spatial identity (p.323). They suggest that, beside the existential identity, another vital component of the landscape is the so called, "spatial identity"(Ibid.). It is a space "where people ascribe identity to their environment." Naturally, the characteristics of this space are much broader than "the visual aspects of the landscape." They suggest it includes elements such as, orientation, distances, ordination, colours, processes and even sounds and smell. Based on Paassi (2002) and Ingold's (2002) research, this specific dimension gives individuals the ability to describe the landscape from outside. In other words, the spatial dimension enables individuals to step out off the immediate surroundings and view life's journey from an enlarged perspective. It must be acknowledged that the "Landscape Identity Circle" quadrant adds to the understanding of the wide spectrum of influences impacting the formation of identity social and personal identity (Stobelaar & Pedrolli, p. 325). However, it fails to resolve the question addressed in this paper.

For this purpose, this study expands the proposed model combining it with the functions of cognitive, evaluative and affective elements of social identity in the context of reflexivity (Diagram 2). In the proposed model, the names, existential and spatial identity used in Stobbelaar and Pedroli's "The Landscape Identity Circle" quadrant are changed to "horizontal" and "vertical" dimensions of life's experience. The resulting two-dimensional view highlights the issues created by the cultural distancing. It also provides a framework for the role intangible heritage plays in the formation of social and personal identity.

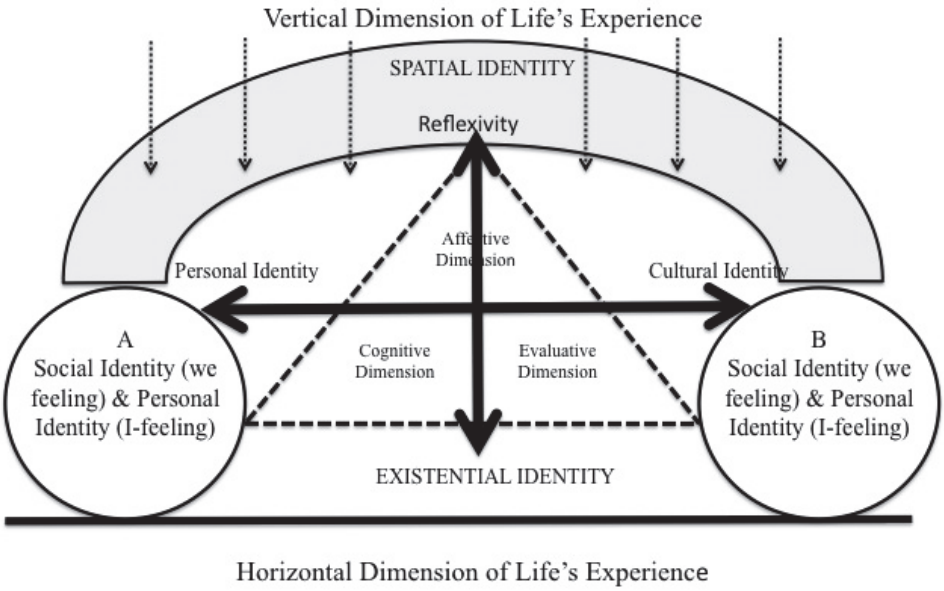

Diagram 2

Firstly, the spatial and vertical dimension of life's experience provides the opportunity to evaluate the connections between the two points of specific cultural uniqueness (A & B) from a wider perspective. Secondly, as already stated, in each segment (A & B) the cognitive, evaluative and affective dimension shape the specific boundaries of identity. Guijaro defines the cognitive aspects as "a dimension, by which an individual knows s/he is a member of the group"; evaluative dimension, "which is perceived by comparison with other groups in which differences are emphasized"; and affective dimension, "which involves emotional attachment to the group" (p.93). In the framework of the existential identity, represented by the black arrow along the horizontal axis, one discovers the emerging challenge of cultural distancing. The pressures exerted by a variety of circumstances drive identity to an ongoing process of modification, renewal and adjustments.

In segment, A, personal identity develops within the construct of everyday communicative memory. On the other hand, in segment B the process of identity formation faces the challenge resulting from the interactive tension between the collective or cultural memory and the need for contextualized relevance. The cultural memory is identified as "the product of a collective experience" immersed in "the body of re-usable texts, images, rituals specific to each society in each epoch (Asmann, 1995, 132). Quoting Pierre Nora, Trim refers to it as a dynamic force "opened to evolution, open to dialectic of remembering and forgetting…vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being a long dormant and periodically revived" (Trim, p,12). It is obvious that, with passing time, the images of the past are "characterized by its distance from everyday life" (Assmann, 129). At this point, it needs to be noted that the movements along the horizontal axis provide only two options, namely a movement forward or reversal to the past. In this respect, movements, along the named axis either disconnect contemporary life from its roots or drive the sentiments toward a nostalgic attachment to the past rather than creativity that enhances a process of continual relevance for the present and creativity towards the future.

The existential-spatial axis, represented by the black arrow along the vertical axis, named in this paper as the vertical dimension of life's experience, provides a broader and deeper perspec-

tive of the horizontal dimension. Firstly, placed in the framework of the vertical dimension, the three characteristics of social identity (cognitive, evaluative and affective) are placed in, what Graham and Howard (p.5) calls, 'senses of time'. It may be referred to as a space of awareness that identity is not "secured by a lifelong guarantee" (Ibid.). This awareness safeguards it from "the temporal orientation" or understanding "that a group oriented towards the past will tend to identify itself or will compare itself with other groups in the past" (Guijarro, 93). Further, the temporal orientation includes the element of reflexivity. Assmann (p.130) connects the role of reflexivity in cultural memory with "the mode of potentiality" where images of the past generate a "total horizon" and the "mode of actuality" where "each contemporary context puts the objectivized meaning into it's own perspective, giving it its own relevance". As well as, it includes the ability "to explain, distinguish, reinterpret, criticize, censure, control, surpass and receive hypoleptically" (Assman, p.132).

Secondly, in contrast, the proposed vertical dimension links the affective dimension of social identity with the reflexivity. This paper argues that, in the proximity of the affective dimension, reflexivity moves beyond the function of comparative analysis along the existential axis. Rather, the interactive function between the two components shapes the uniqueness of both social and personal identity on the vertical dimension of life's experience. As already shown, the intangible heritage transmits much more than static informative images from the past. The narratives, stories rites and images transmit emotions of the life once lived in all its fullness and the passion associated with the universal search for meaning and purpose. In this context reflexivity expends its function for it moves beyond the mundane interests connected with life's journey. In this respect, Halas (2010, p.313) expands Assmann's view of reflexivity beyond the existential dimension. She argues,

> "In the cultural perspective proposed here, memory is a temporal dimension of communicated meaning. In other words, memory consists in communicative acts transmitting reflexive knowledge about the past from the perspective of a future present. Thus, a further importance lies in the fact that this proposal no longer regards memory as turned exclusively towards the past"

Quoting Mead, Halas proceeds to make a compelling point. "Memory cannot be reduced only to set of ideas about the past, because it is linked with action and thus with an orientation towards the future." In her understanding, such reflexivity is not merely recollection of past events. Rather, it is a memory that determines the transmission of meanings which will be formative for the future and in the process it enables reflexivity (Ibid.p. 314).

In this context, the previously named characteristics of spatial identity such as orientation, direction, purpose and knowledge concerning the nature and the universe, embrace the human longing to understand the meaning and purpose of life and to have a point of references regarding its origins. Holtorf (2010, p.46) argues that in that sense "heritage functions less as a source of information about the past and more as a therapy for people uncertain about who they are". The colours, smell and sound engraved in the unique spaces of cultural memory unfold the aesthetic depth of human self-understanding highlighting qualities such as personal uniqueness, giftedness and value. In other words, the elements that touch human emotions are not just the events of the past. From the height of the vertical dimension, the intangible heritage transmits the universal component of human passion to discover its value, uniqueness, individuality and a sense of purpose in life's journey. Quoting Damasio, Costa (2011) observes correctly, "the decisive step is making those images ours…" Such decisive steps connect with the past and at the same time shape the uniqueness of the social and personal identity in the contemporary world.

5 CONCLUSION

In the framework, of the vertical dimension of life's experience, intangible heritage provides inspiration and drive. This impetus, directs the formation of the contemporary identity, to discover meaning and purpose. Its inspirational value empowers the existential experience but, it also leans towards future orientation. Considering the meaning of the affective dimension of memory, Halas observes (p.314). "Reflexive knowledge, is associated with emotions relating to mean-

ings and values originating in the past (the present past) and significant for the future." Further, "it becomes a basis for social relations and ties connecting individuals or groups and determines their future actions" (Ibid.). In other words, the vertical dimension provides an ongoing motion of contextual relevance (represented by dotted arrows) along the horizontal dimension. Here, the social and personal identity is not only immersed in the framework of established traditions determined by cognitive and evaluative analysis. Rather, as suggested by Wilson (2010, 35) it stems from the "mycelial qualities of human phenomenological perception mediated through inter-personal relations". In this framework, the roots of intangible heritage provide a fresh space for new negotiations, mediation, motivation and nurture. In other words, it provides visionary inspiration and motivational drive. Here, the intangible heritage spreads its inspirational flowers of past hope, dreams, desires and beliefs and gives birth to a new and revived sense of identity in the contemporary world. Such identity thrives with passion and vision as long as individuals take the time and effort to nurture, revive and recreate the memory of the living heritage.

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