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A search for new meaning: virtual landscapes, identity and the cross-cultural nature of intangible heritage

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the role virtual landscapes play in the formation of the cross-cultural quality of the intangible heritage. Research suggests that the highly poignant global blending of cultures generates a field of new forms of expressions and gives birth to new contrasting cultural identities. The variety of cultural backgrounds immersed in the framework of globalized varieties reflects the “multiple dimensions that compose it” (Salzman & Matathia, 2006, 134). Besides, the avalanche of technological advancements and the age of digitized communication transitions cultural expressions away from the accepted forms of the new unexplored landscapes. It also argues that the virtual spaces provide a safe-haven environment conducive to the development of personal and cultural identity and formation of communities that create a sense of belonging. Further, it asserts that the vibrant processes of virtual acculturation blend with the reality of human experience to produce novel virtual forms of cultural expressions. In this context, it argues that the inherent dualism and dichotomy between the virtual and real life intensifies a sense of prospective creativity, oriented towards the future-oriented shape of cultural identity and its ongoing meaning for life.

1 UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF LANDSCAPES

Landscapes, defined as remembered fields of familiar places or memories representing records of names and stories of personal and collective experiences, play a significant role as a nexus for the formation of cultural identity. More noteworthy are the functional characteristics of the named landscapes in bridging the past and the present. In the scope of the linear perspective of time, the associated geographical spaces and the commonality of shared experiences, coined with the collective memories, draw into focus the processes involved in the formation of cultural traditions, identities and aspirations (Robertson, 2009, 153). As argued by Robertson, the named elements “influence how we create and give meaning to our environment” (Ibid.). Harrington (2004) argues for a broader view of cultural heritage. “Cultural heritage can be broadly considered to include intangible aspects of our lives.” Such view “encompasses the general values and worldviews of a community” and it “enshrines a community’s character and identity”. In turn, the interactive nature of the ‘living heritage’ inspires the formation of cultural meanings expressed in a variety of tangible and intangible forms. The emerged vestiges of creative skills epitomize deeper and complex networks of collective memories enmeshed in the fabrics of social structures. The frameworks of the named landscapes construct the shape of cultural identity and consolidate the nature of what Robertson refers to as the “spirit of the place” (Ibid., 154).

This paper defines the named “spirit of the place” as a crucible for creative expressions evolving from human search for meaning and significance. Further, it needs to be emphasized that the named space provides an environment of stability and safety for the progressive development of cultural self-identification that moves beyond the scope determined by geographical

or sociological boundaries. Engulfed by the continual collaborative interaction between the ‘outer spaces’ of the real world and the ‘inner space’ of the human soul, searching for adjustment, meaning and significance, the “spirit of the place” also finds its locum in the creative realm of human psyche (Fig. 1). In this context, Robertson questions whether the relationship between a “sense of the place” is intrinsic to identity rather than buildings or monuments” or, as it may be suggested, any form of creative expressions.

Geographically Located Cultural Landscapes

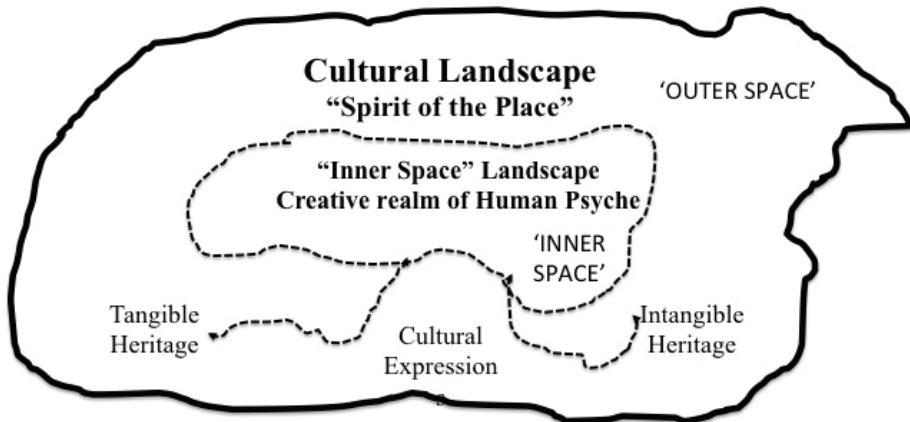


Figure 1. Geographically located cultural landscapes (Cultural Landscapes).

Firstly, the geographically located nature of the cultural landscapes, provide a retrospectively evaluative link between the past and the present. However, the process is not static but continually evolving. The remembered fields encompass, names, stories, shared and collective memories, cultural traditions and cultural meanings. Here, the formation of identity is immersed in the melting pot of interactive integration and adaptation to the “spirit of the place”. It is continually evolving. This paper concurs with Harrington’s view that “through meanings, associations, values and ways of life, people individually and collectively create a meaningful relationship with a place.” Ballasteroz and Ramirez (2006, 677) argue that the resulting “strong collective identities linked to life spaces or imagined spaces give rise to solid sense of communities.” In such cultural spaces identities “go beyond mere descriptions and representations of society.” Rather, they act as “catalysts for social actions”.

Secondly, the continual processes of collaborative interplay between the cultural landscape or, as defined by Harrington a “place of making” coined with the creative realm of human psyche, provides an inspirational springboard for cultural expression evidenced both in tangible and intangible types. Further, the entirety of the “spirit of the place” defined in this paper as ‘the outer’ and ‘the inner’ spaces, offers an evaluative link between the past and the present. As well as, the retrospective nature of all the named components verify whether attachment to the spirit of the place, expressed in the folklore of the heritage is inherent to its identity. In that sense, the place of cultural belonging becomes a catalyst not only for social actions but a catalyst for creative expression of cultural self-understanding.

This study recognizes a closely-knit tie between cultural landscapes and its spaces. However, it suggests that the character of the later moves beyond normative functions and assumes a vital formative and creative role in shaping the specifics characteristics of the regional heritage. It also argues that the linear and geographically positioned landscapes fail to provide an adequate,

prospectively focused framework for the complex character of the new emerging cross cultural and virtual landscapes. This argument reverberates Henriquez' (2006, 288) question regarding the "preservation of cultural identity." He argues whether it means a return to cultural roots of one's origin, or, alternatively "Seek feedback from the origins in order to redefine identity in the globalized present and future conditions?" It is evident that the expressed tension impacts the shape of a future-oriented cultural identity and the nature of ensuing forms of tangible and intangible heritage.

2 THE CHANGING NATURE OF LANDSCAPES

The ongoing process of globalization, movement of migrants and in the recent years the availed influx of refugees generates a highly poignant global blending of cultures. In consequence, it changes the cultural nature of geographical landscapes. Henriquez (Ibid., 286) sees the impact in term of positive and negative elements. His view of the positives relates to "mutual exchange of knowledge between cultures to share solutions to common problems." Among the negative elements he refers to the danger of "the cultural imposition of patterns on the part of the most powerful" where "traditional cultural values, natural capital, and resources are considered as merchandise." Naturally, the geographical and ideological misplacements distort the nature of local cultural identity. More significant is the impact exerted on the character of the landscapes. The geographically localized "spirit of the place" provides a stable environment for a distinctive character of cultural identity. Further, it develops relevant to its time and place inspiration for cultural expressions. The globalized landscapes diversify into unstable and insecure fields of cultural cohabitation. Tomlinson (1999) defines it in terms of "the loss of the natural relation of culture to geographical and social territories." Hence, the changing nature of the new landscapes invades the "spirit of the place" with the continually changing character of instability and insecurity.

The ensuing polarization between the local and global contours of the landscapes impacts the relationship between the previously outlined 'outer spaces' and the 'inner spaces' of the "spirit of the place. At the same time, the cohesive interaction between the outer and inner spaces provides a "comforting sense of cultural homogeneity" (Day, 2011, 49). He defines identity as "performative" where "believing and belonging to a particular culture is, nevertheless, actively demonstrated...by certain social truth or facts." Citing Butler (1993, 225) he refers to the close association between "already held beliefs" and the need to accommodate them to "particular circumstances" in terms of "binding power." As argued previously, the named qualities provide an inspirational springboard for cultural expressions evolving from the creative-ingenuity of human mind.

Research suggests that the highly poignant global blending of cultures generates a field of 'new forms of expressions' and gives birth to new contrasting cultural identities. The variety of cultural backgrounds immersed in the framework of globalized varieties reflects the "multiple dimensions that compose it" (Salzman & Matathia, 134). This paper asserts that the detachment from the cultural origins and the familiarity with the "spirit of the place" transitions the formation of cultural identities into the arms the changing world of technological advancement and the realm of new unexplored landscapes defined as *virtual landscapes*.

3 UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF VIRTUAL LANDSCAPES

The preceding discussion traced the holistic cohesiveness of the geographically situated cultural landscape. It also outlined the closely knitted relationship between the "spirit of the place and the 'inner space' defined as the creative realm of the human psyche. It suggested that the continual processes of collaborative interplay between the cultural landscape, or, as defined by Harrington a "place of making" coined with the creative realm of the human mind provides an inspirational springboard for cultural expression evidenced both in tangible and intangible forms. At the same time, the new landscapes, generated by the evolving global influence of the cross-cultural and technological changes, call into the discussion its impact on the cultural identity of the landscapes, especially its influence on the inner 'space'.

Similarly to the described cultural landscapes, both the virtual and cross-cultural landscapes connect with communities. However, according to Wenjing (2004, 397) “deterritorialization” demands “reconceptualization” of a community and even cultural identity. She defines the communities functioning outside the conventional boundaries or geographical territories as imagined communities and argues, “Communities can be imagined around shared cultural practices beyond a historical and geographical characterization.” As illustrated in Figure 2, both entities become an extended part of the natural flow of life detached from its cultural roots either by attraction to common interests or forces leading to geographical displacement. In both cases, the new environment activates processes of acculturation and adjustment to new conditions.

Geographically Located Cultural Landscapes

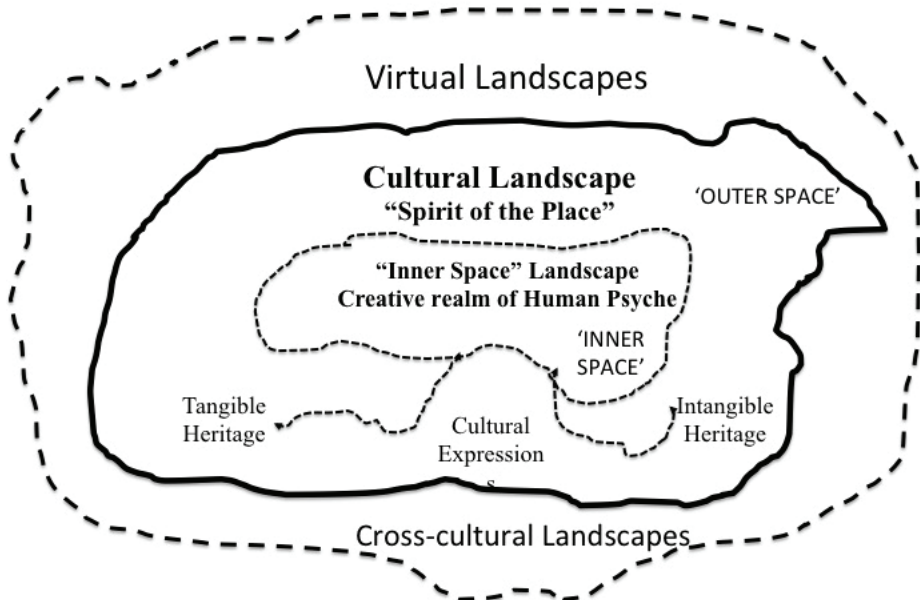


Figure 2. Geographically located cultural landscapes (Virtual Landscapes).

As suggested previously, the new territories provide opportunities for the formation of new identities and hence open fields for the emergence of new cultural expression or re-interpretation of the original cultural expression in a new setting. The new settings alter the “spirit of the place” from a homogenous cultural realm to a highly diversified landscape of cultural diversity. Citing Gladwell (2005) Salzman and Matathia (Ibid., 134) propose that “blending of cultures,” create “significant opportunities for new forms of expressions.” However, Gladwell identifies another significant characteristic, namely “multiplication of identities” and “constructions of new ones.” Hence, the consequential maze of alternative points of reference generates an ongoing search for meaning and cultural self-identification in a dramatically changing world (Fig. 3). The pace of the change engulfs human life both in a geographically located cross-cultural setting and techno-oriented space at the same time the “binding power” of common interests generates both creativity and stability.

This study suggests that the virtual space provides alternative safe-haven landscapes detached from the challenges of everyday life. They can be imaginary in the sense of surreal reality generated by the human mind or imaginary, as suggested by Western, (2001) in a sense spatial reality in cyberspace. As argued by Western “fringe cultures find sanctuary in cyberspace where those with a common interest can communicate easily with each other”. The named fringe cul-

tures may include people in the diaspora experiencing isolation and lack of cultural acceptance. Davies (2011, 68) refers to such phenomena as a state “identity depletion”. He defines it as “life circumstances where a sense of meaninglessness and hopelessness pervades a person’s life or even the life of a community”. But it may also include people with special interests, avoiding hostility, embarrassment, outright alienation or loneliness. Hence, the virtual space provides an escape mechanism for dislocated detachment from the cultural “spirit of the place”. At the same time it generates a network of interconnectivity with other think-alike minds.

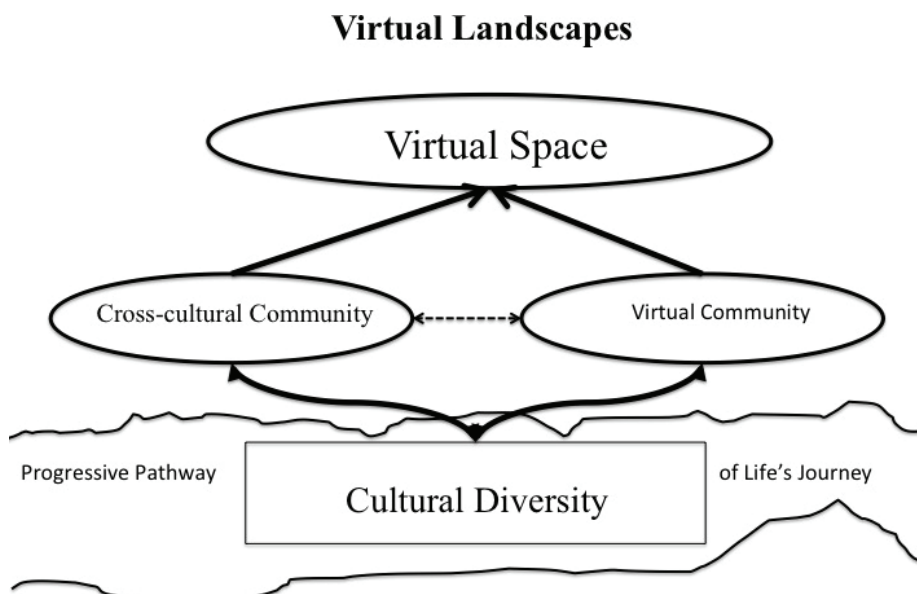


Figure 3. Virtual landscapes.

According to Wenjing (397) such virtually positioned communities “free of place and space can be used to reproduce communities that do not need geographic closeness.” As asserted by Rheingold (1993) they build on certain needs and goals. If carried over a prolonged period of time and with enough emotions, they form “real human relationships with cyberspace.” In consequence, the formed communities generate a multiplicity of virtual landscapes each identified by the specific spirit of a place.

4 THE INNER SPACE OF VIRTUAL LANDSCAPES AND CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

Given the diversified and complex maze of contemporary life, the virtual landscapes provide an alternative escape route to connect with the same-minded people. In this context and in the ongoing search for meaning, significance and acceptance, individuals rediscover a sense of belonging. Harrington asserts that such a belonging “arises through the mutual construction of a community and places reinforced through social practices, memories and local narratives.” At this point the question demanding consideration relates to the role virtual landscapes play in the formation of cross-culturally oriented heritage?

Firstly, the virtual spaces provide an opening ground for acculturation and formation of social and cultural identity (Bhatia and Ram, 2001). In this space, the dynamics of cultural adjustment relates not only to migrating communities (Pope-Davis, Liu, Ledesma-Jones, & Nevitt, 2000; Saxton, 2001) but it also occurs in the framework of tuning to new ideological, social and personal interest. In the pursuit of new points of reference the human mind engages in an interac-

tive identification with the new space and search for meaning and significance becomes catalysts for creative expressions. The described activity proceeds from the dynamic interaction “when individuals of different cultures come in contact” (Schwartz, Montgomery, Briones, 2006, 2). In this sense, the virtual landscape and more specifically the virtual space offers an ideal environment for a creative formation of both social and personal identity in a new context. The state of the formative flux injects into its space elements of spontaneous creativity towards cross-culturally oriented forms of expressions.

Secondly, more interesting is the technological contribution of the emerging variety of social networks. Savoie (2010) points out that the technological innovations impact the quality of life by “delineating a new role for the private individual within public life.” He specifically refers to the dual role individuals experience by almost simultaneously changing the seat from the reader to the author. The almost immediate response to the ideological ideas or socially oriented conversations provides opportunity to express one’s opinion in a free non-threatening environment. At the same time, it provides a framework for the formation of a new cross-culturally oriented community. In one sense distant, but in another sense relatively close and intimate. The dynamics of the interactive dialogues immerse individuals in the collective impassive textures of inter-related collective memories and a diversity of thoughts and ideas. The same space offers opportunity for a creative discovery of one’s personal space and the choice of selective association with other voices opens a ground of nurture and development. At the same time, Savoie argues that “at a certain point the texture of individual voice is lost in the chorus or the chorus is reduced to cacophony” (Ibid, 3).

Wenjing (2005) demonstrates the creative role the virtual space played in the cultural adjustment of Chinese students in the diaspora and its contribution to the formation of cultural identity. The selected modes of Internet connection with Chinese virtual communities connected the students with the homeland. Through networking, they developed connections with Chinese friends and to further the level of communication they set up social network groups with specific interest. One of the students exclaimed. “I have many American classmates, but I do not think we can be called friends because we have great cultural differences” (Ibid, 400). The virtual space provided a home away from home and the social networking created a base for the development of personal identity (traditional) and a healthy climate for cultural adjustment (translation) (Robbins, 1991).

The cultural diversity of the virtual landscapes combined with the specificity of the selective virtual spaces based on common points of interest play a significant role in the formation of a cross-cultural quality of the heritage. The creative components of the landscapes may not end up with products of cultural heritage as have been known in the past and as are preserved today. As stated, the technological advancements and the age of digitized communication transitions cultural expressions into new unexplored landscapes. In the realm of the unexplored fields, the amassed plethora of diversified collective memories will continue to provide innovative interactions and a place of escape from the complexities of life to a surreal reality.

Finally, the creative outcome of the explorations into the virtual landscapes and the product of mediated memories will continue to offer a base for the development of personal identity with empowerment to survive the complexities of the changing world. Van dijck (2010, 273) asserts correctly that in the virtual space, the lived experience and mediated memories “incorporate parts of culture into lives”. The reflective components of the mediated memories will act as an antidote for the inherent dualism between the virtual and real life but at the same time the existing tension, coined with reflexivity, will continue to create a cultural sense of belonging. Even though the virtual space provides anonymity studies show its positive influence on community building in the real space. “Many communities can be made stronger and deeper by encouraging people to meet each other in real life” (Western, 2). Such an environment of cultural heritage arises “through the mutual construction of a community and place,” not only in a geographical space, but also in the spaces of virtual safe-haven. The named places will be reinforced through social practices, memories and local narratives relevant and contextualized to the time and place (Harrington). In the light of the progress of technological advancement, the dynamic process of acculturation and contextualization intensifies a sense prospective creativity steaming forward towards a future-oriented shape of cultural identity, always ready to embrace new innovative ways to respond the challenge of the ongoing search for meaning and relevance.

5 CONCLUSION

The paper examined the role virtual landscapes play in the formation of the cross-cultural quality of the heritage. Firstly it surveyed the nature of the cultural landscapes outlining the elements that contribute to the development of the “spirit of the place” and its impact on cultural identity. It argued that an interaction between ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ space of the landscapes inspire the formation of cultural expressions. Further, due to the changing landscapes generated by global blending of cultures and advancements in technology, it demonstrated the link between the cultural and virtual landscapes. It became evident that in both realms the inner spaces, identified as the creative realm of human psyche provides an inspirational springboard for cultural expression generated by an alternative virtual “spirit of the place”. The territories raise opportunities for the formation of new identities, new cultural expressions through interconnectivity with other think-alike minds. Finally, by exploring the ‘inner space’ of the virtual landscapes, the paper outlined the role virtual landscapes play in the formation of cross-culturally oriented heritage. It evidenced that the formation of the cultural environment in the named space construct a safe-haven for the challenging complexities of the contemporary life. In such place of anonymity, the reflective components of mediated memories create a cultural sense of belonging and a place for spontaneous creative expression. The study shows that both the tangible and intangible expressions of cultural heritage are by-products of the ‘spirit of the place’ an expression of the creative realm of the human mind. The role of the virtual landscape in the formation of such products is to nurture the prospective creativity of the human mind.

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