

Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Diversity of Traditional Medicine

Eivind Falk

Norwegian Crafts Institute and #HeritageAlive

Intangible cultural heritage can be defined as living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants. This includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge, and traditional craft. Traditional medicine is related to all of these areas. While the 2003 Convention nomenclature includes *healing practices* and *healing knowledge* rather than *traditional medicine*, for the purposes of this publication, we have opted to use *traditional medicine* as an umbrella term to encompass not only healing practices and knowledge but also the associated rituals, products, and experiences of practitioners. Traditional medicine can easily be understood as practices concerning nature and the universe, but as the reader will explore in the following chapters, it also embraces traditional crafts, social practices, oral traditions and performing arts. For example, Emanuela Esposito and Vincenzo Capuano explain in their article how music can be used both as medical therapy and for our well-being.

In 2012, during the meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee of the UNESCO 2003 Convention in Baku, Azerbaijan, the NGO Forum¹ decided to establish an online journal with the title #HeritageAlive. The journal sought to share NGOs experiences regarding safeguarding practices, both good and bad, within the area of intangible cultural heritage. The concept was to share knowledge from fieldwork in communities and with practitioners, between the UNESCO accredited NGOs and experts, in order to learn from each other. An editorial board was formed, with members from all over the world, and I was elected as the first Editor-in-Chief. The online journal has published articles on a variety of different themes related to intangible cultural heritage and safeguarding, such

A part of the Editorial Board #HeritageAlive met in Windhoek, 2015. At this meeting, we looked into the field of traditional medicine in particular.

L to R: Albert van der Zeiden, Jean Roche, Ananya Bhattacharya, Eivind Falk (editor-in-chief), Ki Leonce, Shelley Ochs, and Chang Liu.



as articles on traditional crafts, festivals and naming practices. Whilst interest in the journal was relatively steady, interest peaked after a call for papers was made in relation to traditional medicine. As a result of the overwhelming response, we decided to publish an edition of #Heritage Alive, dedicated to traditional medicine.

At the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage meeting in Addis Ababa in 2016, we met with a delegation from the UNESCO Category 2 Center, the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHCAP), and we started to discuss the possibility of publishing a book together. As ICHCAP is well known for the high standards and quality of its publications, for #HeritageAlive it was undoubtedly the best partner we could find. Mr. Weonmo Park, from ICHCAP and his team have generously contributed to make this publication possible by sharing their resources. Hopefully, this book will be a model for fruitful cooperation between the ICH NGO Forum and UNESCOs Category 2 Centers in the future. When we decided to move forward with a publication dedicated to traditional medicine, we expected about ten contributions. Such was the interest in the topic that we received eighteen wonderful articles that illustrate the diversity of traditional medicine around the world. I would like to thank the #Heritage Alive board, which has worked hard preparing the articles for this publication. And thanks go to Albert van der Zeijden, who has been responsible for bringing all the pictures onboard, and to Séverine Cachat, Camille Golan and Nolwenn Blanchard, who translated the summaries. In addition to the board, I have to mention my British colleague Dr. Mandy Nelson whose sharp eyes have been extremely useful in the process.

In the spirit of the Convention of the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, we are not trying to make a comparison between traditional medicine and modern medicine. The concept behind the book is to give the readers a taste of the rich diversity that can be found in traditional medicine practices and the experiences from a number of different perspectives, places and cultures. All the authors acknowledge that for well-being and treatment of illness, traditional medicine has an important complimentary role alongside modern medicine. For example, in his article, John De Coninck shows how traditional health practitioners and the government are working together in Uganda, where more than 60% of the population relies on traditional medicine.

It is hoped that this publication will contribute to the valuable sharing of experiences regarding the safeguarding of traditional practices, and the wider recognition of the role of traditional medicine in different contexts and cultures.

Some of the articles are written by the knowledge bearers and practitioners themselves, such as the articles provided by Jean Roche from France and Richenel Ansano from Curacao. The two authors' unique background as healers as well as researchers, gives us valuable reflections and deeper insights from the perspective of the practitioners.

The role of the community within traditional medicine emerges as a central feature. In her article, Nihal Kadioğlu Çevik highlights the *puerperal* period in Turkish traditional medicine, informed by insights from her own research. *Puerpera* is the woman in the first 40 days after giving birth, and the article shows how the community takes responsibility for the new mothers' well-being, for example, by providing her

with nutritious food. This practice has been evident for many generations and is firmly embedded within social traditions.

The safeguarding aspect was highlighted by the majority of the authors in relation to the preservation of knowledge of the practice of traditional medicine. It is evident that traditional medicine practices face challenges caused by cultural, social, economic and environmental changes. A variety of concerns exist in relation to the safeguarding of traditional medicine, in particular migration, when the younger generation moves from rural communities to towns and cities. An increase in urbanization / rural-urban could potentially make it challenging to transfer the knowledge and practice on to future generations as it traditional has been done.

Another concern raised by the authors relates to the availability of many of the vulnerable medical plants and herbs, and the on-going concerns in respect to species loss. Dr. Saifur Rashid writes in his article:

Many of the kavirajes [practitioners of traditional medicine] now face difficulties in finding the plants that they and their forefathers used to collect from the forest for making some medicines. They complain that many of these plants are either now extinct or endangered.

Hopefully, this publication can raise awareness of the ecological challenges faced and promote a more sustainable approach to managing our common natural resources. Changes in agricultural methods and loss of species crucial for traditional medicine present serious threats to traditions and practices.

Ahmed Skountis article illustrates how traditional medicine relates to the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, and in particular how it fits with the fourth domain—namely, ‘knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe’.

Intangible cultural heritage has no borders, and examples of traditional medicine practices can be found all over the world in many different geographical areas and cultures, and in many different forms. My own interest in traditional medicine arises from an experience I had many years ago when I was healed in Kautokeino, Finnmark county, by an old Sami lady. To put this in context. I am, at least according to my own standards, a quite rational man, and do not believe in either ghosts or UFOs. Actually, I find most magicians and illusionists quite boring. However, my experience revealed to me the power of traditional medicine. Let me explain—

In Kautokeino, the Sami-people³ have established a wonderful centre for traditional Sami crafts for teaching, training and research: The Duodjiinsthitutta. I was invited to the centre to learn more about traditional Sami crafts and the Sami community. I considered this invitation to be a huge honour.

The Sami people are often cautious about sharing their traditional knowledge of nature and the universe with outsiders such as myself. In part, this is because the Norwegian majority have been suppressed the Sami culture for hundreds of years by preventing their use of cultural expressions such as their own language, songs and clothing. Therefore, it is quite understandable that there is some distrust of outsiders by the Sami people. The dark past is still an open wound for many people.

At the centre, Duodjiinsthitutta, I was introduced to a series of possible workshops that I could attend. The workshops focused on working with traditional Sami materials, such as bone, horn, wood, textile and

seal skin. I chose the seal skin workshop, as this was a material that I had never used before, and I decided to make a case for my glasses. The skin was thick, and the needle had a sharpened edge to penetrate the tough sealskin. I was untrained, a novice, in this trade and after a while I cut my thumb. Actually, I did not simply 'cut' my thumb, but I cut off a small piece of flesh, and it started bleeding.

As a woodworker, I am used to getting cuts from a knife and other tools, and a little bleeding was not a big deal for me, but I really wanted to make it stop in order to continue my work with the sealskin case for my glasses. Again and again I tried to stop the bleeding using a plaster, tape and napkins. It stopped for a while, but as soon as I started to work, it started to bleed again. I was starting to get grumpy, because I really wanted to finish my wonderful little piece of craft work.

Then something happened. Behind the curtains, an old Sami woman was hiding. She was dressed in her traditional clothing, and from her hiding place, she had observed my problem for a while. She came over to me, grabbed my needle and asked me if this was the one with which I had cut myself. She nodded and grabbed my thumb with her other hand. She moved the flat side of the needle back and forth over the wound as she quietly recited a magic rhythmic saying. The bleeding stopped immediately.

The woman adjusted her glasses and inspected my thumb and the wound. She turned to me and said, "You have a strange colour in your blood." "It's not my blood", I replied, "It's the flesh. I actually cut off a small piece". The old Sami woman nodded. "OK", she said, and with that grabbed the needle and started to slide it back and forth over wound in the same way as before, adding her almost whispering magical rhyme.

Leader of the Sami craft center, Inga Hermansen Hætta, teaches Eivind Falk how to work with sealskin



When I looked the bleeding had stopped. I thanked her for healing my thumb, and she disappeared quietly. It was wonderful to get back to my work, and I continued my struggle with the seal skin. Thanks to the old Sami lady I was able to finish my work.

Later on, the same night, I was in the hotel, having a beer with colleagues. I told them the story about how the old Sami woman had healed my thumb in such a wonderful way. They asked me if they could have closer look at it, and I showed them my thumb. To my surprise, there was no longer any mark, scar or sign of what had happened. My thumb was completely healed, and as good as new. I really don't know if they believed in my story, but to me it made a huge impression.

A year later, I was again invited by the Sami community and the Duodjiinsthutta in Kautokeino for a celebration at the crafts centre. There I met the old Sami lady again, and we started to talk. I asked her if she remembered that she had healed my thumb and I told her the story as I remembered it. "Well that might have happened", she responded.

We sat down together, and she told me that the knowledge of healing was necessary for her to survive on the Finnmark plateau, alone with the reindeer. It was not just a matter of stopping blood, but dealing with all kinds of challenges that might occur for humans and for reindeer in such an isolated and wilderness environment. Her husband had passed away some years ago, and she told me that he was really a master in healing as he also had a magic breath that he could use.

I asked her if she had transferred her skills to the new generation, and she said no. Her children were not interested. I asked her if she could teach me how to stop bleeding. She smiled and said she could, but it would not be as easy as I might think. She explained that there were many complexities about nature that I would have to understand before I was able to absorb the knowledge of the healing art. She suggested that it would take me at least a year dedicated to this, and that I would have to live with her, in her tent on the Finnmark plateau, herding her reindeer in order to slowly understand and acquire the knowledge.

To me, what she really answered was that the issue was not just about learning how stop bleeding as an isolated phenomenon. This particular knowledge was interwoven with the complex cultural context and heritage of which the old Sami lady was a part. The knowledge that has been passed on and refined over generations is a part of a whole and integrated system, and cannot be presented in pieces at a weekend class, or something that can be learned as a quick fix. As a part of a modern "pick'n mix" culture it is easy to underestimate the complexity in the contexts of traditional practical knowledge, as we see the many aspects as isolated phenomena or elements. The old Sami lady's generous answer pointed this out in a very pedagogical way and has been a reminder in my approach to fieldwork. In the field of intangible cultural heritage we often speak of the risk of de-contextualisation. For me the old Sami lady's answer to my naive question, on one hand, illustrates that issue in a very clear way, and on the other hand, reminds us of the complexity of the practical traditional knowledge we are dealing with. Never underestimate an old Sami lady.

I wish you a wonderful journey exploring the world of traditional medicine. Bon voyage!

RÉSUMÉ

Le patrimoine culturel immatériel peut être défini comme les expressions vivantes héritées de nos ancêtres et transmises à nos descendants. Il inclut les traditions orales, les arts de la scène, les pratiques sociales, les rituels, les événements festifs, les connaissances et les pratiques concernant la nature et l'univers, les savoirs et l'artisanat traditionnels. La médecine traditionnelle est reliée à tous ces domaines qui composent le PCI. Elle peut facilement être comprise comme relevant de pratiques liées à la nature et à l'univers, mais le lecteur découvrira dans les chapitres suivants qu'elle concerne aussi l'artisanat traditionnel, les pratiques sociales, les traditions orales et les performances artistiques.

Dans l'esprit de la Convention pour la sauvegarde du PCI, nous ne tentons pas de faire une comparaison entre la médecine traditionnelle et la médecine moderne. Ce livre vise à donner un aperçu de la richesse et de la diversité des pratiques de médecine traditionnelle, au travers d'expériences issues de différentes perspectives, lieux et cultures. Tous les auteurs reconnaissent que pour être en bonne santé et traiter efficacement les maladies, la médecine traditionnelle joue un rôle complémentaire et important aux côtés de la médecine moderne.

Lors de la réunion du Comité Intergouvernemental pour la sauvegarde du PCI à Addis Ababa en 2016, nous avons rencontré une délégation d'un Centre de catégorie 2 de l'Unesco, le Centre international d'information et de mise en réseau du PCI dans la région Asie-Pacifique (ICHCAP), et avons évoqué la possibilité de publier un ouvrage ensemble. L'ICHAP étant bien connu pour la grande qualité de ses publications, il constituait indubitablement pour #HeritageAlive le meilleur partenaire possible. M. Park, directeur de l'ICHCAP, et son équipe, ont généreusement contribué à rendre cet ouvrage possible en partageant leur savoir-faire. Espérons qu'à l'avenir, celui-ci offre un modèle de coopération fructueuse entre le Forum des ONG du PCI et les Centres de catégorie 2 de l'Unesco.

Je vous souhaite une merveilleuse exploration dans le monde des médecines traditionnelles. Bon voyage!

NOTES

- 1 The ICH NGO Forum is the platform for communication, networking, exchange and cooperation for NGOs accredited by UNESCO to provide advisory services to the Intergovernmental Committee in the framework of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- 2 Members of the #Heritage Alive editorial board 2012–2017: Jean Roche, Rajiv Trivedi, Emily Drani, Ananya Bhattacharya, Albert vd Zeijden, Salih Taner Serin, Valentina Zingari, Dr. V. Jayaran, Eva Romankova, Harriet Deacon, Joseph Ogieriakhi, Fanny Houët, Ki Leonce, Gabriele Desiderio, Severin Cachat, Seraphin Bute, Robert BD Otto, Okello Quinto, Jorge Gustavo Caicedo, and Eivind Falk (Editor-in-Chief).
- 3 The Sami people are an indigenous Finno-Ugric people inhabiting the Arctic area of Sápmi, which today encompasses parts of far northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula of Russia. The Sami are the only indigenous people of Scandinavia recognized and protected under the international conventions of indigenous peoples, and are hence the northernmost indigenous people of Europe.