

## **Listening to the Past: The Role of Oral Histories and Ethnography in Safeguarding Cultural Heritage**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The research essentially focuses on the role of oral history and ethnographic methods for the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) preservation, which includes traditional knowledge, arts, rituals, faiths, and so forth. Moreover, it points to some community-based, contextual approaches for the protection of ICH, under the conditions of contemporary challenges, such as globalisation, modernisation, and cultural homogenization. By using international cases such as UNESCO's 2003 Convention and India's multi-socio-political environment, the article argues that ethnography and oral history are key tools for preserving and disseminating ICH. The oral history method sheds light on the lives of indigenous subaltern populations that otherwise remain at the margins, while critiquing dominant discourses. The method aids in the recovery of subaltern voices and the sustaining of embodied performances and local knowledge systems, but, at the same time, also triggers a conflict of interests in the area of intellectual property. Ethnography, on the contrary, gives a detailed, in-depth observation and analysis of activities, crafts, and the culture of everyday life. It includes reflexivity, the relation between the researcher and the subject, and a careful analysis of symbolic connotation and socio-linguistic structure. The study shows that oral history and ethnographic research are indispensable for heritage policy, especially in such societies that are postcolonial and multicultural, where ethical documentation is not only required but also must be highly regarded. It stresses the need to consider ICH as a living part of cultural identity by advocating digital archiving, climate resilience, and youth-driven transmission of ICH.*

**Keywords:** Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), Oral History, Ethnography, Cultural Preservation, Indigenous Knowledge.

## **I. Introduction & Background**

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) refers to practices, traditions, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as their cultural heritage. Unlike the tangible heritage that includes monuments and artefacts, ICH is not static; it is transferred from one generation to the next and continually reinterpreted due to social and environmental transformations (UNESCO, n.d.-d). Examples of ICH are traditional craftsmanship, festive practices, rituals, social practices, performing arts, and oral traditions.

### ***The Significance of Preserving Cultural Heritage***

Globalisation and modernisation pose significant threats to ICH through cultural homogenisation and the disturbance of traditional forms of transmission (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2023). Loss of traditional arts, local languages, and social rituals indicates the necessity to preserve ICH. Studies conducted on indigenous societies in Southern Africa reveal that an integrated approach is necessary for conserving music and dance traditions as well as languages. Such intervention promotes cultural identity and enables intercultural understanding (UNESCO, n.d.-c).

In contemporary society, marginalised cultural practices, which are not safeguarded or conserved, can face the problem of extinction, especially when the younger generations are distanced from their indigenous roots and knowledge because of factors like modernisation and urbanisation (UNESCO, n.d.-b). Thus, preservation approaches should go beyond archival methods and include creating reliable spaces where these traditions and practices can thrive both in the contexts of formal and informal settings (International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, 2023).

### ***The International Organisations' Role***

UNESCO plays a central role in safeguarding ICH through its 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It is implemented by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, including listing on heritage lists and technical assistance to member nations. These actions offer frameworks for international protection and recognition of multiple cultural expressions across the globe (UNESCO, n.d.-b). There are five areas of ICH identified by the convention, which are- oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices related to nature, and traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, n.d.-d). Through different listing mechanisms, UNESCO invites state parties to protect and promote these diverse marginalised living traditions. The frameworks are community-based with an intentional emphasis on the democratic character of conservation activities (UNESCO, n.d.-a). However, they are solely

feasible if there is active International cooperation and dissemination of knowledge (UNESCO, n.d.-b).

India's ingrained cultural diversity calls for context-specific action in ICH conservation. Communities are at the heart of their preservation in participatory activities. Documentation, intergenerational transmission, and community mobilisation ensure conservation in keeping with cultural values. ICH conservation discourse in India identifies the need to engage communities in formulating sustainable and meaningful conservation strategies (Chowdhury, 2014). The focus on folk practice, including Baul singing and tribal ceremonies, highlights the pluralistic imagination expressed in the Convention (Chowdhury, 2014). Institutions such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi have launched documentation programs; however, challenges remain in seeking authenticity. For instance, fairs such as the Kumbh Mela ought not to identify practitioners but also empower them (UNESCO, n.d.-b).

### ***Connection of Oral History and Ethnography with ICH Conservation***

This study views ethnography and oral history as being among the most basic methods within ICH conservation. Oral history captures first-hand data on tradition, and ethnography provides high-quality observation and analysis of actions in culture. The two procedures collectively provide overall information on the passing and growth of ICH (Bhatt, 2020; Kraus, n.d.). Ethnography, as an immersive approach, enables researchers to grasp the meaning of ICH from an emic point of view (Bhatt, 2020). It is particularly useful where heritage is inscribed into gestures, foodways, or rituals. Oral history plays a key role in recovering cultural memory among Indigenous, oppressed caste, and other marginalised groups (Repozytorium Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, n.d.; Chowdhury, 2014). Oral history and ethnography combined deepen our insight into ICH as an experienced and remembered reality (Kraus, n.d.; Gonçalves, n.d.). These approaches enable culture to breathe and expand, resisting erasure in today's world.

## **II. Discussion**

### ***Oral History as a Vehicle for Conserving ICH***

Oral history as a practice in interviewing aims to collect people's memories and narratives for the documentation of cultural heritage. Oral history interviews succeed where they synthesise formal processes like open questions, rapport creation, and showing tact towards concerns that are ethically sensitive regarding documentation. Recent research by the University of California, Santa Cruz, documents how oral history operates (University of California, Santa Cruz, n.d.).

Oral traditions are employed as primary sources of transmitting indigenous knowledge. India has diverse tribal groups that preserve their history, myth, and social culture in oral tradition.

Indigenous communities in Northeast India, for example, employ oral traditions to pass their heritage, keeping community identity intact (Chowdhury, 2014). They not only serve as narrative devices but also as independent epistemologies that offer meanings that differ from those of written or institutional narratives (UNESCO, n.d.-c). Thus, oral histories here are not mere memories; they are living expressions of resistance, continuity, and knowledge production.

Oral history lies at the core of bringing back marginal and erased histories against hegemonic historical accounts. Oral history provides a platform for subaltern classes to place their histories and their forms of expression in culture onto the record. Oral history raises the cultural durability because it imparts power to muted voices, according to a study from the University of Gdańsk (Repozytorium Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, n.d.). In India, for example, Dalit individuals have used oral testimonies as a form of resistance against Brahmanical discourse, inscribing their genealogies and social memory on the public sphere (Chowdhury, 2014). Furthermore, it has several long-lasting consequences for writing and remembering national histories.

Oral histories create communal memory through public stories. Cultural experience and private memories come together in a tie with others and the past. The study "A Life Worth Remembering" investigates how oral history sustains community identity (Gonçalves, n.d.). This process creates what scholars refer to as "communicative memory," where the political is personalised and family heritage is projected onto broader cultural landscapes (Ibid, n.d.). Such shared narratives are critical to creating group identity, particularly among diaspora or displaced peoples.

### ***Intellectual Property Issues in Oral Histories***

Intellectual property issues in oral history include ownership, permission, and commercial exploitation, where the use of oral histories is concerned. There is a requirement to negotiate the legal frameworks regulating oral histories to avoid trespass on the rights of knowledge keepers. Studies exploring the intersectionality of copyright law and oral history attest to the above challenges and recommend ethical frameworks (Duke Law & Technology Review, 2005). For example, Duke Law & Technology Review (2005) explains that interviews in oral history are typically covered under copyright law, but this coverage may be contradictory to the usual ownership culture that dominates most Indigenous contexts. Researchers are therefore advised to create participatory models of consent that are in harmony with the values of the informants and their communities.

Oral histories break down master histories through counter-narratives. In documenting lived experience, oral histories break down master histories and offer a wider perspective on cultural evolution (Chowdhury, 2014; Repozytorium Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, n.d.). They enable

memory to become archival, forcing what is conventionally regarded as legitimate history. According to Kraus (n.d.), oral histories destabilise chronology, linearity, and even authorship, opening up the field of history to multiplicity of voices and forms.

### ***Ethnography as a Tool for Documentation of ICH***

Ethnography is qualitative research that aims at in-depth observation of cultural practices. It entails prolonged residence among communities, participant observation, and close observation of social behaviour. Ethnographic study has developed from an observational study to a participatory study. This is based on co-production practice, where researchers and communities co-produce knowledge. The researcher transforms from observer to active participant, being an actual member of a dialogic relationship with the community. The process redirects authority in the ethnographic structure and facilitates the collective construction of knowledge (Bhatt, 2020). Reflexivity becomes necessary in ethnographic study because it acknowledges the researcher's role in influencing the interpretation of culture. The tension between emic (insider) and etic (outsider) continues to be at the centre of an understanding of cultural practices in real terms (Bhatt, 2020; Anthropology Encyclopedia, n.d.).

Ethnographic fieldwork is extremely useful in recording everyday rituals, festivals, and folk crafts. These elements of ICH require contextual information obtainable only through ethnographic approaches of complete immersion (UNESCO, n.d.-c; Bhatt, 2020). Participant observation enables the researcher to understand cultural subtleties. The method allows greater insight into symbolism in traditional practice (Kraus, n.d.). However, it is a field of interest where cultural sensitivity is at stake. Researchers must go through ethical dilemmas in an attempt to avoid misrepresentation and prejudice. Qualitative research ethics guidelines offer the best methods of avoiding a courteous encounter with communities. This includes the employment of context-sensitive consent processes, obtaining community agreement, and reporting results in culturally acceptable data formats (UNESCO, n.d.-a; Kraus, n.d.). Language and cultural differences are barriers to ethnographic research. Practices such as the use of community interpreters and mastery of local languages promote mutual communication between researchers and communities (Bhatt, 2020; Chowdhury, 2014).

### ***Ethnography-Oral History Intersection in Preservation of ICH***

The meeting of ethnographic practice and oral histories adds richness to ICH documentation by combining first-person testimony with contextual understanding. The intersection of disciplines in ethnography and oral histories presents an integrative vision of cultural practice (Gonçalves, n.d.; Kraus, n.d.). ICH preservation raises ethical issues of authenticity, representation, and consent. The researcher must ensure that documentation efforts resonate with the values of

communities and cultural sensitivity. The UNESCO Ethical Guidelines for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage stress that the community's right to determine and control their expression of their own culture is to be preserved through both the research and the archiving process (UNESCO, n.d.-a; Duke Law & Technology Review, 2005).

### **III. Conclusion**

The research has established ethnography and oral history as essential tools in ICH preservation. Oral history captures personal accounts that are representative of cultural memory, while ethnography provides careful records of customs. They collectively document the personal and collective nature of tradition, both taking note of the "what" of cultural practice as well as the "how" and "why" that drive it (Kraus, n.d.; Bhatt, 2020). This two-pronged approach allows for deeper immersion in lived heritage, acknowledging both its symbolic meaning as well as how it is passed down through experience.

By situating cultural knowledge in the eyes of their custodians and the settings of their performance, this research proves that qualitative approaches are not secondary to heritage research but are essential to any moral and successful conservation strategy (Chowdhury, 2014). Oral histories, especially of marginalised or indigenous communities, are crucial in challenging homogenised and hierarchical narratives of cultural history (Repozytorium Uniwersytetu Gdańskiego, n.d.). Similarly, ethnography provides a framework for how intangible practices are integrated into daily life, thereby setting traditions within spatial, bodily, and social settings (Anthropology Encyclopedia, n.d.).

In a period of fast-paced globalisation, the conservation of ICH is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity. This study emphasises the importance of adaptive safeguarding strategies that recognise traditional practice and respond to contemporary challenges. The rapid spread of dominant global cultures through electronic media and urbanisation tends to lead to cultural homogenization, as well as to erosion of linguistic and ritual diversity (UNESCO, n.d.-c).

In this paradigm, oral history is a counter-narrative that empowers marginalised communities to resist cultural erasure by confirming their presence through remembrance and narrative (Gonçalves, n.d.). Similarly, ethnography allows for close acquaintance with rituals, crafts, and symbolic performances that might not be made intelligible by archival or survey research alone (Bhatt, 2020). Therefore, the research further enriches the developing body of work arguing on behalf of the incorporation of lived experiences, embodied knowledges, and grassroots voices into heritage discourse. Further, it responds to ongoing critiques of hierarchical, museum-centric

approaches by offering a grounded, community-centred alternative that is closer to the ethical commitments outlined in qualitative research traditions (Kraus, n.d.).

### ***Policy Implications***

These findings in this study can be used to inform cultural heritage policy by giving first priority to community-based initiatives. Oral history and ethnographic research should be included in heritage conservation policies by policymakers. Contemporary institutional initiatives, such as those outlined in UNESCO's 2003 Convention, stress the importance of community engagement (UNESCO, n.d.-b). Implementation of policy, however, often does not permit meaningful cooperation at the grassroots level. There is therefore a need for more participative frameworks that recognise communities not just as passive informants but as engaged co-creators and custodians of cultural knowledge (UNESCO, n.d.-a). Policies also need to enable material and legal assistance for community-led documentation efforts, for example, in the form of local archives, oral history centres, and participatory digital portals. Heritage policy also needs to critically address the legal and ethical dimensions of intellectual property, namely in relation to oral traditions vulnerable to exploitation should they be documented without proper consent (Duke Law & Technology Review, 2005). There is a need to create frameworks that protect the rights of knowledge custodians while enabling responsible dissemination, especially within collaborative research environments.

### ***Future Research Directions***

Further studies can be undertaken on the role of digital technologies in the conservation of ICH, youth engagement in cultural transmission, and the impact of climate change on intangible heritage. Digital archives, AI transcription software, and participatory media platforms have enormous potential for democratizing access to oral histories and ethnographic resources (UNESCO, n.d.-b). Nevertheless, scholarly research also needs to explore the possible dangers of digital extraction, data colonialism, and the commercialisation of culture by non-community-governed platforms.

Participation by youth, in particular, is a neglected but vital field. Younger generations are inheritors as well as potential creators of ICH, and their engagement in the form of education, narration apps, and web-based collaboration can significantly contribute to cultural continuity (Chowdhury, 2014). The subsequent research may also explore how climate change is affecting seasonal celebrations, agricultural rituals, and landscape-based practices, areas in which ethnographic documentation is required.

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