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Ownership of the intangible cultural heritage

The recent re-theorization of heritage not only as sites and materiality but rather as a social construction and cultural practice draws attention to the process of heritage-making by applying and recognizing the social significance of objects and expressions. This transformation in the general understanding of cultural heritage implies extension to and inclusion of the 'intangible cultural heritage', which resorts on the re-conceptualization and reflexive analysis of the social dimension in defining and valorising the preservation of representations, knowledge and skills of the past.

The construction and identification of cultural heritage is always an act of politics and power, it depends on who defines cultural heritage and who has the control to conceptualize its stewardship. Cultural heritage, as a value-laden project of ideology plays on the category of time while making claims for ownership, purity, and restitution. The management of the heritization process, the employment of past repertoires and expressive practices in the construction of celebrated intangible heritage lumps together different periods, entails exclusions and renders communal cultural experience homogeneous. It also tends to overshadow the complexities of history and politics in its programme to empower local and indigenous groups or equip particular expressive forms with political resonance.

At the same time, intangible cultural heritage carries a strong potential for the acquisition of socio-political capital as well as channels for economic resources, while playing today an important role in international culture-orientated politics. My discussion of the predicaments of collective or individual ownership, contested restitution or celebration observable in the policies of intangible cultural heritage is based on the experience of the Seto community in Estonia.