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Keynote abstract

What should sustain in culture?

I compare local production and use of cultural heritage with the promotion of different ethnic groups using the model that the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth has developed for analysing ethnicity and ethnopolitics. According to him, on the micro level the basic element of the culture is a heterogeneous and dynamic interactive process in everyday culture. I will argue that on this level culture is primarily a global and heterogeneous interaction process. In it both verbal and material phenomena are constantly changing and varying. It is not possible to distinguish different cultures from each other with clear boundaries, or to name specific tangible or intangible elements of a culture.

Secondly, culture is a condensation of relatively constant cultural phenomena among interrelated people. These phenomena consist of both conscious symbols as well as unconscious elements and of both intangible and tangible elements. In the mutual interaction process on micro level people share influences and the process develops with relative homogeneity. In this process it is possible to perceive different, original cultures with dynamic boundaries and dynamic essential elements.

Thirdly, culture is a symbolic and clearly argued knowledge of the original essences of different cultures with their intangible and tangible elements, in other words cultural heritage. On this level, cultures are collective “imagined communities”, produced by institutional powers. According to Barth, these powers are, firstly, local and regional organisations functioning on the middle level. The intention of these organisations is to create a feeling of community and to motivate people to strive towards some goal—be it ethnic or for instance economic.

Secondly, these powers function on the macro level, where the actors are national and international organisations. They create a framework for local activities on middle level through legislation, administration, and the financing of various activities. In the contexts of cultural heritage and the use of it these organisations are for instance UNESCO, the European Union, and the national organisations concerned with cultural heritage and regional development, such as national museums and ministries.

Finally, all these three levels are parts of the cultural entirety and interact in the global context. Both symbolic cultural wholes on middle and macro levels and condensations of cultural phenomena on micro level are subordinate to the primary process of culture with its global, individual and heterogeneous aspects.

Culturally sustainable development takes, firstly, into consideration all cultural processes functioning on the micro, middle, and macro-levels. Primarily culture should be sustained as a heterogenic and dynamic process on the micro level. Secondly, culture should be sustained as value-based cultural constructions, such as cultural heritage, as a part of it. In the latter case, a common, transparent definition of cultural heritage with different values in relation to it is needed.

I will have empirical examples from the Southwest-Finland Archipelago.