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Special Issue

**GreenHeritage.**  
The impact of  
Climate Change  
on the Intangible  
Cultural Heritage



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# Climate Change and Intangible Cultural Heritage: Some Insights from Research and Territorial Planning



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Climate change represents one of the most urgent challenges of our time, with impacts that extend far beyond the environmental and economic spheres, encompassing instead the complex interplay of factors that influence the well-being of local communities and the very survival of the ecosystems they belong to. Acknowledging the cross-cutting nature of its implications constitutes the first essential step in the design and definition of risk management and mitigation strategies that can genuinely offer a viable response aligned with the complexity of the issue.

In this regard, the redefinition of policy priorities, particularly during the COVID-19 emergency, is merely the most visible result of an in-depth reflection on the opportunity to reconfigure production systems, consumption habits, and planning trajectories towards climate neutrality. Consequently, while the global political agenda focuses on mitigating climate change, local territories are called upon to define adaptation strategies to the effects that climate change, directly or indirectly, imposes on specific areas or regions. This involves utilizing the resilience capacity of their respective territorial systems (García, 2019).

This new perspective, as is evident, also concerns strategies for the protection and enhancement of cultural heritage. Cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, forms a fundamental part of a territory's identity matrix. It is intrinsically tied to both the perceptual-symbolic and performative dimensions of local com-

munities, as it embodies their cultural history and creativity (Unesco, 2003), contributing to the socio-spatial context in which interactions and practices evolve (Aktürk, Lerski, 2021).

Extreme events such as floods, droughts, and fires—whose projected increase in the near future has already raised concerns within the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change — can have devastating effects on highly symbolic artefacts and places. This leads to the risk of the disappearance or compromise of material or intangible sediments that represent, for communities, irreplaceable aggregations of values, meanings, memories, and shared opportunities for common planning over time (Sab-bioni, Brimblecombe, Cassar, 2010).

Similarly, gradual changes (such as the progressive increase in average temperatures or fluctuations in humidity levels) underlie deterioration processes that can affect both tangible cultural heritage and their associated landscapes, as well as productive practices, traditions, and rituals. Without adequate responses from public and private actors and local communities as a whole, these processes can inexorably lead to deterritorialization (Kim, 2011).

Furthermore, while the effects of climate change on tangible cultural heritage appear self-evident and have been studied for some time (Sesana, Gagnon, Ciantelli, Cassar, Hughes, 2021), the relationship between climate change and intangible cultural heritage remains much less explored. Differentiating between these two domains is not a simple task: studying the preservation strategies of a historic building, for example, also involves reflecting on the recovery of skills and expertise related to traditional production and craftsmanship, which may be threatened, among other factors, by reduced availability of raw materials or by the increased vulnerability of such materials to unusual climatic conditions.

The complexity of the dualism between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as the geographical significance of the issue, has been well highlighted by UNESCO, which states "Intangible cultural heritage can play an important role as a source of resilience, recovery, preparedness, and prevention measures to reduce vulnerability and exposure to risks associated with climate change and in the mitigation of carbon emissions. At the same time, the viability of intangible cultural heritage and its bearers, and the resources they require, are fundamentally at risk from climate change directly or from the multiplier effects of climate change on other conditions for viability."

Building on this dualism, UNESCO, following the Operational Directives and the Committee's decisions (Decisions 15.COM 8, 16.COM 5. b, and 17.COM 13), has launched a series of efforts aimed at equipping stakeholders with appropriate tools to sup-



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port both the study of the phenomenon and the identification of territorially localized solutions, although framed within a global context. Among these initiatives, it is worth noting the vast bibliographic index freely accessible through UNESCO's official web channels, which, at the time of writing (August 2024), gathers nearly three thousand references to international research on the relationship between climate change and intangible cultural heritage. Without venturing into a bibliometric analysis of such a vast body of work—which would require more in-depth study—the point we wish to highlight in this brief reflection is the significant presence of many case studies, approximately 14% of the listed titles, that are strongly geographically defined. Even more interesting is the observation that most of these case studies pertain to inherently vulnerable territories, particularly coastal areas affected by rising sea levels, coastal erosion, storms, and extreme weather events; islands with limited carrying capacity; mountainous regions affected by glacial melting and landslides; agricultural areas threatened by drought and desertification; forest areas increasingly subject to devastating fires; and urban areas experiencing steadily rising temperatures<sup>1</sup>.

This observation, in line with what has been stated in the introductory remarks of this contribution, allows us to deepen our reflection along two key lines:

1. Climate change is a challenge that pertains both to the global scale—especially regarding mitigation—and to the local-territorial scale—concerning adaptation and resilience strategies;
2. A holistic understanding of climate risk and territorial vulnerability is necessary, with the former referring to both direct and indirect manifestations, and the latter to the preconditions that determine the exposure of territories to catastrophic events, as well as their potential and actual damages.

<sup>1</sup> Content analysis conducted using the ChatGPT Content Analysis Pro plugin

It is precisely within this territorialized reading of climate change and climate risk, in which all the constitutive elements of a territory are involved, that the increasingly significant focus on intangible cultural heritage is contextualized, both as an object of protection and preservation (in terms of risk and vulnerability) and as a potential resilience mechanism (in terms of adaptation).

The scientific production highlighted by UNESCO is certainly not exhaustive, but we believe it can serve as an illustrative example of how the relationship between climate change and cultural heritage has reached a priority level in scientific debate as well as in the political agendas of national and international governmental institutions. In particular, it is possible to identify at least three perspectives through which to specifically and place-based explore the relationship between climate change and intangible cultural heritage.

One perspective is certainly represented by the opportunity to create a broad-spectrum catalogue of the elements constituting local intangible cultural heritage—an entity that is difficult to define—and to outline their respective risk profiles. A second perspective concerns the possibility that the persistence of specific traditional practices could serve as an indicator of the “health” of the territory. Lastly, a third perspective, probably the most promising one, is represented by the potential for intangible cultural heritage, through the promotion of targeted preservation and enhancement actions, to itself become a potential resilience mechanism, stimulating the recovery of sustainable land-use practices or the activation of new ones with similar characteristics.

### **From the International Regulatory Framework to the Italian Context**

Among the international legal frameworks that have, over the past decades, paid attention to the impact of climate change on cultural heritage, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (1992) is certainly worth mentioning. It was the first global response to the challenge of climate change, focusing primarily on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, while leaving the intangible aspects of cultural heritage on the margins of both the debate and policies.

More recent instruments provided by the European Union for the preservation and regeneration of territories exhibiting a significant degree of vulnerability (structural, managerial, socio-economic, and/or environmental), vulnerabilities that have become even more evident and concerning as a result of the global climate change, include the work carried out under the Council Work Plan for Culture 2019-2022.



For the drafting of the Plan, an open coordination group was established, composed of experts from EU member states, which reflected on the relationship between cultural heritage and the European Green Deal. The group identified threats to cultural heritage arising from climate change, as well as the regulatory and legislative gaps that still render the problem vague and lacking in definition and detail (starting from the recognition of the absence of an explicit reference to cultural heritage in the Green Deal text) (<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4bfcf605-2741-11ed-8fa0-01aa75ed71a1/language-en/format-PDF/source-search>) (last access: Aug. 29, 2024).

The strategies and interventions defined in this context promote holistic, systemic, integrated, and participatory approaches (in line with the spirit of the Faro Convention [COE, 2005], which recognizes each individual's right to participate in the processes of enhancing cultural heritage related to cultural identities). These approaches ultimately aim to generate significant and lasting virtuous impacts across all sectors of sustainable development (economy, culture, society, and environment). Among these sectors, cultural heritage represents a transversal axis capable of producing, at multiple levels, new collective sensitivities and awareness. Additionally, it activates processes that affect every aspect of local development: from increasing social cohesion to enhancing the ability to attract investments (not only in the cultural sector); from the consequent increase in territorial competitiveness and attractiveness to the promotion of new forms of welfare, helping to counter dangerous regressive trends, such as the abandonment of economic activities and those related to land maintenance, depopulation, and marginalization, which particularly affect rural and inland areas. In this way, cultural heritage significantly becomes the core of the issue and its possible solution: both the object to be preserved and, at the same time, the lever for activating new processes of resilience, change, awareness, empowerment, and the development of visions, behaviors, practices, and skills in line with the sustainability objectives set by the European Green Deal.

Regarding our country in particular, it is quite easy to observe how it consists of an extremely varied mosaic of cultural histories, local traditions, landscape, and pedoclimatic frameworks; consequently, the profile of fragilities and vulnerabilities that emerge is equally varied. This is especially true for coastal and inland areas. Coastal erosion and rising sea levels are, in fact, a real emergency for our country, considering the approximately eight thousand kilometers of coastline, as well as the fact that, according to the Istituto Superiore per la Protezione e la Ricerca Ambientale (2023), 54 out of the 644 coastal municipalities nationwide report an erosion rate of over 50%. Similarly, to fully un-

derstand the magnitude of the problem, it is also useful to reflect on the specific condition of inland areas, where 23% of the Italian population resides (Openpolis, 2024). In these territories, it is evident how climate change, along with other social, economic, and cultural factors, contributes to generating a worrying trend of depopulation, depriving the territories of human and social capital, which impacts both the possibilities and the trajectories of local development, as well as the types of actions that are realistically feasible in terms of mitigating the effects of climate change, and in the protection and preservation of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

In light of this, new regulatory instruments for managing territorial vulnerabilities have emerged. Consider, for instance, Decree No. 434/2023, dated December 21, 2023, by which the Ministry of the Environment and Energy Security approved the National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change. This plan aims to provide the country with a cross-sectoral operational framework that operates on multiple levels, including, as is obvious, the cultural heritage sector. However, once again, it does not explicitly address its intangible component.

### **The Challenges of Protecting Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Face of Climate Risk**

In general, what emerges from the analysis of the regulatory frameworks addressing the risks posed by climate change to cultural heritage and outlining potential governance paths is the insufficient attention and detail specifically devoted to its intangible component. Although there are indeed references in various parts to traditional practices and customs (such as those related to fishing and agriculture), the emphasis remains on the eco-



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conomic value of these activities, while the social, cohesive, symbolic, and cultural dimensions are still largely marginal or even unexplored. This issue becomes even more problematic when considering that many of the territories with high vulnerability levels are also those richest in histories, rituals, celebrations, traditions, and practices (such as, for instance, rural areas).

In this sense, the hope is that, within the national framework, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan will represent an opportunity to identify specific safeguarding actions for intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, this would align perfectly with the content, actions, and interventions provided for in Mission 1 “Digitalization, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture, and Tourism” and in Investment 2.4 “Protection and Enhancement of Rural Architecture and Landscapes.” This issue has already been partly addressed by the measures for the regeneration of small villages (Investment 2.1, the so-called “Bando Borghi”), which has shown particular interest in the traditions, rituals, and celebrations of small historic Italian villages with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants.

However, it is important to emphasize that before calling for the necessary attention to intangible cultural heritage within national and international regulatory frameworks, it is essential to undertake widespread grassroots work to ensure that communities can recognize the invaluable potential for sustainable development in the intangible sediments of their own culture. Furthermore, communities must be enabled to imagine and practice how this can happen, and to develop the necessary skills to realize this process. Vidal and Dias (2017) describe this in terms of “endangerment sensibility,” referring to the varying degrees of awareness that communities develop about the possibility that a cultural sediment (tangible or intangible) may be damaged, severely compromised, or even destroyed due to the vulnerability of territories. This, in turn, fosters a widespread perception at all levels of the urgency of protection and preservation actions.

Only through this fundamental step—built on the daily construction of new perceptions, awareness, sensitivities, and new networks of knowledge and skills that communicate among themselves from the ground up—can effective and operational actions, strategies, and policies be conceived and implemented. For this reason, among the recommendations contained in the policy brief related to the GreenHeritage project – The Impact of Climate Change on Intangible Heritage – the result of synergistic work between professionals, research institutions, administrations, local stakeholders, and civil society that took part in the policy round table organized by the European University Centre for Cultural Heritage, held in Ravello on April 12-13, 2024 (Miggiano, 2024) – considerable attention is given to the involvement of local communities and stakeholders in decision-making

and management processes; the organization and planning of ad hoc initiatives for knowledge, awareness, and sustainable enhancement (at all levels); and the building of a relationship between communities and territory that remains consistent with the values it expresses (community spirit/identity), even in the face of climate change.

The crucial objective, therefore, remains to trigger a shift in the role of communities, which would transition from being “impotent and passive” actors to becoming “primary actors” (Eichler, 2020)—that is autonomous agents of change, capable of both directing their responses and actions and influencing global responses to climate monitoring, adaptation, and mitigation.

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The pictures show three moments of the round table held in Ravello in April 2024, namely: 1. Opening session; 2. a contribution by Fabio Pollice; 3. Performance by “I Discede”.