



Project: CAM as an Intangible Cultural Heritage?

What are the assets of the intangible cultural heritage to guarantee the safeguarding of traditional care methods?

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In its widest sense, culture may be said to be the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It includes not only the arts and the letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs.

(Extract from the UNESCO Declaration, World Conference on Cultural Policies, Mexico City 1982)

It may seem strange at first to pull together the UNESCO and the intangible cultural heritage with the complementary medicine and the traditional care methods. In fact, the common associations to intangible cultural heritage are usually the monuments and landscapes.

With the adoption of the convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in 2003 the UNESCO has set new standards in dealing with the intangible cultural heritage. At first, this convention was mainly perceived as a proposal to the developing countries, as they were not well represented on the Intangible Heritage Lists, to become aware of the other domains of culture beneath the well established ones, such as:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including the language
- Performing arts
- Social practices, rituals and festive events
- Traditional craftsmanship
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

and herewith to increase their significance. Most of the western industrial countries did not feel concerned at first because they had already drawn up long lasting inventories of the culture present in their own countries.

However, on closer examination, the convention deals with domains of major interest for all kind of societies.

Austria has committed itself from the beginning to a specific domain which the convention has called «knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe». The strategy followed over the last decades to shift responsibility – also when dealing with healthcare and illness –led to a rapid loss of sense of personal responsibility and individual competence with dramatic consequences in particular for the public healthcare. The demand for a so-called “empirical knowledge” has increased.

Since 2006, discussions have taken place in the national agencies for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage, involving different groups of interest, about the challenges set in the transmission and protection of natural care methods. As a result, two research projects have been implemented.

The first project, entitled «**Complementary Medicine and Traditional Healthcare Methods in Austria**» has been commissioned by the Healthcare department. The core of that project consists in the classification of the present offers in complementary medicine as the precondition to any further consideration. Complementary healthcare methods or traditional methods could turn out to be very significant for our public healthcare system provided the safety and seriousness questions have been settled.

The project emphasizes several points:

1. The priority is given to the establishment of a detailed description of the different types of traditional and complementary care treatments. The methods will be assigned to categories so as to enable a systematic overview. In addition, surveys about the clients’ motivations to use complementary medicines will be conducted and also about the practitioners’ activities, interests, legal position and their place in the healthcare system. A further step plans the identification of the requirements for seriousness and safety of the treatment, as a precondition for any future assessment.
2. The term of knowledge concerning traditional care is the other main issue of that project. Once you’ve clarified the nature of the knowledge about traditional care in Austria, you ought to define which spheres of life and to solve which problems that knowledge on healing methods is relevant for the human being today.
3. The compatibility between complementary healing methods and mainstream conventional methods will be then analyzed according to its practicability, whereas the theoretical aspects of the compatibility will be referred to underlying paradigmatic basic assumptions, agreed that possible contradictions have to be clarified. The demands from the patients’ or user’s perspective will be analyzed in this context.

In Addition, archives are planned to be set up for the documentation of the complementary and traditional healing methods. Michaela Noseck, qualified culture and social anthropologist, is in charge of this three years lasting research project

The goal of the second project is **to guarantee the place of the traditional herbal remedies in our pharmacies**. The European directive concerning the regulation of traditional herbal medicines is threatening to make major remedies disappear out of the quality safe domain of our pharmacies starting from 2011. Thus, some traditional medicinal products based on herbal substances such as tea blends, ointments, oils etc. may lose their status of drugs. In practical terms, this means that the knowledge concerning herbal agents that have been developed over decades may vanish from our pharmacies up 2011 –the directive should be enforced till then – and to drift with no equivalent quality controls into the gray areas between cosmetics, food supplements and food.

At the close of a long process of meetings and discussions, conducted by the National Agency for the Safeguarding of Cultural Heritage, involving the parties directly concerned - i.e. the pharmacists, the herbal remedies manufacturers and the public authorities - a solution could finally be found to get out of this dilemma, it is the so-called Austrian way.

The «revival» of the Austrian pharmacopoeia has enabled to find one way to safeguard herbal plants, at least for the Austrian pharmacies.

The monographs required for the Austrian pharmacopoeia are easier to prepare and therefore cheaper than the studies required by the European pharmacopoeia. The scientific research in pharmacognosy are planned to be supported through subsidies from the research department and from private enterprises – namely the herbal remedies manufacturers. Here again, it is in the form of a research project that a solution could be found as a viable way out of the initial dilemma.

We've already experienced several times, that the umbrella term of intangible cultural heritage enables the networking of different interests so that difficult questions and seemingly inflexible positions can be discussed. Surely it is not up to a cultural organization to deliver medical recommendations, but multidisciplinary debates can contribute to increase public perception on the incredible variety of existing healing methods, at least as a social phenomenon, and to make aware of the potentials of regional tradition.