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## **Cultural Heritage and the Inheritance of Civilization. Insights from Michael Oakeshott's Reflections on Education \*\***

**Abstract:** Michael Oakeshott viewed liberal education as an initiation into the inheritance of civilization, an intellectual pursuit unsubordinated to outer aims, and an expression of human freedom. In his reflections on education, the notions of “inheritance” and “civilization” are given a prominent place, as contents and processes forming human identity. Both lack the static and commemorative meanings common usage sometimes ascribes them; for Oakeshott, they are to a greater and deeper extent intangible, rather than tangible elements of collective and individual identities. At the same time, international institutions created to protect and promote cultural heritage, and, more recently, intangible cultural heritage, have initiated an idiom defining heritage in relation to human identity, as well as to social and political values which would support its safeguarding. It is the purpose of this article to suggest a comparison between the two kinds of discourses, in the attempt to clarify the normative depth of both “heritage” and “education”, using valuable insights from Oakeshott’s reflections, and, in the end, to shed light on some irreconcilable differences between liberal education, and the “heritage studies” mindset.

**Keywords:** Intangible cultural heritage, inheritance, civilization, Michael Oakeshott, education.

### **Introduction**

In his essays on education, Michael Oakeshott argued that the pursuit of learning should be honoured and defended as a valuable initiation of individuals into the rich heritage of human civilization. It should be the particular engagement of liberal education to accompany us into the world of meanings, traditions and practices, narratives and “utterances” in which the whole of human experience has been condensed. For Oakeshott, this engagement was of a fundamental, organic nature, insofar as the very concept of humanity is predicated on it. This is a recurrent theme in his writings on

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liberal education, which he defined as a “moral transaction” between generations, “upon which a recognizably human life depends for its continuance” (Oakeshott 1971, 43), a “process in which we discover and begin to cultivate ourselves” (Oakeshott 1962, 304), or “an education in imagination” essential for – borrowing an expression from Paul Valéry – “our *début dans la vie humaine*” (Oakeshott 2001, 30).

Two interrelated notions, *inheritance* and *civilization*, are central in Oakeshott’s conception of liberal education, which he defended both with a sense of urgency from the assault of Rationalism, the all-encompassing ideology of modernity, and with a sense of nostalgia in the face of irretrievable loss.

Both notions are illuminated by his often celebrated metaphor of “the conversation of mankind”. This is meant to capture the dynamic “meeting place” of all distinct modes of human expression, such as the discourses of science, practical activity, as well as poetry (aesthetics), joined by the less individualized “voices” of history and philosophy. Criticizing what he saw as a dangerous tendency to establish the dominance of the argumentative discourse of science and, consequently, the subordination of the other modes of relating to the world, he argued that a person with genuine education should be able to understand and appreciate each “utterance” for its distinctiveness. This should be inseparable from a historical understanding of each manner in which our civilized humanity has expressed itself. Equally important, we should resist “barbarism”, and cultivate the capacity to control the tendency each discourse has to “*superbia*, that is, an exclusive concern with its own utterance, which may result in its identifying the conversation with itself and its speaking as if it were speaking only to itself” (Oakeshott 1962, 201).

This article gives an overview of Oakeshott’s conceptual universe, in which “inheritance” and “civilization” are particularly relevant for understanding his defence of liberal education. Since human beings are essentially historical, and do not have an inner purpose dictated by “nature”, but rather have to become initiated into a world of meanings and representations, all our inheritance is, in fact, intangible heritage. Education should help generations in their transmission of this heritage in an unabridged way which safeguards its intelligibility. At first glance, the language in which international provisions for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage are written seems to suggest the same concerns, and the same awareness that education is a valid channel for the intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage. However, I will try to show, using Oakeshott’s distinction between “language” and “literature”, that, despite legitimate concerns for various collective and cultural identities being threatened by globalization, what is now being safeguarded by international heritage organisations is not only distinct, but perhaps also incompatible with the “inheritance” and “civilization” Oakeshott wrote about.

## Inheritance and Civilization

There is a rather strong normative emphasis on *inheritance* and *civilization* as contents and processes fundamentally related to our becoming human. Both concepts lack the static and commemorative meanings common usage sometimes ascribes them; for Oakeshott, they are neither objects of worship in some imaginary museum of humanity, nor acquisitions which we appropriate by entitlement in virtue of belonging to a community. Inheritance and civilization are to a greater and deeper extent intangible, rather than tangible elements of collective and individual identities. They are constitutive of collective identities by way of traditions and internalized habits of moral conduct that resemble linguistic acquisitions more than reflective thought (Oakeshott 1962, 62). Similarly, they are constitutive of individual identities by a process of self-realization, an exercise in self-consciousness which resembles more a “reflective engagement”, rather than an “organic adaptation to circumstances” (Oakeshott 2001, 7). In the end, the narrative we can make our blossoming lives into is inseparable from learning. We learn to become human not in the sense of acquiring the contents and contextual practices of our numerous social and institutional roles, but in that of gaining full responsibility for our thoughts and actions:

The price of the intelligent activity which constitutes being human is learning. When the human condition is said to be burdensome, what is being pointed to is not the mere necessity or having to think, to speak and to act (instead of merely *being* like a stone, or growing like a tree) but the impossibility of thinking or feeling without having slowly and often painfully learned to think something. The freedom of a human being inheres in his thoughts and his emotions having had to be learned; for learning is something which each of us must do and can only do for ourselves. This inseparability of learning and being human is central to our understanding of ourselves. It means that none of us is born human; each is what he learns to become. (Oakeshott 2001, 5-6)

Inseparable from freedom, education would be something essentially different from schooling and training, as well as from sectarian, decontextualized, and fragmentary acquisition of technical knowledge. The latter refers to knowledge which can be legitimately formulated into rules, such as road rules collected in codes, recipes collected in a cookery book, keeping in mind, though, that it is not *by rules* that the raw material of this synthesis was filtered and absorbed. The other, endangered half of knowledge “exists only in use, is not reflective and (unlike technique) cannot be formulated in rules” (Oakeshott 1962, 8). In fact, this is mostly traditional knowledge, the added value of shared experience, guiding us when, how and how much to rely on rules, and when on something else. Nevertheless, this practical knowledge, which is a prerequisite of genuine mastery and connoisseurship

in all areas of life, has been obscured and devalued by the predominance of Rationalism, as a political ideology and intellectual style threatening to conquer virtually all areas of life.

Rationalism, Oakeshott wrote, is “the most remarkable intellectual fashion of post-Renaissance Europe” characterized by disregard for “the traditional, the circumstantial, and the transitory” (Oakeshott 1962, 3), for the indispensable and intricate networks of meanings attached to historical human practices and customs. It claims a better grasp of reality in simplifying patterns essentially similar to the mental operations used by engineers in order to make sense of the world. In politics, which is a historical and value-loaded mode of conduct owing most to traditions, the ideology of Rationalism has turned out to be blatant fallacious, yet increasingly widespread, to the extent that it generated its own style: the “politics of perfection” and the “politics of uniformity” (Oakeshott 1962, 5). Inexperience and empty certainties have replaced the complex, historical judgment, as well as the sense of balance and proportions which only somebody who travelled the long road of political experience can acquire. In his view, this is a dangerous and costly mindset, which thrives on and propagates misconceptions regarding human knowledge.

In the long run, perhaps the most serious implications of this change we have in the end accommodated into all spheres of life, i.e. the domination of utility-oriented mindset, are to be found in education. Decades ago, Oakeshott's reflections on education warned against the corruption of the universities, called to account for their social mission, and to pay service to society by becoming increasingly similar to efficient training centres. Nevertheless, it is precisely the University which, in his view, should be most protected against such a danger. The core of his argument in its defence as the place where genuine liberal education is indeed possible is that the University, as a body of scholars, rather than an academy, accommodates, by its very nature, an education as a plurality of “voices” engaged in a “conversation”. It is not concerned with mere teaching, but rather with “imparting” some of the valuable inheritance that actualizes our freedom and gives meaning to our lives. Most importantly, it imparts “familiarity with the modes of thought, the « languages » which, from one point of view, compose the whole intellectual capital of a civilization”, (Oakeshott 1962, 313). In so doing, it conveys neither the topics, nor the shallow etiquette of the conversation, but rather its “manners”.

There is a conceptual symmetry between “manners” and “engagement”, in that both suggest a dynamic, unpredictable and very rich combination of structures, nuances, tonalities and modalities which illuminate the plurality and depth of a genuine initiation into our inheritance and civilization. This is why liberal education, a privileged expression of this metaphor, should

not be reducible to a unifying discourse, to a collection of ready-made ideas and cultural products, and not in the least to an imitation of a venerable tradition. On the contrary, as proven by all Oakeshott's reflections on the topic of education, to acknowledge it in its authentic sense is from the perspective of a transaction, an engagement, a journey, a pursuit with virtually infinite possibilities that leaves room for curiosity and life itself to develop along the way.

### **Intangible Cultural Heritage as “Language” and “Literature”**

Oakeshott's thoughts on education, which never took the form of a doctrine, can be considered in a broader context of his vision of modern civilization, as “an answer to the question of how to implant loyalty to modernity even when it has no philosophical foundations”, and, despite the emphasis on inheritance and traditions, which encourage his being perceived as a conservative thinker, he may have defended “the only kind of education that may save modern civilization in the long run” (Podoksik 2003, 213).

How can, yet, such thoughts on educations, informed by mistrust in ready-made ideas, quick fixes, and intellectual clichés be a genuine inspiration for heritage studies? Oakeshott's “lyrical height” (Franco 2004, 119), elitism and, often, irony towards cultural illiteracy, vain self-sufficiency, and naïve enthusiasm of Rationalism and its fellow-travellers may appear disconcerting to a more pragmatic mindset. In the absence of a novel framework that could be applied to the immense domain of heritage, where one may perhaps rightfully say that, currently, a new language is being created, Oakeshott's philosophy of experience requires a special treatment.

If we look at how intangible heritage is understood and approached from a legal and bureaucratic point of view, on one hand, and as attached to various educational aims and contents, on the other hand, the initially very high diversity and polyphony of the approaches yields to a few topics which allow an examination.

To begin with, the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines intangible cultural heritage as:

the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups, and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. (UNESCO 2003, Art.2.1)

The convention goes on to defend the necessity of international law instruments for safeguarding elements of intangible cultural heritage (insofar as these are compatible with a human rights framework, as well as with the social values of respect and sustainability), and distinguishes a number of domains for ICH: oral traditions, including languages, performing arts, “social practices, rituals and festive events”, “knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe” and “traditional craftsmanship” (UNESCO 2003, Art. 2.2.).

The sections dedicated to the practical measures for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage emphasise its social function, as well as its relation with sustainable development. Partly, this is understood in the context of intangible cultural heritage elements which have a direct connection with natural environment, but texts closely associated with the Convention explicitly mention ICH “as a driver and guarantee of sustainable development” (UNESCO 2018, Art.172). The Convention itself refers to the “intangible cultural heritage of humanity”, but goes on to assert the benefits of safeguarding it for the respect between communities, considering the threat of intolerance which globalization and social transformations brought about.

Different kind of values are conflated in the Convention, as well as in other texts directly related to it: on one hand, encouraging appreciation of ICH, as well as promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity are goals to be met at one level; on the other hand, it is obvious that distinct values are at stake: sustainable development, inclusive economic development, tolerance, respect, social cohesion, equity, and peace. With regard to the potential of intangible cultural heritage to foster peaceful societies and with respect for human rights and the right to development,

States Parties should endeavour to recognize, promote and enhance those practices, representations and expressions of intangible cultural heritage that have peace-making and peace-building at their core, bring communities, individuals and groups together and ensure exchange, dialogue and understanding among them. (UNESCO 2018, Art.192)

Moreover, *The Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, adopted in 2015, self-defined as “overarching aspirational principles”, talk about the right of each community, group, and even individual to assess the value of intangible cultural heritage without external judgments of value and worth. On a similar note, the principles warn against the “decontextualization, commodification and misrepresentation” as threats to ICH. Other ethical principles to be promoted are gender equality, youth involvement and respect for ethnic identities (UNESCO 2018, Ch.6).

This eclectic character of values is not without implications. For instance, one criticism of this definition is that the rationale of the Convention is not

coherently connected with its operational part, describing the specific provisions for the safeguarding of ICH. This part, modelled after the 1972 World Heritage Convention, should, as Professor of International and EU Law Federico Lenzerini argues, rely on the concomitant application of international human rights law. In fact, the ICH is not only dynamic and rather subjective (as compared to heritage of universal value) in virtue of the self-identification criterion, but also quite ephemeral, in that it is being constantly recreated. This raises a challenge for legal instruments designed to safeguard something whose generous definition borders ambiguity and volatility. At the same time, the decades that separate the adoption of legal protection mechanisms for tangible cultural heritage and the 2003 UNESCO convention may also indicate a presumption of confidence that local communities would manage on their own to preserve what themselves define as ICH:

In other words, the depositaries of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) were considered to accomplish spontaneously and appropriately the mission of transmitting to future generations the necessary knowledge to preserve and perpetuate their own immaterial heritage, with no need of any international action in that respect. (Lenzerini 2011, 102)

The fact that this is no longer the case is the result of a complex process, of which globalization and the social transformations it brought are the umbrella-notions used to describe massive changes at an unprecedented pace, which influence not only the standardized usage of certain notions, legal and institutional mechanisms, but also our deeper conceptualizations.

Considering the role of education in strengthening individual and collective identities by the intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage, the way we think of education in general is one of these deeper conceptualizations. In fact, education is explicitly mentioned as one of the long-term channels of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, by raising awareness of its importance, as well as by building and conveying a discourse which associates very different elements of ICH with a block of distinct values, such as human creativity, sustainable development and other principles of social justice.

For example, the *Overall Results Framework for the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO 2018) suggests, in the list of indicators, that ICH should be “integrated in the primary and secondary education”, while post-secondary education “supports safeguarding and study of ICH”. This implies in practice that ICH should be included in the content of various disciplines, “as a contribution in its own right and/or as a means of explaining and demonstrating other subjects”. Linguistic justice considerations find their place here, as ICH is also a rationale for multilingual education. School students should also learn respect towards their own

ICH and the ICH of others. As for tertiary education, it should develop curricula and study programs for ICH safeguarding and management. The *Framework* leaves open the possibility of including ICH as a content in virtually all formal and non-formal education, “by curricula and degrees (in fields such as music, arts, crafts, technical and vocational education and training, etc) that strengthen the practice and transmission of ICH.” (UNESCO 2018, 121).

What is obvious from the text of the Convention and the direction indicated by the ensuing complementary texts created under the aegis of UNESCO is that ICH will continue to be a constant concern for the international community, and soft measures of promoting and transmitting, with priority, education, would, one way or the other, to make room for this equally new, equally old, constitutive of human identity.

As a matter of coincidence, some of Oakeshott’s late essays on education are chronologically very close to the beginnings of the formalization of heritage safeguarding as a priority for the future of our civilization, and as a domain placed under international protection. Nevertheless, the conceptual universe of his reflections is, most likely, not intelligible to that of the present-day heritage studies.

One pair of concepts useful to explain why present initiatives of promoting cultural heritage as constitutive of human identity are essentially different, and, in fact, incompatible with the worldview of the “conversation of mankind” is Oakeshott’s distinction of *language* vs. *literature*.

Education, Oakeshott argues, is nothing less than the way in which we “learn our way about a material, emotional, moral and intellectual inheritance” and “learn to recognize ourselves in the mirror of this civilization” (Oakeshott 1962, 304). This is the ideal of liberal education which cannot be separated by the ethos of European civilization, and of its universities. It is at this level of depth that a genuine meaning of belonging to a civilization, and a genuine self-realization can unfold. Otherwise, the various cultural products we consume time and again are just disconnected suggestions which we may internalize, without ever being able to integrate into a coherent narrative.

However demanding as it sounds, this is, in Oakeshott’s view, the kind of education suitable to historical beings. The world we inhabit consists not of “things”, but rather of “meanings; that is, occurrences in some manner recognized, identified, understood and responded to in terms of this understanding” (Oakeshott 1971, 45). To make sense of such a world, which is, indeed, the world of intangible cultural heritage, we must make sense of its wholeness, if not by experience, by a representation that should be neither shallow, nor fragmentary. Unless we strive to do so, and unless education is thus understood, we will remain at the level of acquiring a “text” or a “literature” in its narrow sense, that is, deprived of a context of prac-

tices and meanings. Learning the “literature” is the province of vocational education mostly, where what matter most are the skills to be acquired, and not the explanatory and defining context of practices in which such skills, as well as the need for such skills, ever emerged. This happens, he says, when all we are interested in is to learn how to use a product or another of scientific thought, without knowing how to think in appropriate manner. And although there is a use and a purpose in such abridgments that make life possible to live at a practical level, this should not make one overlook that there is another perspective available to those who aspire at more than social efficiency and utility.

By “language” Oakeshott understands “a manner of thinking”, such as a mode of thinking imaginatively, poetry, while “literature” stands for “what has been said from time to time in a “language”, such as a particular poem (Oakeshott 1962, 308). It is, equally, the distinction between knowledge inseparable from a way of thinking, and knowledge that can be assimilated from a textbook. If one confines oneself to learning the “literature”, it is as if one learned a “dead language”, without being able to properly speak it in conversational contexts. We could imagine, as well, what it is to take part in a conversation when some participants learned by heart beforehand what they are going to say (their piece of “literature”), whereas others communicate spontaneously and fluently, adapting their “language” to that of the others.

Furthermore, if one attempts to substitute education by means of this abridged learning, the distance between oneself and one’s humanity increases. As he elsewhere wrote, using “language” less metaphorically, and concerned with integrating the ideal of education in the context of “School”:

For, to know a language merely as a means of contemporary communication is to be like a man who has inherited a palace overflowing with expressions, intimations and echoes of human emotions, perceptions, aspirations and understandings, and furnished with images and emanations of human reflection, but in whose barbaric recognition his inheritance is merely that of « a roof over his head ». (Oakeshott 1971, 50)

## Conclusions

The conceptual landscape of the 2003 UNESCO Convention and its associated texts interpret intangible cultural heritage in terms of a “literature”, rather than of a “language”, to use Oakeshott’s distinction. The first argument is that of the distinction between tangible and intangible heritage, which persisted for decades. From an Oakeshottian point of view, this is an artificial distinction, and, although it is obvious that feasibility considerations were much responsible for preserving it, one cannot help noting that more and more mechanisms created to address this difficulty cannot, in fact

address it, but rather create an idiom (a “literature”), and, *within its confines*, they may claim to have addressed it. In other words, creating more institutions and policies responsible for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage remains disconnected from other social evolutions, of which, the most important are the social and political values attached to ICH, as well as the trends in education.

ICH is acknowledged as valuable from a multitude of perspectives, of which only some relate directly to “identity” in terms compatible with Oakeshott’s reflections. The other values which should support safeguarding ICH, such as social justice, sustainability, and peace refer to an instrumental dimension of ICH, which is intelligible within the confines of a recent idiom of cultural diplomacy, but is completely disconnected from the “conversation of mankind”. The metaphor itself suggests that there should be no hierarchy among the “voices”, but it seems that cultural heritage is often a potential vehicle for more social justice and other values in the list. In fact, the concept of “list” (list of overarching values, as well as the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*) is likely to be a politically-informed concept of inclusion/exclusion. As already noted, the institutionalization of intangible cultural heritage generated distinct lists and distinct mechanisms for assessing what enters a certain list or not – some forms of heritage are deemed to be in need of urgent protection, others are more representative. For the latter case, multinational nominations are already causing some trouble, for example, when various Central European countries claim that some technology of blueprinting textiles is representative for their identity or, even more problematic, falconry, which was, by 2017, already nominated by 18 countries. In fact, the living expressions and the contemporary social and cultural meanings of this element of ICH are very different across the countries requesting its recognition on a list. (Schreiber 2017, 358).

Therefore, although aware of the importance of intangible cultural heritage for the preservation of individual and collective identities, and of the necessity of transmitting to future generations a rich and intelligible heritage, current international mechanisms are unfit to address this topic other than in a piecemeal fashion. As Lenzerini writes,

In fact, intensification of intercultural contacts, which in many cases has translated into cultural prevarication and the imposition of certain cultural models over others, has quickly put under threat the capacity of the oldest generations to transmit their knowledge and knowhow to the youngest. (Lenzerini 2011, 102)

The second argument refers to the *self-identification* criterion, which shows that there may be a difference between elements of heritage with universal value, and elements of heritage with subjective value, in the context of an

“idiosyncratic cultural inheritance” (Lenzerini 2011, 108). For Oakeshott, this would, perhaps, not be a very relevant distinction as it is phrased, which does not imply that he would have considered all elements of cultural heritage on a par. That “vivid consciousness of an intellectual and moral inheritance of great splendour and worth” (Oakeshott 1971, 51), as well as his belief that the civilization that we are being initiated by the “School” yields to the constraints of learning, which is not “a seamless robe”, meaning that “possibilities are not limitless” (Oakeshott 1971, 48), indicate that most forms of cultural relativism would not be desirable.

For Oakeshott, the self-identification that is indeed valuable, is that acquired by means of education, that is, when, after having being contemplated the treasures of human civilization, we commit to “an engagement of critical self-understanding in which we relate ourselves not to our inheritance of instrumental arts, but to the continuous intellectual adventure in which human beings have thought to identify and to understand themselves”. (Oakeshott 2001, 13)

Therefore, the great deal of attention that is being currently given to the issue of cultural heritage, especially considering how to safeguard and promote intangible cultural heritage, and the powerful institutional mechanisms that are being created to this end, would not meet the goal of maintaining identities and transmitting the inheritance of our civilization to future generations, unless this had been done in the manner of learning a “language”, and not a “literature”.

In the absence of such a goal, perhaps historically unfeasible at the moment, due to the dominance of the managerial spirit in culture and education as much as in other areas of life, the self-reinforcing bureaucratic mechanisms with their numerous rules and amendments are illustrative of Oakeshott’s story of the Tower of Babel. “The project of finding a short cut to heaven is as old as the human race”, he writes, and our aspiration for perfection has led us to search for many such shortcuts in our moral and intellectual life. This is why we were happy when we discovered much trouble would go away if we consistently applied some rules. Nevertheless, we should be aware that traditional forms of behaviour and history itself are never static, and, therefore, we cannot manage by simply updating the rules. Just as in the case of arguing that moral life could be reduced to a set of moral ideals disconnected by the actual way in which habits of behaviour are being internalized, the domain of heritage studies may be a case in point for the same ill-directed perfectionism. Thus, he writes, subordinating practices of habits of behaviour to ideals resembles “a literature in which criticism has usurped the place of poetry, or [...] a religious life in which the pursuit of theology offers itself as an alternative to the practice of piety” (Oakeshott 1962, 59; 72).

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