

Traditional Crafts. What About?

Pîrvu IONICĂ

SINAPTICA Association, 37 Mecet St., Sector 2, Bucharest, Romania; pirvu.ionica@sinaptica.ro

Abstract

The (re)connection of contemporary society with traditional knowledge and its expression, traditional crafts, is a contradictory endeavor in itself. On one hand, traditional crafts are socially perceived as a burden, as a useless part of social life, and in the best case, as an exotic remanence of the past, good only for the hobbyists. On the other hand, as UNESCO and WIPO stated, traditional knowledge, and, by extension, traditional crafts are (or should be) an essential part of humankind's history, part of the present, and the potential keepers of answers for future challenges. The presented paper aims to point out, mainly for general public use, the characteristics of traditional crafts and their richness. Traditional crafts might possess valuable answers for the present and future, related to sustainable use of natural resources; techniques and technologies for restoration and preservation of cultural heritage; holistic approaches in education; social and economic cohesion, especially for challenged communities. One of the main challenges in the active preservation of traditional crafts is that their protection and further acceptance at a social scale are connected with communities and not with individuals. In this respect, societies must find those instruments to address the communities of knowledge bearers and not companies or individuals. This understanding of the exceptional significance of communities in the present and future of traditional crafts is part of the solution for a desired sustainable life on this planet. Modern technologies will not offer all the answers to a dramatically fast-changing environment.

Keywords

Traditional knowledge; traditional crafts; education; sustainability; mankind; resources.

How do we understand living heritage?

A very heavy burden?

A cornucopia of opportunities?

One might tend to go to the first option because the answer can be simple: "a heavy burden should be thrown away". As a matter of fact, such an approach has its merits. Living heritage means:

- **Old** (maybe primitive). We should live in the present and advance to the future. The preservation of certain elements of traditional culture is relevant for historical and educational purposes. In the case of traditional crafts, they might be of interest to underline the advantages of contemporary production means.
- **Expensive to preserve**. The intrinsic characteristics of living heritage, including traditional crafts, required special attention and a significant amount of money to preserve and maintain. In the case of traditional crafts, the products have a narrow niche market and craftworkers are not able to sustain themselves.
- **Something meaningless**. All human creations are answering a need, but the elements of living heritage have (almost) no meaning(s) for today's people since nobody needs them to make them relevant at a social scale.

For any reasonable ground, the above ideas are relevant since they are part of our common understanding of the past. **Living heritage is culture**, and culture can't exist without its bearers and creators. When people do not connect, anymore, to specific parts of a given culture, those parts can be considered dead culture. A dead culture might be a topic of academic studies, but nothing else.

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However, since living heritage (LH) and traditional knowledge (TK) are so difficult to approach, there should be a reason for organizations such as UNESCO¹ (2011) or WIPO² to declare the broad intangible cultural heritage's (ICH) elements relevant to the entire humanity. In simple words, ICH and its elements are relevant for those aspects which are not to be seen. From this point of view, traditional crafts are relevant to the entire ICH field.

Traditional crafts are significant not necessarily for what we see, but for what is hidden. Pottery, weaving, blacksmithing, woodworking, and many others are important for the knowledge they contain. The oral transmission of the know-how means more than the preservation of traditions, for the crafts have had and retained the ability to adapt. This is, in fact, the reason why the most important planetary organizations have considered that crafts, along with other components of ICH, must be protected, and craftsmen must be supported to continue to develop and pass on their knowledge to future generations. We will talk about all these and several other topics next. To facilitate the understanding of these topics by non-specialists, real-world examples will be used and the language will avoid specialized terminology.

Within the next pages, we will summarize some basic terminology about traditional crafts (in association with intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge) and we will try to underline a few ideas about the relevance of traditional crafts for today's world and next future.



Practicing with traditional lime production (left) and transgenerational knowledge transfer (right)
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¹ For introductory information about intangible cultural heritage and its components see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003>.

² For introductory information about traditional knowledge see WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization): <https://www.wipo.int/tk/en/tk/>

How do we understand traditional crafts?

First of all, it is necessary to understand how and why to distinguish traditional crafts from other manufacturing occupations. There is a set of characteristics of traditional crafts, common to all elements of ICH, which distinguish them from other occupations, manufacturing or otherwise. These characteristics are collective, anonymous, and oral, to which we add syncretism³. The knowledge that makes up a craft is developed and accumulated over generations and through the exchange of information between craftsmen. This knowledge belongs to a collective and not to a particular craftsman. Even when a practitioner of a craft discovers something new, and innovates within that craft, not long after that new knowledge "melts" into the universe of knowledge that forms the craft. That's why in traditional crafts we don't talk about patents⁴, which protect the knowledge of a single person. Knowledge within crafts is free, even though in history we find craft guilds whose mission was, among other things, to keep the "secrets" of each craft.

However, what does "knowledge" mean when we refer to a craft? Knowledge, in this case, consists of all the information necessary to practice the craft. This also includes those types of information related to the senses: color, temperature, taste, texture, density, etc. Practitioners of a craft, from a wider geographical or cultural space, collectively possess the entire knowledge of that craft. The fact that there are variants of the practice of the craft, sometimes even at the practitioner level, does not mean that the collective character of the knowledge is diminished. The existing variants within a corpus of knowledge are part of the specifics of traditional crafts. Unlike other manufacturing occupations, whose knowledge has the same content and the same form, in the case of crafts, the whole is made up of innumerable variants.

Knowledge management and transfer depend, to a wide degree, on the craftsmen themselves. The knowledge involved in a craft is accumulated through the practitioners' direct experience, observation, and trial and error approach. The visual recognition of a suitable tree for obtaining wood, the appreciation of the quality of a certain type of soil by touch, the information provided by the smell of a certain plant, how these combine best to obtain a certain finished product... All this forms a type of knowledge capable of using materials that are not standardized, using constantly adaptable working techniques, to obtain sets of finished products that satisfy the same needs, without the products themselves being identical.

The development of knowledge within the *collective* has an important consequence: there is no single holder, an "owner" of that knowledge. Equally, it cannot be said that that knowledge is without an author or "owner". This is one of the reasons why the above-mentioned international organizations insist on the sui-generis protection of traditional knowledge. In the absence of protection, which can be useful at the collective level, some components of knowledge can be appropriated by a single person, and this can impose limitations on subsequent uses. As an example, how a certain pigment is made from natural ingredients, known to traditional wool dyers, ends up being patented by a single person. This will require any future user to pay a sum of money to be able to produce that pigment. The restriction on the use of the mode of production will apply even to the artisans in whose community, extended in time and space, the mode of making the pigment was developed.

Traditional knowledge, created over generations, is a type of knowledge that provides optimal integration of humans in their environment. Natural resources are used to the maximum, with little waste and a great economy. Even within the same craft, whatever it may be, a strong adaptation of techniques to available resources and their environment

³ See art. 2 of the UNESCO Convention on safeguarding of ICH. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention#art2>

⁴ According WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization), cited above.

can be observed. For this reason alone, traditional crafts must be defended and supported to be passed on.

The *anonymous* nature of traditional knowledge means that it has no specific creator or author. Even if, at any given moment, a particular practitioner makes a precisely identifiable contribution to the existing body of knowledge, that contribution is only relevant following acceptance by the entire community of artisans and beneficiaries. The integration of new contributions is done by modifying and adapting them by other practitioners, through the variants mentioned above. Although we are used to understanding the creator as a certain person, within traditional knowledge, the author is a whole community, very often, difficult to delimit to specific people. Simplifying to the max, the wheel has one or more unknown creators. Likewise, weaving or the process of extracting a metal from a rock.

When we come across a craft object that bears the name or initials of its creator, it does not mean that that person is the creator of all the traditional knowledge necessary to make that object. The application of the name or initial has a limited function: it individualizes and "links" that product only to the one who made it. The anonymous nature of knowledge is also preserved in the case of craft guilds. In this case, a guild will defend its knowledge which is collective and anonymous, again lacking a clear link between a particular person and a particular piece of knowledge.

The anonymous character of traditional knowledge is also highlighted in written versions, older or newer books. When we open such a volume, we will learn about techniques, materials, and methods, but not about those who created that knowledge. Moreover, it is useful to understand that written information about a particular craft is always incomplete. The great diversity of the materials to be worked with and the contexts in which the craft techniques and methods are applied require a long practice to find out the details that cannot be presented in writing, details accessible only to the human senses.

Therefore, when discussing the protection of craft knowledge, the lack of an author prevents the application of existing legislation in the fields of copyright and industrial property. Different, new regulations are therefore needed to address crafts and their associated knowledge from the perspective of collective knowledge, randomly distributed among the members of a community.

The third characteristic mentioned above is *orality*. This means that all that is craft know-how is transmitted orally, from craftsman to apprentice, in a non-formal way. Even in the case of crafts organized within some guilds, information is still transmitted orally. The writing down of knowledge appeared late in the history of manufacturing activities and did not include all the details necessary to make quality craft products. Typically, learning a craft is done through observation, imitation, and practice (a lot of practice).

Of course, in different historical contexts, we can find that some content of the associated knowledge crafts had been fixed in writing. However, the existence of these writings saved the knowledge partially only. The loss of oral transmission, from generation to generation, has led to the loss of all details that cannot be described and fixed in writing. The oral transmission of traditional knowledge is important because it facilitates the involvement of all senses in acquiring and perfecting the skills necessary to practice a craft.

Industrialization meant detaching certain sequences from craft processes and transposing them into simple, repetitive elements that could be made by machines. At the same time, industrialization also imposed the standardization of raw materials needed for production. Finally, automated processes and standardization allowed the orality of learning a trade to be abandoned. Even today, learning and performing simple

tasks are possible by reading and following written or drawn instructions, such as assembling the components of a piece of furniture.

Regarding orality itself, it remains to be seen whether new technologies such as Virtual Reality and haptic equipment will be able to replace the direct human interaction specific to oral learning.⁵

The fourth characteristic of living heritage (and TK as well) is *syncretism*⁶. This means that, within a craft, we will not encounter a very strict specialization of the content of knowledge. Instead, interferences between crafts and between them and the rest of knowledge are the rule, not the exception. Syncretism also means the inclusion of foreign components in certain knowledge, and their transformation into a coherent and functional whole. Strict specialization became possible since industrialization. Until then, some crafts, with work sequences that could be detached without jeopardizing the entire production process, could have some partial specializations within the craft. For example, in the case of pottery, large workshops could have the molding done by some workers and the decoration done by others. However, syncretism is what facilitated the "imports" of know-how from one craft to another or from other fields into crafts. All the syncretism is at the basis of the "movement" of crafts from one territory to another, covering all the areas where they had relevance or utility.



Practicing with wood roofing
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⁵ See WIPO for a general and wide presentation of the characteristics of the TK and traditional crafts - https://www.wipo.int/edocs/pubdocs/en/wipo_pub_1049.pdf

⁶ Romanian Law on Intangible Cultural Heritage, for the legal relevance of syncretism - https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/romania_law26_2008_roorof.pdf

Traditional crafts and traditional knowledge in human history & society

Having reviewed the characteristics of traditional knowledge, we will return to crafts and their place in the present and future. The reason we insisted on knowledge is that crafts are the physical expression of the previous. Only through knowledge do the components of nature and even nature in its entirety become useful to a human being. It is knowledge, accumulated over millennia, that has helped us separate ourselves from our less fortunate or less evolved relatives.

International bodies, representative of all humanity, emphasize the importance of safeguarding traditional crafts because they encapsulate important knowledge about the relationship between Humans and the Universe. Even though science provides explanations and tools to better understand how to use environmental resources for our benefit, science can sometimes be far too neutral and uninvolved. Crafts, urban or rural, are useful and necessary because they provide solutions to problems far too unimportant for a scientific approach or one involving advanced technology. With an almost trivial example, for the repair of a water pipe in the house, a skilled plumber is necessary and sufficient, and not a physicist, an expert in fluid mechanics.



A traditional blacksmith's shop
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In a highly technological world, it is difficult to accept that traditional crafts, manufacturing occupations in general, can still take place. However, several arguments require us to pay more attention to crafts and craftworkers.

We will start from a less obvious **characteristic of most ICH components**: utility. All forms of expression of traditional knowledge have a purpose, a well-defined finality. The aesthetics associated with the results of traditional knowledge play a well-defined role in the social relations of communities, if only through the ability to convey a message. The purpose of religious expressions is to order, in one way or another, the interaction between this world and other worlds. In the case of crafts, the usefulness of their results is obvious. However, a utilitarian approach is not enough to justify the need to keep crafts alive.

It is necessary to look at TK, expressed through crafts, at a deeper level, in the context of the interaction of people with the environment in which they live. In the case of crafts, artistic or utilitarian, this interaction is based on efficiency, effectiveness, and economy. The craftsman does not waste the resources available and necessary to produce a particular good. Somewhat simplistically, this economy of use is correlated with two resources of special importance: work and time. Wasting resources ultimately means more work and more time to get a certain amount of products. The waste of limestone in the process of obtaining lime means more work and more time to compensate for the wasted raw material. Today, the entire society is making significant efforts to learn how to use natural resources more economically or, in one word, to be sustainable.⁷

The use of industrial-type technologies allows, broadly speaking, to ignore the fact that part of the resources used is thrown away without receiving any use. The user sees only the finished product, everything that production means is hidden from him. Even the producer himself, in industrial society, becomes an abstraction, expressed through impersonal factories. Industrial-style tools even allow workers to ignore those amounts of resources that are unused. The industrial worker does not tire when he extracts the resources, using for this operation machines that can develop a force far greater than that of his muscles. Processing, in turn, is accomplished using far too little human muscle power. The lack of direct interaction between man and raw material facilitates, consequently, a consumerist approach to the use of resources transformed into finished products.

Direct contact with craftworkers and craft production processes allows us to understand the value of primary resources and the significance of the associated costs, i.e. the price a craftsman asks for a certain product. This direct contact acquires strong educational values because it facilitates the acquisition of responsible behaviors in the individual's relationship with his environment. Without insisting on educational theories, it is enough to remember that we learn more easily what we do directly. Acquiring responsible behavior concerning the environment is made easier by practice. Courses of a theoretical nature, which appeal to abstractions, symbols, and representations of reality, can make an important contribution to the process of educating responsibility, but they require time and patience. In contrast, the participation of children or adults in craft activities generates effects at a social level with increased effectiveness.

Another argument for keeping crafts as an active part of society considers their ability to adapt to the most different environments, most efficiently. For example, the construction of wooden houses very often uses raw materials in a form very close to their natural state. For this to be possible, a deep knowledge of the wood's essence, the growth phases of the trees, and the favorable moments for harvesting are necessary. The industrial processing of wood facilitates its standardization, ignoring details and specific elements. Equally, the abandonment of artisanal knowledge or traditional knowledge, in general, can create a high degree of dependence of the whole society on the availability of mediated resources such as advanced technologies. The technologies of the present and, predictably, of the future can radically transform the environment. These technologies are increasingly independent of the natural environment, adapting the environment to the technology.

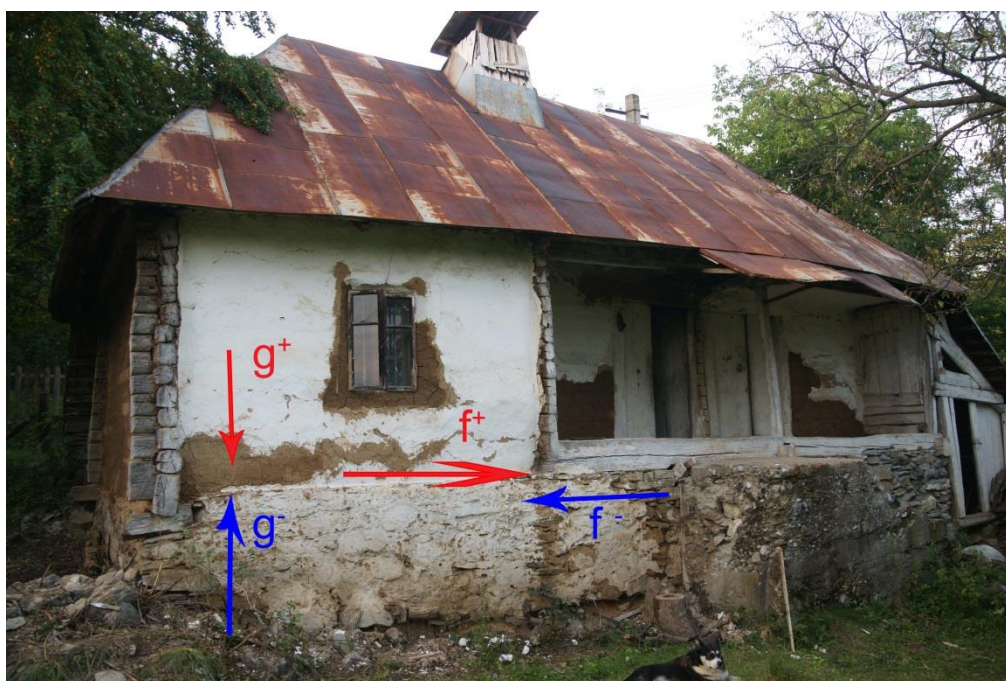
It can be argued that such an evolution in the application of knowledge is a desirable one, allowing humanity to focus on those types of activities that do not involve physical labor. However, it is worth noting that UNESCO and WIPO add to traditional knowledge, among others, genetic diversity. The technologies of today, and probably of the future, uniformly work in all fields. From automation at the dawn of the industrial revolution to industrial agriculture today we can see a reduction in diversity. Traditional knowledge,

⁷ For a variety of resources related to connection between TK, ICH and sustainable development see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/sustainable-development-and-living-heritage>.

including crafts, has proven over time to be perfectly capable of functioning in a highly diverse environment, including adapting to new environmental conditions. The diversity of forms of expression contained in traditional knowledge also includes a great linguistic richness. From this point of view, the adaptation of crafts to different environments also generated a diversity of language: names of tools, names of techniques, names of objects, etc.

TK and education

From another perspective, safeguarding the traditional knowledge associated with crafts using active ways, namely by practicing them, can prove useful from a broader educational perspective. Crafts are, by their very nature, manufacturing occupations. Practicing a craft is possible, among other things, when there is good hand-eye coordination (in addition to engaging all the other senses). Carrying out craft activities, especially for children, can make an important contribution to their harmonious development. We are used to educational systems including artistic activities such as drawing (painting) or music to achieve effects on children's physical development. However, given the great diversity of crafts, it is not unreasonable to think of school programs that include manual activities taken from crafts and adapted to the school environment. In the context of STEAM education (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics), the inclusion of crafts in the curriculum can contribute to a better connection between academic education and the easier integration of future adults into society⁸.



Gravity and friction demonstrated on a traditional house
© Pîrvu Ionică

The universe of traditional knowledge includes a huge diversity of practical applications of some theoretical knowledge. For example, pottery and blacksmithing can be linked to physics and chemistry. Crafts that involve the processing of plant or animal fibers can represent the practice components for chemistry. Vernacular architecture can be a good introduction to geometry. Carpentry or tinsmithing, in turn, can facilitate the understanding of some elements of mathematics and geometry (plane or in space). Of course, the results of crafts can be found in manuals, in the form of photos or

⁸ For further information about the connection between traditional crafts (living heritage) and education see <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/46212-EN.pdf>.

descriptions. However, in terms of knowledge, there is a huge difference between the information of a theoretical, imaginary, or symbolic type and information of a practical type. For example, information about how to start a fire with a piece of ferrous metal (steel) and a quartz stone (flints) will not start a fire, no matter how detailed this information is. The fire will be ignited by striking the iron against the stone and producing a spark. Likewise, the video recording of a fire played on the screen of the mobile phone, will not warm us, nor is it useful to bake a potato.

Although at present, in most societies developed or seeking a higher level of development, significant efforts are being made for digitalization (virtual and augmented reality, meta universes, artificial intelligence), for the transition of an increasing number of activities into - an area of total automation (including through the intervention of robots), the need for direct interaction between a Human and his/her environment may be preserved and even increase. For at least another generation, people will need direct interaction, sharing the same physical space, without the mediation of an electronic device. Moreover, such a reality highlighted the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, during which, for society to function in a way as close as possible to the pre-pandemic one, the most important technologies available were involved to reduce direct human interaction. However, in many ways, it has been proven that interaction in the virtual environment, while relevant for many activities, fails to provide people with a reasonable substitute for specific gregariousness and direct physical activity. Moreover, it should be noted that, during the prolonged pandemic quarantines, the states included DIY stores in the category of stores that offer essential products. Basically, people had access, with fewer restrictions, to food, medicine, and products that allowed manual activities.

This article does not allow the development of the mentioned topics. However, the pandemic experience should give us all reasons for thought. Our health, of each of us, involves more than food, decent living space, and medicine. We still need to interact directly in the same physical space, use our whole body for different activities and interact with the natural environment.

The appeal to crafts is not a plea for a return to a utopian "golden age" of humanity, during which humans were integrated into nature and lived together with it, without spoiling and destroying it. Reconsidering the place in the society of traditional crafts could significantly contribute to solving some global problems faced by all of humanity: the need to reduce the consumption of natural resources; the imperative of a more environmentally friendly society; creating a balance as stable as possible between the development of knowledge based on information and knowledge based on experience. Last but not least, the recognition of the value of traditional knowledge, including that expressed through artistic or utilitarian crafts, can represent the solution for preserving the cultural heritage existing today and passing it on to future generations.

Author biography

Pîrvu IONICĂ has graduated from the Faculty of Legal and Administrative Sciences of "Dimitrie Cantemir" Christian University, Bucharest, and has a Ph.D. diploma in philology issued by the Romanian Academy - „Constantin Brăiloiu” Ethnography and Folklore Institute. During the last 25 years, he was directly involved in drafting Romanian laws in the cultural field, including the Romanian law about the protection of intangible cultural heritage. During the last 15 years, he was also active in initiatives aiming to preserve *in situ* and *in vivo* a large variety of traditional crafts and traditional knowledge. In this respect, he is a genuine bearer of traditional knowledge related to masonry, woodworking, weaving, and building using mud and wood. Also, he has over 20 years of experience in strategic development, project management, and adult training (including non-formal and informal education).