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# Digital Natives in Preschool: Mexican Teachers' Perspectives on Technology-Influenced Learning

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## *Abstract*

The purpose of this cross-sectional phenomenological study is to explore and understand the impact that the use of technology and social media at home has on preschoolers, and how such technology outside the classroom influences their reactions and attitudes to traditional materials. This study explored the perspectives of five preschool teachers, who are the ones who have observed and lived this phenomenon in preschool classrooms, generation after generation. The instruments used for data collection were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. After conducting a thematic analysis, the results suggest that digital resources and materials obtained more positive responses due to their engaging and interactive nature, whereas traditional materials were often met with boredom or disinterest by preschoolers.

*Keywords:* preschool, digital natives, external factors, classroom materials, teacher perspectives.

## 1. Introduction

The main objective of this study was to explore and understand a current phenomenon that has emerged in recent years and has been growing exponentially in preschool children. This phenomenon is about the rapid changes in how preschool children learn and expand their knowledge at an increasingly younger age due to technology, generation after generation. The rapid development of technologies and media have changed children's lives and ways of learning, including preschool children (Hsin, Li, & Tsai, 2014). Currently, a wide variety of studies can be found related to topics such as the use of technology in children (Mertala, 2016), the effects of technology on learning and academic performance (Ozerbas & Erdogan, 2016), implementation of technology and digital media in the classroom and childhood centers (Donohue & Schomburg, 2017). However, most studies typically focus on technology designed especially for learning or children, in school and non-school settings. However, several authors such as McPake, Plowman, and Stephen (2013), and Hsin et al. (2014) agree that very little has been studied about the use and influence of digital technologies at home that are not intended for young children under 5 years old. This implies that little has been investigated on how the influence of technology at home has an impact on the behavior, attitudes, and responses that children (specifically preschool children) have towards the materials, activities, content, and forms of learning in the classroom in a Mexican context. Is important that this issue and its impact continue to be studied, even more so because it is something that will likely continue to affect or impact education and teaching practices in general. Therefore, this study aims to understand this phenomenon in the Mexican

context through the perspectives of Mexican preschool teachers, who are the ones who have observed and lived this phenomenon in preschool classrooms, generation after generation. This research seeks to answer the following question: *What are the perspectives of Mexican kindergarten teachers of preschool children towards learning materials used in the classroom?*

## 2. Literature review

The following section will present an overview of previous research in the areas related to types of materials used in the preschool classroom, external factors and use of technology and media out of the classroom, and digital natives.

### 2.1 *Types of materials used in the preschool classroom*

As young children and preschoolers nowadays have an earlier and easier access to technology and digital multimedia, digital learning content is being designed specifically for children. This has led to research testing and comparing the different types of learning materials and content available today for young children (e.g., Kjallander & Moinian, 2014; Mertala, 2016; Ritcher & Courage, 2017; Reich, Yau, Xu, Muskat, Uvalle & Cannata 2019). In this study, it is important to provide a description of the materials used in the classroom in order to better understand the preschoolers' responses and reactions to different kinds of materials. In this case, materials are classified into traditional and digital. On one hand, traditional materials refer to classroom materials, content, and resources that do not require technological devices to be used. For example, traditional textbooks, printed worksheets, flashcards, physical objects, etc. These materials are typically static and do not change based on user actions (Richter & Courage, 2017). On the other hand, digital materials are those that depend on technological devices such as computers, mobile phones, monitors, and MP3 players to games, videos, music, e-books, and animations available on the internet (McPake et al., 2013).

### 2.2 *External factors and the use of technology and media out of the classroom*

Because of the rapid development of technologies and digital media, children's lives and ways of learning have changed dramatically in recent decades. However, they are not only using technology and digital multimedia designed especially for children. According to authors such as McPake et al. (2013) and Reich et al. (2019), young children also engage with a wide range of domestic technologies, social media, mobile devices, digital content, and other forms of external influence that are intended for adult use. Technology and digital media have such an impact on children that today a large variety of studies and research reviews can be found on this topic (e.g., Hesin et al., 2014; Coyne, Radesky, Collier, Gentile, Linder, Nathanson & Rogers, 2017). In addition to the influence that technology has on the cognitive, psychological, emotional, and social development of children, researchers have been interested in the role that technology has on young children and the influence it has on various aspects such as learning and academic performance (Crescenzi, Jewitt & Price 2014; Dontre, 2021). Likewise, according to Tuerk, Anderson, Bernier, and Beauchamp (2021), another important external factor to consider in children's development and learning are the proximal influences that children have outside the classroom, for example, parent-child interactions, caregivers, parental practices, or family functioning. Therefore, the use of technology, consumption of digital media, and proximal influences outside the classroom are important external factors to consider and are crucial to understanding preschoolers learning and learning preferences.

### 2.3 Digital natives

The term digital natives (DNs) is used to identify individuals who were born in the last two decades of the digital era and are growing up exposed to continuous evolution and constant updates in the field of technology. This concept was introduced by Prensky (2001), who considers digital natives as *native speakers* of the digital language of computers, video games, and the internet. However, Dingli and Seychell (2015) argue that due to the great changes and adaptations that technology and the digital world have had in recent years, DN's can also be divided into generations, the first and the second generation. They consider the first generation of DN's as "late starters" (p.1) since there were no devices with touch interfaces and therefore, their exposure to computers and the internet started when they had sufficient knowledge and skills to operate the mouse and keyboard. Moreover, the different mobile devices in existence and the internet at home were less accessible, and the social web that we have today did not even exist yet. In contrast, the second generation of digital natives (2DNs) was born in an era where the internet and technology are more accessible. In addition, a lot of devices nowadays are *smart* devices and come with a touchscreen, thus, the basic requirement to use such a device is a finger. Furthermore, according to Dingli and Seychell (2015), one-year-olds of 2DNs manage to master the intuitive touch interfaces of their tablets they do not even need to understand the basic concepts of a language before operating a device (as in the case of the first generation of DN's). Understanding DN's is crucial in educational settings, as their learning styles and preferences differ significantly from previous generations. For example, DN's tend to prefer interactive and multimedia-rich learning experiences over traditional, text-based methods. Moreover, they are used to instant communication methods such as social media, messaging apps, and video calls. According to Kivunja (2014), DN's learn not from the linear, paper-based data in textbooks but from hyperlinked, random-access, digital sources that are available online. They learn, not simply by reading, writing, and arithmetic, but with the assistance of online tools, simulations, games, online videos, and even social media. Thus, the concept and understanding of DN's, in general, is particularly relevant to this study, as it aims to examine how the use of digital technologies at home affects preschool children and how teachers perceive these changes in a classroom setting.

## 3. Methodology

This section presents the methodology design for this cross-sectional study. The research question that guided this study was:

*What are the perspectives of Mexican kindergarten teachers of preschool children towards learning materials used in the classroom?*

### 3.1 Paradigm and method

The perspective that this research adopted is the postmodernism paradigm, which is a perspective in which ideas enter under the umbrella of qualitative research (Heigham & Croker, 2009). In the postmodernist worldview, diversity among people, ideas, and institutions is celebrated and equally valued. By accepting the diversity and plurality of the world, no one element is privileged or more powerful than another (Merriam & Associates, 2002, as cited in Heigham & Croker, 2009). Therefore, postmodernism seemed the most appropriate paradigm for this research as it aligns with the objectives and expectations of the study, that is, to obtain different points of view of the same phenomenon from the perspective of participants with different backgrounds (different years of experience) in order to have representativeness.

Following the qualitative tradition, the research method or research approach employed in this study is the phenomenological approach. The purpose of phenomenology is to

look in detail at the phenomena under study to explore the complex world of lived experiences from the participant's (the ones who live it) point of view (Qutoshi, 2018). In other words, the focus is on a deeper understanding of phenomena embedded within research participant's views and perspectives. Therefore, this approach is the most suitable for the present research as it leads to gaining a deeper level of insight into the personal experience and knowledge of the participants, but the focus is still on the phenomena. Moreover, under a phenomenology approach, a researcher can reflect critically and become more thoughtful and attentive in understanding social practices as well (Qutoshi, 2018). This is also convenient for this study as it is also intended to know the impact and effects that the phenomena have in the participant's context and professional practices.

### *3.2 Research context and participants*

This study included the participation of 5 female preschool teachers who have different years of experience teaching in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. In order to participate they needed to meet the following criteria:

- Be a preschool teacher at present or have had experience teaching preschool children no more than a year ago.
- Give or have given classes within the state of Guanajuato, Mexico.
- Years of experience as a preschool teacher.

According to the demographic data collected through a questionnaire, all the teachers participating in this study currently teach in private institutions. Moreover, all participants only have experience in private schools except for one, who has previously had experience teaching preschool in the public sector. These points along with other characteristics are important to consider as might have an impact on the participants' perspectives and perceptions of the phenomenon studied in this research. Moreover, additional characteristics and qualities contribute to representativeness, which is also valued in this study.

### *3.4 Data collection procedures*

The data collection for this study was conducted in October 2023. Two instruments were used to collect the data: semi-structured, and questionnaires. The design of these data collection instruments, as well as the data collection process, was in Spanish, the first language of the participants.

#### *3.4.1 Questionnaire*

A demographic questionnaire was applied to the participants in this study previously to the interviews to collect demographic data and general information from the participants to:

- Collect demographic and personal information that could be relevant.
- Obtain information that helps to have a better understanding of the context and perspectives of each participant.
- Adapt and restructure some questions that will be asked in the interview if necessary.

This questionnaire was designed and applied with both open-response items and closed-response items.



### 3.4.2 Interviews

Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, which Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2003) described as a means of data collection that can help to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to a research question(s) and objectives. This data collection instrument was employed because of its flexibility. As this study aims to explore the phenomenon being studied by looking at different perspectives and experiences, additional questions may be added since understanding each perspective in detail is essential.

Each interview was conducted one-on-one with each participant. All interviews were conducted face-to-face except one of them due to the geographical dispersion and inability to come to a central location for an interview. Instead, this particular interview was conducted and recorded via videocall in Zoom, and subsequently transcribed to be coded and analyzed.

The base questions of the interviews mainly focused on teachers' perspectives of traditional materials vs digital materials and technological devices, implementation of technology in the preschool classroom, as well as changes, adaptations, and evolution of teaching and learning practices in preschool due to technology-influenced learning.

### 3.5 Data analysis method

The data collected and transcribed from the semi-structured interviews was analyzed with a thematic analysis method to identify patterns in the experiences and perspectives of the participants about the phenomenon, how it arose, and its impact in the preschool classroom. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that involves identifying patterns and recurring ideas (referred to as themes) in a qualitative data set (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). Thematic analysis allows searching for subjective information, such as a participant's experiences, views, and opinions.

### 3.6 Ethical protocols

To respect and protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms were used instead of their real names. Additionally, they were provided with an informed consent form to ensure well-informed and voluntary participation. In such informed consent forms were established the purpose and objectives of the study, how the data and results would be used, the activities in which participants would contribute by being part of the project, as well as the risks and benefits of participating in the project. Furthermore, in such a consent form anonymity was guaranteed to participants and they were informed of the right to choose to withdraw from the project at any time.

## 4. Findings and results

This section presents the results of the study with the objective of answering the research question: *What are the perspectives of Mexican preschool teachers of preschool children towards learning materials used in the classroom?* During the data analysis process, five themes emerged: (1) Preschoolers' attitudes towards traditional vs digital material, (2) more "awake and aware" children in the classroom, (3) the replacement and adaptation of traditional materials with digital materials, (4) the role of technology and media outside the classroom, and teacher difficulties with technology.

#### 4.1 Attitudes towards traditional vs digital materials

Most of the teachers participating in this study pointed out that there is a notorious difference in the attitudes and reactions of preschoolers towards the use of traditional material and the use of digital material. One of the teachers stated that there are more positive attitudes and reactions towards digital materials and activities that involve such digital materials or technological devices:

*"I have seen that children are very interested in what is related to the internet and technologies at present. And they are more engaged and attentive if technologies are involved" (Helena, Int.)*

This teacher also points out the main differences when she uses technology and digital resources, and mentions that their preschool students are especially motivated by audiovisual resources:

*"Well, the first thing is that you capture their attention, with what is novel for them, the interest is immediate, especially with videos and screens, and they immediately show interest and do pay more attention to you." (Helena, Int.)*

In contrast, they mention that they have perceived more negative attitudes towards traditional materials. For example, Blanca reported experiencing and witnessing more negative attitudes and responses related to traditional material in the classroom:

*"Now they only last 15, 20 minutes with, for example, plasticine and they complain 'I'm bored already' Yesterday when we were learning the numbers, I told them, Let's mold them with plasticine 'I'm already bored'. (Blanca, Int.)*

Likewise, teacher Fabiola reports a lack of concentration and motivation when working only with traditional materials:

*"Yes, well, all those materials that have to do with concentration, for example, the books that are basic, those that are to teach them to read or teach them mathematics. Precisely because since they are not graphics that move, they sort of say, 'Hey this book what?' 'Or this what?' Since children are now accustomed to the fact that all the animations, they look for something interactive and animated, the fact that you bring them, perhaps, a copy, does not attract their attention." (Fabiola, Int.)*

Similar to Blanca and Fabiola, Helena mentioned the following when asked if preschoolers' attitudes and responses would be positive if only traditional materials were used:

*"No, I think they would get bored more easily, they would get totally bored. Children need more activity and more stimulation to really get involved in the activities." (Helena, Int.)*

On the contrary, Maria, the teacher with fewer years of experience, argues that she thinks that there is no such big difference in her students' reactions and behavior, the difference is in the time they are engaged with materials:

*"I think that all the material continues to work, but only for less time." (Maria, Int)*

It is interesting that this teacher does not think that there is a difference in the reaction that students have to traditional material, but that the difference is in the time that the material keeps them hooked or involved in an activity. This may be due to the generational and experience gap between teachers since teachers with more years of experience can probably see a clearer contrast in the change of materials and their effectiveness.

#### 4.2 More “awake and aware” children in the classroom

An interesting pattern that emerged during the analysis is that teachers perceive digital native preschoolers of the most recent generations as “more awake and aware” due to the influence of technologies and social networks. The teachers explain that due to the easy access that nowadays children have to technology, mobile devices, and social media, children of the last generations (from 2021 to 2023) are “more awake and aware”. This is in the sense that now children are more knowledgeable and acquire much more information and skills at a much earlier age than in previous generations. One of the teachers comment:

*“Well, they are already more awake and as I told you, perhaps the stimulation at home, they don't like just simple activities anymore, “Oh no, it's just coloring”, no, they are already looking for more.” (Blanca, Int.)*

In the case of teacher Blanca, the consequence of such a phenomenon could be perceived as something problematic for her as a teacher, since she mentions that now her students need more than “simple activities” and that require more materials and resources, more activities and more creativity than before. This could be an example of the influence that technology and social media have outside the classroom and shows that such influence also has an impact on the classroom for both teachers and students. However, more “awake and aware” preschoolers are not necessarily a problem or do not mean a disadvantage or something bad, as Fabiola suggests:

*“It is precisely this part that now children learn things much faster, they have more memory capacity than they did 10 years ago, for example.” (Fabiola, Int.)*

Similarly, Helena pointed out some advantages of “more awake children”:

*“I notice the children are much more awake. In every sense. And that is thanks, perhaps, to the same technology and the lifestyle they live now. They are more aware of many things that perhaps the children of before were not. Above all, I also see that children today are much more expressive, more social 'no teacher, it's this', 'no teacher, it's that.' Most of them express themselves without any problem.” (Helena, Int.)*

On the other hand, Fabiola noted that this issue of more knowledgeable children has also contributed to changes in teaching strategies, and sometimes it can be challenging for them as teachers to be flexible and adaptable.

*“Now from what the child knows is where we depart to teach and for us to know what to teach. Right? And yet, well, in my previous training practices, when I was just starting, the teacher was the one who shaped that part of the knowledge, and now is not, now the children give us a lot of information to depart from their learning.” (Fabiola, Int.)*

Then, this information matches with the suggestions of several authors (e.g. Mcpake et al., 2013) that nowadays digital technologies used at home in smart and intuitive devices, have the potential to expand the knowledge of young children and help them to become more “awake and aware” by fostering their communicative and literacy skills. Of course, this is perceived as something good and advantageous for the teachers, however, it can also be challenging for some teachers as they need to be updating their strategies, methods, and practices to take advantage of such early knowledge and to facilitate learning in the classroom.

#### 4.3 Replacing and adapting the traditional with the digital

Another recurring theme identified during the data analysis was the need to adapt or even replace materials and activities due to the current preschoolers’ learning preferences and needs. For example, teacher Fabiola comments:

*“There are materials that we definitely have discarded because they do not have functionality for children because they do not attract their attention, as I told you. In this case, it could be a content book for math. Or for example, the use of nothing more than the blackboard, now you cannot be using it all the time.” (Fabiola, Int.)*

Of course, there are many reasons and factors that lead to changes in material, activities, and teacher practices in general. However, the participants mentioned that one of the main reasons why they have had to change, adapt, and replace traditional materials and activities was due to the impact of technology, digital devices, the internet, and social media. For example, Helena mentioned:

*“Well now everything is being renewed and well, what is behind is left behind because now technology and what is new is what really interests them” (Helena, Int.)*

One of the teachers argues that, in her case, rather than replacing, it is complementing the traditional with technology in order to keep the students engaged and motivated:

*“More than anything it is like complementing. If, for example, I'm teaching the vowels, I play them a song about the vowels, so it stays more with them. Then I include the... the screen, a video of the vowels, and then they on a piece of cardboard on the floor with chalk and other materials, complemented with technology. I believe that both are essential, both forms of traditional and technological materials. I believe that everything... everything is useful, and we can take a little of everything.” (Blanca, Int.)*

Similarly, Blanca says that is important to complement traditional materials with technology and digital resources with which children are already very well familiar.

*“I think that now we complement or facilitate the child's learning through technology, which they also find at home. (Blanca, Int.)”*

Additionally, is noteworthy that something that was mentioned by various participants was that they specially started to replace materials and activities much more in the past three years. This may suggest that the radical shift to technology because of the need for confinement during covid 19 had a major impact on the early learning experiences of children now attending school.

#### 4.4 *The role of technology and media outside the classroom*

Of course, something discussed and mentioned during the interviews was the role that technology and media have as an influence on children outside the classroom. Regarding this theme, during the data analysis different opinions, perspectives, and examples arose about how technology and social media have influenced children. Some participants highlighted the diffusion and accessibility of technologies and digital content, for example, Fabiola mentioned:

*“I think it's not that the influences of now are better or worse. The influences and content have not changed much, rather, what changes are the contexts, accessibility, and dissemination. And now fashions change more constantly.” (Fabiola, Int.)*

In the same way, Helena commented the following regarding easy access to technology and the fast change in trends spread in social media:

*“Now fashions and trends change more constantly. So, I say, maybe the trends now are more volatile than when I was little or 10 years ago, right? For example, before you could only listen to certain music if you had a cassette or a CD or watch the movie if you had the DVD. Not now, now you go on the bus, and you hear the music,*

*you are anywhere, and you can access almost anything because everyone has access to a cell phone and the internet.” (Helena, Int)*

Some of the teachers suggest that this easy access and overuse of technologies and the internet at home could contribute to the lack of motivation in the classroom and be one of the reasons why nowadays it is harder for children to focus for longer periods of time. For example, Blanca mentions:

*“Stimulation at home, I think, has a lot to do with it. They are active all the time, which parents allow them to use because... aside from that they also have a tablet all the time, a cell phone in their hands, and well, because of that they need to see colors, they need to see movement, they need... to be active so yes, by the stimuli from outside, the stimuli at home, the stimuli in society.” (Blanca, Int)*

However, again, Helena does not see this as a complete disadvantage, on the contrary, she argued that this influence and the impact of technology and the different media that children consume outside the classroom can also be something good:

*“They now have more alternatives to learn and express expressions. Not just parents or family. They are not limited to ‘Oh, I heard it from my aunt’ No, they now tell you ‘Oh teacher, haven't you seen this and this?’ Now they narrate and tell you a whole story about something or the meaning, and that is the advantage.” (Helena, Int)*

These perspectives may imply that the influence of technologies, mobile devices, social media, and the internet outside the classroom can impact the classroom, and preschoolers' learning and development and can bring both advantages and disadvantages for teachers.

#### 4.5 Teacher difficulties with technology

Another notable pattern in the answers of the participants is the difficulties that they as teachers had and still experienced due to the impact that technology has on children's learning and lifestyles. For example, some of them mentioned that they need to prepare more activities than in past years because children's span of attention has become shorter.

*“I think they were calmer before and they accepted activities that do not involve more than coloring, um... or gluing paper balls and... things like that, no. Now the children want movement, more material, and several forms of stimuli at the same time or in the same activity. Now if you spend more than 20 minutes on the same thing their attention has already been lost on a different thing.” (Blanca, Int.)*

Some participants further mentioned that they also find it difficult to keep up with the trends, especially when it comes to music, language, characters, artists, movies, etc. that children consume outside the classroom nowadays, which makes it more difficult for them to make the students identify or relate to the content that the teachers can offer them.

### 5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of preschool teachers about the lack of engagement of preschoolers with traditional learning material in the classroom. The main findings show that preschool teachers perceive a significant disparity in children's reactions toward traditional and digital materials. Digital resources and materials garnered more positive responses due to their novelty and interactive nature, whereas traditional materials were often met with boredom or disinterest. Teachers noted that children nowadays are accustomed to animated and interactive content, which seems to affect their engagement with static materials. Moreover, the results of this study show that teachers perceive preschoolers of current generations

as more alert and knowledgeable, attributing this to their exposure to technology and social media. This study was limited to a small number of participants in a small region, and only two data collection instruments were implemented. These conditions make it difficult to generalize the results. However, despite the limitations, this research makes a valuable contribution to understanding the impact that this phenomenon has on a small scale in the context of Mexican preschool classrooms through teacher's perceptions. Furthermore, the results of this study have provided interesting insights about specific aspects and factors that could be further investigated in the future, such as children's shorter span of attention that the teachers mentioned in this study.

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# Community Participation in Identifying, Inventorying, Managing, and Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal

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## *Abstract*

Intangible Cultural Heritage Safeguarding and Community Participation is one of the topics discussed within UNESCO's Asia-Pacific Higher Education Network for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage (APHEN-ICH). Specifically, this article focuses on Nepal as a case due to its rich cultural and religious characteristics. The main emphasis of the article, however, lies in evaluating the efforts made by the Nepalese people in protecting their unique national assets. Furthermore, the article explores the relationship between Nepal's intangible cultural heritages and the local population. It examines how the local population contributes to the preservation of these national treasures and analyzes the resulting impacts, causes, and other relevant factors. Additionally, the article delves into the various opportunities, challenges, and potential solutions associated with safeguarding intangible cultural heritages and engaging the community in this process.

*Keywords:* community participation, intangible cultural heritage, safeguarding, Nepal.

## 1. Introduction

The global context of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is primarily defined by the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, adopted in 2003. This convention aims to recognize and promote the significance of intangible cultural heritage, including practices, knowledge, skills, and cultural spaces that communities and groups consider part of their heritage (UNESCO, 2022). As a signatory to the Convention, Nepal plays a crucial role in safeguarding its intangible cultural heritage. The country has a rich cultural legacy, including folk music, dance, festivals, rituals, craftsmanship, and oral traditions. These elements are deeply ingrained in Nepalese communities and contribute to their identity and sense of belonging.

With its 125 documented ethnic groups, Nepal is one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world. It is also multicultural, multilingual, and diverse, with 125 spoken languages (Sah, 2021). Preserving and promoting its cultural heritage is a source of pride for

Nepal, as it is an integral part of its identity. Nepal's involvement in the Convention includes identifying, documenting, and promoting its intangible cultural heritage. This involves initiatives such as inventorying cultural practices, raising awareness among communities, supporting traditional knowledge practitioners, and integrating intangible cultural heritage into education and sustainable development programs.

Through its participation in international forums and collaborations facilitated by the Convention, Nepal exchanges experiences, best practices, and expertise in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. By actively engaging with the Convention, Nepal contributes to global efforts to preserve and promote the diversity of intangible cultural expressions, fostering mutual respect and understanding among cultures worldwide.

Over the years, the definition of intangible cultural heritage has evolved. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines it as the cultural heritage that has been passed down from generation to generation, encompassing not only physical aspects but also intangible expressions like social practices, performing arts, oral traditions, festive events, and spiritual ceremonies (UNESCO, 2023). These cultural heritages not only preserve traditional ways of life but also provide a platform for younger generations to connect with their culture, learn about their identities, incorporate them into their daily lives, and respect the ways of life of others (UNESCO, 2007). The concept of "intangible" cultural heritage aims to instill a sense of identity among people and help them appreciate possessions connected to their culture and religion, even if they are not tangible.

Nepal's intangible cultural heritages permeate every aspect of daily life, from the bustling streets of Kathmandu to the hidden villages in the mountains, from the flat Terai region to the towering Himalayas, and from one ethnic group to another. These heritages form a dynamic mosaic that reflects the country's cultural wealth and character. The pulsating heartbeat of the nation is made up of diverse rituals, festivals, historical occasions, myths, acts of devotion, and natural cycles. Each of these remarkable events is marked by intricate yet enjoyable rituals, vibrant music, folk and traditional dances, and stunning traditional attire (Baral, 2019). Intangible cultural heritage in Nepal serves as a bridge between the past, present, and future, playing a crucial role in defining the nation's identity. Despite being a small, developing nation in South Asia, Nepal's cultural treasures and the need for global cultural awareness are still not fully recognized. Therefore, this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage, including its significance, challenges, and potential.

The goal of this article is to educate readers about Nepal's diverse intangible cultural heritage and help them understand its importance within the country. By delving into the country's culture, especially its intangible cultural heritage, this article aims to raise awareness of Nepal's rich traditions and assets. Additionally, this article aims to explore the potential and challenges associated with these cultural resources and examine the connections between civilization and intangible cultural heritage. Finally, this article will focus on possible strategies and solutions to safeguard and promote the nation's cultural legacies.

## 2. The intangible cultural heritage of Nepal

As mentioned above, Nepal is rich when it comes to cultural heritage. In this section, we embark on the intangible cultural heritages that embellish the cultural structure of Nepal. This section focuses on exploring the main domains of intangible cultural heritage found in Nepal and unveiling what each domain has to offer.

### *2.1 Oral rituals*

The oral rituals (Maukhik Parampara in Nepali) of storytelling and folklore have been used by Nepali for millennia to pass down their traditions from one generation to the next. Not only have stories about civilizations and customs been passed down through the generations, but also numerous made-up tales, bedtime stories, and other stories have been ingrained in Nepali society. These are the historical customs that are still very much in use today and play a crucial role in fostering cross-generational communication and cultural exchange. These oral ceremonies discuss many gods and goddesses, well-known heroes, and various significant elements of society. These oral traditions had their origins in literature or other written forms before evolving into oral tales and interactions that allowed for a deeper understanding of the social and linguistic facets of society (Universität Wien, 2021). Some of the famous folklore in Nepal includes Yetis (creatures in the snow), Kichkandi (witches), Pishacha (forms of Vampires), Jhakri (a breed of shamans in the form of doctors), Bhakunde Bhoot (wandering spirits, ghosts), and many more (Bista, 2015).

### *2.2 Performing arts*

Nepali are passionate about the arts since the nation is among the most stunning and creative in the entire globe. Dance, music, illusion, theater, and mime have traditionally been the most well-liked performing arts in Nepal and have played a significant role in preserving the nation's current variety. The concept of performance arts in Nepal dates back to when there was a panchayat system (no-party system) in Nepal during the mid-1980s (Baral, 2019; Performance Art Resources, 2020). The performing arts in Nepal have not only been used in the context of culture and traditions but also have played an important role in political and social aspects of the country as people find it effective to send a message to society through the means of performing arts. These forms of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage have been appropriated by several artists throughout the globe, helping to keep the country's reputation intact. Since performing arts have traditionally played a significant role in defining the Nepali identity, the curriculum of educational institutions now includes a variety of performing arts, including dances, musical instruments, and theatrical productions, to infuse culture into the learning process (Joshi & Dangal, 2020).

### *2.3 Traditional crafts*

Nepali people cherish hand-made crafts and other items of this nature since they have a long history of practicing traditional craftsmanship. The majority of Nepalese handicrafts are influenced by the Hindu and Buddhist religions, and people often employ locally accessible raw materials such as bamboo, tree trunks, leaves, etc. God statues, silver and metallic goods, pottery, stone sculptures, handcrafted papers, bells, and a wide variety of other objects are only a few examples. These handcrafted items are not only a part of Nepali culture, but they also make wonderful gifts and keepsakes for loved ones. The tradition of making handicrafts dates way back in the Nepali culture, and the most common types of them are woodcrafts, metalcrafts, silver craft, metalcraft, bamboo craft, and ceramics (Kailash Himalaya Trek, 2021). This type of intangible cultural legacy is crucial for exhibiting talent and simultaneously maintaining the culture.

### *2.4 Social practices*

Given that more than 60% of Nepalis identify as Hindu, social practices like festivals and rituals play a significant role in Nepali culture. Hinduism is recognized as the religion that celebrates the greatest number of social activities. The majority of Nepal's social customs are based on folklore, the blessings of the old, or the commemoration of a significant historical event. In addition to festivals and festivities, Nepal also observes religious rituals such as pujas (God

worship), temple visits, and rites to honor plants, the sun, and nature. As all ethnic groups share the same social practices of religion, tolerance, and friendship, Nepali social practices unite the communities, foster social peace, and enable diverse ethnic groups to coexist.

### 3. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe

The cultural heritage surrounding knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe is deeply rooted in Nepal. The country's diverse landscape, which ranges from the towering peaks of the Himalayas to lush valleys and plains, has forged a unique bond between its people and the natural world. According to UNESCO (2007), traditional beliefs, such as animism and Hinduism, play a significant role in shaping our cultural heritage. Numerous rituals, ceremonies, and festivals are dedicated to honoring and appeasing various natural elements, deities, and celestial bodies. Moreover, practices like astrology, Ayurveda, Yoga, and Vastu Shastra are intricately woven into our culture, reflecting our deep connection with nature.

Nepal's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) regarding nature and the universe extends beyond religious or spiritual beliefs; it also encompasses traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations. UNIECO Domains also highlights the knowledge includes sustainable agricultural practices, herbal medicine, and conservation techniques that exhibit a profound respect for the environment (UNESCO, 2023). Preserving and promoting this cultural heritage is crucial for Nepal's sustainable development.

#### 3.1 *Preserving cultural treasures through education and awareness*

Nestled in the heart of the Himalayas, Nepal is a country renowned for its breathtaking landscapes, rich history, and vibrant cultural heritage. Beyond the majestic mountains and ancient temples, Nepal is home to a diverse range of intangible heritage that reflects the country's identity and traditions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MOFA], 2023). From vibrant festivals to unique art forms, these intangible treasures are invaluable and must be cherished and preserved for future generations.

According to UNESCO (2007), Intangible heritage encompasses the non-physical aspects of a culture, including traditions, rituals, oral histories, performing arts, and social practices. Nepal, with its diverse ethnic communities and indigenous groups, boasts a plethora of intangible heritage that has been passed down through generations. One of the most prominent aspects of Nepal's intangible heritage is its religious and cultural festivals. Dashain, the biggest Hindu festival, is a vibrant celebration of the victory of good over evil. The festival stretches over 15 days and is marked by various rituals, including animal sacrifices, cultural dances, and the flying of colorful kites (Nepal Tourism Board, 2023). Tihar, also known as the Festival of Lights, is another significant festival where Nepalis honor animals, including cows, dogs, and crows, as a symbol of respect and gratitude.

Traditional music and dance forms are integral to Nepal's intangible heritage. The country is known for its diverse folk dances, such as the Dhime dance, Maruni dance, and Maithili dance, each originating from different regions and ethnic groups (Baral, 2019). These dance forms often depict stories from mythology and local folklore, accompanied by traditional musical instruments like the Madal, Sarangi, and Bansuri.

Nepal's oral traditions and storytelling practices are deeply rooted in its intangible heritage. Tales of gods, goddesses, and legendary figures have been passed down through generations via oral narratives. The ancient epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata hold a special place in the hearts of Nepalis, and storytellers continue (UNESCO, 1967) to captivate audiences with their vivid retelling of these timeless tales.

Another remarkable aspect of Nepal's intangible heritage is its traditional craftsmanship. Skilled artisans create intricate wood carvings, metalwork, pottery, and textile designs that reflect the country's rich artistic traditions. The Newari community, renowned for its exquisite architecture and craftsmanship, has played a significant role in preserving Nepal's traditional art forms.

Khanal (2019) focuses on language as a vital part of a country's intangible heritage, and Nepal boasts remarkable linguistic diversity. With over 120 languages spoken across the nation, Nepal is a linguistic treasure trove. From Nepali, the official language, to regional languages like Newari, Maithili, and Tamang, each language carries its own unique cultural nuances and contributes to the country's rich tapestry of intangible heritage.

While Nepal takes pride in its intangible heritage, it also faces challenges in preserving and safeguarding these cultural treasures. Rapid urbanization, globalization, and changing lifestyles pose threats to the sustainability of traditional practices and knowledge. Additionally, the recent devastating earthquakes in 2015 further highlighted the need for concerted efforts to safeguard Nepal's cultural heritage. To address these challenges, Nepal has taken important steps to safeguard its intangible heritage. The government, in collaboration with UNESCO, has identified and documented various elements of intangible heritage, providing a foundation for preservation efforts. Additionally, local communities, cultural organizations, and NGOs have played a crucial role in raising awareness, conducting research, and implementing initiatives to safeguard intangible heritage.

Education and awareness programs are vital in ensuring the continuity of Nepal's intangible heritage. Schools and community centers can incorporate traditional art forms, storytelling, and festivals into their curricula to foster a sense of pride and appreciation for cultural traditions among the younger generation (Dangal et al., 2021). This helps to create a deeper connection with their heritage and encourages them.

#### 4. Major aspects of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal encompasses traditions, customs, and practices passed down through generations. The key aspects of ICH focus on Traditional Arts and Crafts. According to the UNESCO (2007) Nepal has a vibrant array of traditional art forms, including Thangka painting, woodcarving, and pottery, each with unique techniques and cultural significance. Music and Dance are integral to Nepal's cultural identity. From classical melodies like Dohori to folk dances like Dhime Baja, these expressions reflect the diverse ethnic groups and their histories.

Nepal celebrates numerous festivals throughout the year, deeply rooted in religious or cultural traditions. Festivals like Dashain, Tihar, and Teej are observed with great fervor and play a significant role in community cohesion. Nepal is home to a multitude of languages and dialects, each with rich oral traditions of storytelling, folklore, and epic narratives like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which have been passed down orally for centuries (UNESCO, 2007). Nepali cuisine reflects the diverse geography and cultural influences.

Traditional dishes like momo, dal bhat, and Newari cuisine are not only a source of sustenance but also a symbol of social bonding and identity. Traditional healing systems such as Ayurveda and Jhakri practices have been preserved in Nepal for centuries, offering holistic approaches to health and well-being. Preserving and promoting these aspects of Intangible Cultural Heritage is crucial for maintaining Nepal's cultural identity and fostering pride among its people, while also offering insights into the country's rich heritage for future generations.

## 5. Importance of Intangible Cultural Heritages

The Intangible Cultural Heritages are not only pretty to the eye but also hold many benefits and significance in the world as well as in the context of Nepal.

*Importance Globally.* Only through diversity and distinctions is the peaceful cohabitation of people possible across the world. According to MOFA (2023), it incorporates not just a community's religious features but also ideas about the environment, globalization, and modern society. These kinds of cultural heritages are crucial for any community, regardless of size or scale, as they foster social cohesion, instill an appreciation for variety and culture throughout the world, and serve as a blueprint for establishing an inclusive society (UNESCO, 2023).

*Importance in the context of Nepal.* Similar to what was stated above, the significance of Nepal's intangible cultural heritages will be discussed here:

1. An integral component of Nepali identity is its intangible cultural heritage. In order to leave a mark on the world, it aids in the development and preservation of Nepal's varied communities' and cultures' identities.
2. People in Nepal feel a feeling of belonging and the community becomes more inclusive when these kinds of heritages are present.
3. Even though Nepal is a very varied nation, its intangible cultural heritages aid in bringing together members of various cultures, foster greater social cohesiveness and promote peaceful coexistence.
4. Cultural and customary practices that have been passed down from generation to generation can be preserved, protected, and promoted with the aid of intangible cultural heritages, preventing their extinction.
5. Not only do these kinds of cultural heritages contribute to the country's cultural elements, but they also encourage travel, deepen relations between Nepal and other nations, improve the economy of the nation, and strengthen Nepal's worldwide standing.
6. The intangible cultural heritages also help in reducing the generation gap and increase the connectivity between the older generation and the younger generation.
7. They can be applied in various educational field and make culture a part of the education system of the country (Joshi & Dangal, 2020), which further provides awareness and encourage people to protect and promote them in a more effective manner.

## 6. Risk factor of intangible cultural heritage in Nepali context

Preserving Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nepal faces several risk factors that threaten its continuation and vitality. These risk factors include modernization and globalization, natural disasters, social and political instability, commercialization and tourism, decline of traditional knowledge, and lack of awareness and institutional support.

Modernization and globalization have eroded traditional practices and values in Nepal due to rapid urbanization and increased exposure to global influences. This has resulted in younger generations neglecting or abandoning traditional cultural practices in favor of modern lifestyles.

Nepal is prone to natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides, which can cause significant damage to cultural sites, artifacts, and oral traditions (Shrestha et al., 2024). The physical destruction caused by these disasters also disrupts the social fabric that sustains cultural practices.

Periods of political unrest and conflict can disrupt cultural activities and erode social cohesion, leading to the restriction or suppression of cultural events and practices (Shrestha et al., 2024). This ultimately results in a loss of cultural identity and heritage.

While tourism can bring economic opportunities, it also poses risks to ICH. Commercialization and mass tourism can lead to the commodification of cultural practices, distortion of traditions for tourist appeal, and exploitation of cultural resources without proper respect for their significance. The migration of younger generations to urban areas in search of education (Rai & Dangal, 2022) and employment opportunities poses a risk to traditional knowledge and skills. The transmission of oral traditions, craftsmanship, and indigenous knowledge systems may be disrupted, resulting in a decline in ICH.

Limited awareness about the importance of ICH among policymakers, communities, and the general public hinders efforts to safeguard and promote cultural heritage. Insufficient institutional support, funding, and resources further exacerbate the risk factors.

Addressing these risk factors requires a concerted effort from government agencies, cultural institutions, communities, and other stakeholders. Strategies may include raising awareness about the value of ICH, integrating cultural education into formal and informal curricula, implementing policies to protect cultural rights, promoting sustainable tourism practices, and fostering community-led initiatives for cultural preservation and revitalization.

## 7. Opportunities and challenges of the Intangible Cultural Heritages of Nepal

Particularly in emerging nations like Nepal, the intangible cultural heritage brings with it a variety of opportunities. As a result, both the individuals who live there and the nation as a whole may benefit from these assets. The opportunities that there are types of heritages bring to Nepal are explained in this section. To begin with, Nepal is a tourism destination in and of itself, attracting thousands of visitors each year owing to its natural and cultural riches. Intangible Cultural Heritage gives Nepal a platform to market itself throughout the world and highlight what this country has to offer. Incoming visitors may be highly advantageous to a developing country like Nepal since it helps to strengthen international ties and diplomacy, and it also receives money from tourists every year. It not only helps Nepal get international recognition, but it also helps to increase the country's economic growth, which will eventually improve the living conditions of the people who live there.

Similarly, to that, various kinds of traditions, notably performing arts and handicrafts, provide a route for individuals to participate in creative enterprises. People are given possibilities for employment and are empowered by it. People can engage in a number of vocations, such as teaching various performing arts, such as dancing, musical instruments, mimicry, theater performances, and more.

Additionally, developing one's own company, learning new skills, and growing are all things that may be accomplished by producing various handicrafts. Additionally, they might establish a number of training facilities to advance people's knowledge and offer vocational training to those in need, particularly women, to boost community empowerment. It not only generates chances in the cultural realm but also opens doors of opportunity in the economic realm. It encourages individuals to be committed, explore their culture and religion, and rely on these national resources for spiritual support in order to advance personally. It aids in fostering communal cultural interchange, which opens up other options. By applying their skills to the education sector, people may also promote their knowledge of these sorts of sectors related to education and contribute to raising the literacy rate. Even though it is not a very developed or economically wealthy country, Nepal would begin to grow if these kinds of prospects were

investigated more and taken advantage of. This would help the people's quality of life and lead the nation in a better direction.

Culture and cultural heritages are gradually disappearing as a result of increased industrialization and globalization. People frequently place such a high value on purported "development" that they neglect to consider the modest beginnings of growth. People have turned away from their identity and culture in order to live a Western and contemporary lifestyle, and as a result, particularly the intangible cultural legacy is disappearing. In addition, individuals often want to reside in more urbanized and industrialized nations and cities, which forces them to abandon their own cultures and customs. People frequently forget about their heritages as a result of growing urbanization and the demand for a lavish living. Not just the younger generations, but also the elder generations set the stage for this phenomenon by leaving their culture behind, causing their children to grow up with no concept of cultural heritages or living heritages, ultimately discouraging the usage and popularity of such sorts of heritages.

Lack of knowledge and education is another major obstacle to the development of Nepal's intangible cultural heritage. People unwittingly tend to drive such cultural elements of the nation extinct when there is a lack of understanding of their significance. Furthermore, the cultural heritages of Nepal are not given due respect, which makes it challenging for the Nepali people to work to preserve these national treasures. It is also challenging for people to continue conserving the intangible cultural heritage to the point where their own lives may be at risk since Nepal is a geographically challenging nation where natural catastrophes and tragedies occur frequently.

## 8. Conclusion

The conservation and promotion of Nepal's intangible cultural assets have become more challenging due to the aforementioned issues and difficulties. Nevertheless, there are several solutions to these problems, which will be covered in this section. First and foremost, people need to be made aware of the value that their country's intangible cultural heritage has for their lives, identities, and nation. People will not be motivated to take action to conserve and promote these assets of their nation unless they are fully informed about them. It must be made clear that in addition to forms of development like urbanization and modernization, they also need cultural development for the objectives of personal development. They must also be informed of the numerous opportunities that these types of assets present in a person's life. Skills from one person to another, and one generation to another, must be passed on so that these cultural heritages never disappear from the country.

The commercial and tourist implications of intangible cultural heritages must also be discussed. If this happens, people will be more motivated to learn and teach diverse culturally linked skills. These areas require international collaboration and support since they are not just about the past but also a vital resource for the present and the future and have a lot to offer. The pursuit of knowledge about this intangible cultural legacy might open up new prospects and allow for its application to a number of different disciplines of study. Finding a future for Nepal's intangible legacy is crucial, especially in light of its history, variety, and cultural uniqueness. This promotes personal growth for each individual in addition to aiding in their development.

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## Orpheus: From a Mythological Figure to a Thracian King-Priest

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### *Abstract*

The Thracian institution of the king-priest is attested since at least the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. This study presents Orpheus not just as a talented poet and singer, but also as a Thracian king-priest from before the Trojan War, who had different spiritual understanding (later known as Orphism) and attempted to reform the old religious belief system. The solar circles, some of them oriented towards the sunrise, found on numerous rock sanctuaries in Thrace, show that Sun-related practices were present in Thrace millennia before Orpheus and they were one of the key elements of his philosophy, just as the idea of bodily purification, which ultimately lead to enlightenment and divine inspiration. It is also reasonable to assume that his teaching involved a doctrine, probably only for initiates, related to the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body.

*Keywords:* Orpheus, Thracian religion, sun worship, solar circles, archaeoastronomy.

### 1. Orpheus as a mythological figure

In Thrace the institution of the king-priest is attested not just archaeologically since at least the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC through the Valchitran Treasure (16<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century BC) and the numerous double axes found throughout Bulgarian territory, but also in written accounts as well.<sup>1</sup> The idea of Orpheus being a king-priest is overlooked, because today Orpheus is considered to be an entirely mythological figure and is widely associated only with music and poetry. But until 1870 Troy was also considered by many to be mythological – that is was a work of fiction and it never existed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Bondzhev, 2024b.

<sup>2</sup> After its conquest Troy was later destroyed by fire (c. 950 BC) and earthquakes (c. 500 AD). After the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was buried and lost from view (Fitton, 2019). In a lecture Donald Kagan (2007) says the following: “If you walked into the leading universities in the world, there would probably be Germans in the 1850s and you went to the classics people, and you said, ‘Well, you know Homer wrote about these places, Mycenae and other places. Can you tell me where that was?’ They would say, ‘You silly fellow, that’s just stories, that’s mythology, that’s poetry. There never was an Agamemnon, there never was a Mycenae, there isn’t any such thing.’ Then in 1870, a German businessman by the name of Heinrich Schliemann, who had not had the benefit of a university education and didn’t know what a fool and how ignorant he was, believed Homer, and he said he wanted to look for Troy.”

Ivan Linforth discerned two contributory sources to the religious tradition about Orpheus, two independent cells which united to produce it. One of these two elements was the religion of the mysteries. The other is the legend of Orpheus the magical singer, who with his song and lyre could charm and subdue men and beasts and all nature, who could even bend the wills of gods of the lower world by the sweetness of his music.<sup>3</sup> Linforth concludes that “like other legends it may have had a kernel of reality, but it was enriched with elements drawn from folk lore and developed by the play of the Greek imagination.”<sup>4</sup> That is why my research will not focus on legends.



Figure 1. Orpheus in the presence of Thracians. Red-Figure Pottery, 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Archaeological Museum in Siena, Italy



Figure 2. Orpheus and other Thracians wearing a Phrygian cap. Red-Figure Pottery, 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Vicenza, Italy

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Afonasinina's statement (2007: 30) that Orpheus' attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice is certainly reminiscent of shamanistic practices of rescuing souls. He failed to save his wife, while shamans usually succeed in their adventure. Thus Orpheus should not be considered a shaman, as many scholars in the past have done.

<sup>4</sup> Linforth, 1941: 293-294.

## 2. Orpheus: A Thracian King-Priest

The Thracian ethnic origin of Orpheus is indisputable. Strabo points that it is “the Thracians, among whom the Orphic rites had their beginning” (10.3.16) and that Orpheus belongs to the Ciconian tribe (7.8.18). Diodorus (5.77.3) talks about “the Cicones, whence Orpheus came.” Virgil (*Ecloques* 6.30) writes about Orpheus being tied with the Ciconian town of Ismarus.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle (*Peplos* Fr. 48 [46]) states that the Ciconians buried Orpheus in Ciconia.



Figure 3. Thracian tribes. Map template: Fol, 2008. Tribes location: mine

One of the greatest historical contributions of the Thracians in European and world culture is called Orpheus.<sup>6</sup> Orpheus is much more than a talented poet and singer. He is a religious reformer, a priest, a Teacher, who imparts valuable knowledge to humanity. The name Orpheus was first mentioned in the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC by the poet Ibycus (Fr. 10a). The name is accompanied by the definition “the renowned“, which shows that it is a matter of recording a long oral tradition. The inscriptions from the Parian Marble (IG XII 5.444) from 264-263 BC point that in 1398 BC Orpheus makes known his own poetry, or eight centuries before the first written sources.

Diodorus (3.65) describes Orpheus as a heir to a royal family. After devoting all his time to self-improvement, he continues his education at one of the best schools on the planet – the one in Memphis, Egypt (1.96), becoming “superior of all men in gifts and education” (3.65). Thus, it should not surprise us that a heir to a royal family, having received the best priestly education one could have, later becomes a king-priest. Apollonius (1.34) points that Orpheus was

<sup>5</sup> Ismarus was first mentioned by Homer, who speaks of Ismarus of the Cicones (*Od.* 9.39), where Maron, son of Evantius and priest of Apollo, who protects Ismarus, lives (*Od.* 9.197). Herodotus’s account (7.109), of Lake Ismaris, situated between Maroneia and the Thassosians’ city of Strome, places the hydronyme to the west of Maroneia, thus extending the perimeter of the name used. Apollodorus (3.15.4) speaks of the son of Eumolpus, Ismarus, who went to the Thracian king Tegerius and married his daughter. Here, it is undoubtedly noteworthy that the name Ismar is associated with the Thracian royal institution. Strabo (7.43) speaks of Xanthea, Maroneia, and Ismarus, which were cities of the Cicones. Ismarus, however, he says, is today called Ismara; it is close to Maroneia. And here nearby, also, is the lake Ismaris. Apparently, Strabo also links Ismarus/Ismara to the Thracian Cicones by claiming that, like Xanthea, Maroneia was a Ciconian city; he also mentions Lake Ismaris (Detschew, 1976: 217; Isaac, 1986; Laukopoulou, 2004; Porozhanov, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Fol, 2008: 6-7.

ruler of the Bistones and Conon (*Narrations* 45) – ruler of Macedonians and Odrysians. As a man with power and influence Orpheus focused on his religious reform.

Euripides (*Bacchae* 711-747) describes one of Dionysus' bloody rituals:

They [the maenads or Bacchantes] at the appointed time began to wave the *thyrsus* for their Bacchic rites, calling on Iacchus [Dionysus] . . . They, with hands that bore no weapon of steel, attacked our cattle as they browsed. . . . [They] rent the heifers limb from limb. Before thy eyes there would have been hurling of ribs and hoofs this way and that; and strips of flesh, all blood-bedabbled, dripped as they hung from the pine-branches. Wild bulls, that glared but now with rage along their horns, found themselves tripped up, dragged down to earth by countless maidens' hands. The flesh upon their limbs was stripped therefrom quicker than thou couldn't have closed thy royal eye-lids.

According to Anna Afonasiina, Orpheus never entered the state of trance, a kind of collective madness (inspired by the god),<sup>7</sup> typical to Bacchantes, who played on tympana. Orpheus changed the religious rites in the way quite opposite to the ecstatic practices. The divine gift of Orpheus and ecstasy, associated with it, is better understood in Platonic sense: as a higher ecstasy, quite different from the divine madness of the Bacchantes.<sup>8</sup>

Diodorus (3.65.6) writes that “Orpheus also made many changes in the practices and for that reason the rites which had been established by Dionysus were also called ‘Orphic.’” Plato (*Laws* 782c) defines what an “Orphic life” is: first, when the “offerings to the gods consisted, not of animals, but of cakes of meal and grain steeped in honey, and other such bloodless sacrifices” and second, “keeping wholly to inanimate food and, contrariwise, abstaining wholly from things animate” (needed for bodily purification).<sup>9</sup> Pythagoreans believed that through purification humans could join the psychic force that pervaded the cosmos.<sup>10</sup> Numerous philosophical teachings believed that this force, which ultimately leads to divine inspiration, exists everywhere around us, but is most present at sunrise. According to Eratosthenes (*Catasterismi* 24):

He [Orpheus] did not honor Dionysus, but considered Helios the greatest of the gods and called him Apollo. Arising at night, toward dawn, he would climb Mt. Pangaion and await the sunrise, so that he might be the first to see the sun.

Although the practices related to the sunrise were later professed by the Pythagoreans, Essenes, Bogomils in Bulgaria and their ideological successors in France – the Cathars, this ancient tradition is present in Thrace much earlier than Orpheus.<sup>11</sup> In Perperek (Perperikon), where the sunrise is perfectly to be seen, the found ceramics with images of the Sun attest that the solar cult

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Apollodorus 3.5.1-3, where a collective psychosis is vividly described.

<sup>8</sup> Afonasiina, 2007: 29. Plato *Ion* 533e-534a: “. . . the Muse inspires men herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain. For all the good epic poets utter all those fine poems not from art, but as inspired and possessed, and the good lyric poets likewise; just as the Corybantian worshippers do not dance when in their senses, so the lyric poets do not indite those fine songs in their senses, but when they have started on the melody and rhythm they begin to be frantic, and it is under possession – as the bacchantes are possessed, and not in their senses, when they draw honey and milk from the rivers – that the soul of the lyric poets does the same thing, by their own report.”

<sup>9</sup> Prohibition of meat-eating by Orpheus is probably referred to by Aristophanes *Frogs* 1032: “Orpheus taught us the mystic rites and the horrid nature of murder” (West, 1983: 16, n. 42; Schibli, 1990: 123).

<sup>10</sup> Gorman, 1978: 185; Dombrowski, 2014: 540. Probably that is why Plotinus (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), who was a Neo-Platonist, but also shared Pythagorean ideas, and was obsessed with purification, warned about food which obfuscates the astral body of the psyche (Gorman, 1979: 196). Purification was also practiced by the Manichean elite (Gilhus, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> See Bondzhev, 2024a.

exists from at least the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. Solar circles, some of them oriented towards the sunrise, are to be found on numerous rock sanctuaries: Paleokastro, Mochukovi Kamani (Elhovo), Kamaka (M. Tarnovo), Orizari (Sliven).<sup>12</sup>



Figure 4. Solar circles on Kamaka rock sanctuary.  
They exist from at least the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC

Figure 4.1. The solar circles from another angle. Fol, 2007: 159

Sun-related practices in Thrace are attested even after almost a millennium after Orpheus. Before being finally turned into a tomb, just as many other Thracian tombs, Golyama Arsenalka (end of 5<sup>th</sup> century BC) was used as a temple. Archaeoastronomy shows that one of the practices was related to the winter solstice when the rays of the Sun reached the specially calculated and constructed central circle on the floor of the domed chamber.<sup>13</sup> It is assumed that at that particular moment the king-priest stood in the circle and accumulated, what has been believed to be, sacred and enlightening solar force – a common practice on many sacred places around the world. Sergei Ignatov concludes, that the solar cult in Thrace, obviously, cannot be an agricultural cult, as 19<sup>th</sup>-century anthropologists claimed, but a doctrine, probably only for initiates, related to the cycle of the soul after it leaves the body.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Fol, 2007. Many of the solar circles are located mainly in Strandzha and Sakar Mountains. Sometimes traces of an attempt to acquire quern-stones are misinterpreted as solar circles. But sometimes, as on Paleokastro, both are present. Some solar circles are located on such a hard to reach places, that it makes no sense of them being an attempt to acquire a quern-stone.

<sup>13</sup> For the Thracian Tomb of Sveshtari being oriented towards the winter solstice see Dermendzhiev, 2007: 157; Bondzhev, 2023b: 114.

<sup>14</sup> Ignatov, 2023: 27. This statement contradicts the hypothesis long expressed in Bulgarian historiography (Mihailov, 1951; 1972: 250-251; see Popov, 2014: 14), which assumed that Herodotus' term "immortality" (4.93), relating the Thracian (Getic) belief system, does not indicate the belief in the immortality of the soul. Whatever the truth is, I have *infinite* respect for the studies of all colleagues from the past and present, without whose efforts my research would have *not* been possible.



Figure 5. Thracian Tomb Golyama Arsenalka located in the Valley of the Thracian Kings

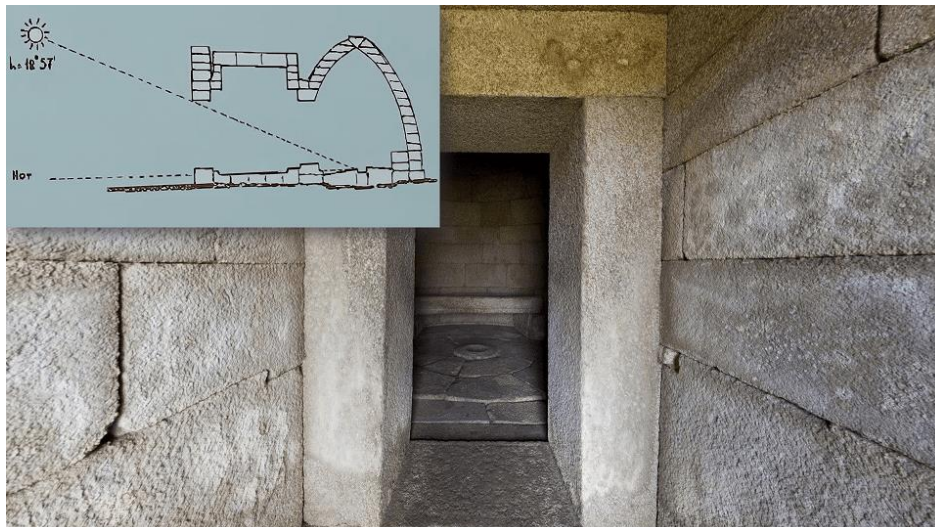


Figure 6. Thracian Tomb Golyama Arsenalka's antechamber and domed chamber

Figure 6.1. Position of the Sun at winter solstice

The texts on the Orphic gold tablets from the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC serve as a guide for the soul in the afterlife.<sup>15</sup> According to Herodotus (2.81), Orphic practices are close to the Egyptian and Pythagorean. The Orphic texts are undoubtedly influenced by the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.<sup>16</sup> Ignatov makes a remarkable comment about the essence of the book:<sup>17</sup>

My thesis supervisor believed that the main purpose of the *Book of the Dead* was to practice before going beyond [in the afterlife]. I think that he indeed practiced it for the last ten years of his life – to go beyond and come back. You practice it, so that [at the moment of death] you don't get confused where you are heading; and so that you

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<sup>15</sup> Graf & Johnston, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> Common plots are: quenching the thirst of souls with cold water, a ban on passing certain paths, guards asking questions, underground kings (Merkelbach, 1999: 5ff).

<sup>17</sup> Ignatov, 2021: 21. Ignatov is the founder of Egyptology in Bulgaria and Minister of Education (2009-2013).



don't get scared. Because people get scared and lonely in this moment [of death]<sup>18</sup> . . . This [process] is being practiced in the whole world, not just in Egypt. What we call true meditation has to do with tapping into a higher reality.

Here Ignatov is obviously alluding to the mystical concept, known since ancient times, of a soul journey.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, we could only speculate whether Orpheus possessed such knowledge (something he might have learned or mastered in Thrace, Egypt or somewhere else) and whether something similar was practiced not just by the Greek Orphics, but prior to them by the Thracian followers of Orpheus as well.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Orpheus' legacy

Historical reality about Orpheus never ceased to be mixed with legendary accounts. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC Apollonius Rhodius wrote his *Argonautica* and two centuries later Virgil and Ovid introduced Orpheus' failed attempt to bring his wife Eurydice out of the underworld.<sup>21</sup> Today Orpheus is known for the mythological – mainly with the legend of the singer charming the animals. Poetry, singing and music were undoubtedly essential elements of Orpheus' personality, but they were used as tools to transmit knowledge – sacred texts are more easily remembered through rhyme and music.<sup>22</sup>

Few have looked at the written accounts from the perspective describing Orpheus as a Thracian king-priest from before the Trojan War (14<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century BC?), who had different spiritual understanding (later known as Orphism) and attempted to reform the old religious belief system. We might assume that he tried to spread the concept related to the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body and, respectively, the necessity of establishing a personal connection with the Creator (instead of worshiping some deity) – bodily purification and the sacred, enlightening solar force would assist that process.<sup>23</sup> I would be surprised if these concepts were completely new to the Thracian lands. The existence of the practices related to the sunrise millennia before Orpheus rather hints to the fact that at least some (Proto-) Thracian priests might have been familiar with the concepts of bodily purification as well.

It seems reasonable to assume that Orpheus' education in Memphis might have helped him to further deepen his spiritual understanding and when he returned back to Thrace, this time from the position of a king-priest, he started to initiate not just Thracians, but Greeks as well.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gorman (1979: 202): "Hell for the majority of later Pythagoreans was simply a state when the psyche of the departed does not know what to do once it has been ejected from the body. It wanders in a twilight world of ignorance until it is automatically reborn again."

<sup>19</sup> On shamanism (although I prefer the word "initiate", instead of "shaman", because the latter is being used as a general expression applicable to the magico-religious life of all primitive peoples) and entering the spirit world see Meuli, 1935; Chadwick, 1942; Eliade, 1964; Lewis, 1971; Burkert, 1972: 120-165; Dodds 1973; Burkert 1996: 67-69; Humphrey 1996; Afonasiina 2007; Bondzhev 2023a. Note Burkert's (2004: 74) statement, where he called the opposing views among scholars "battlefield between rationalists and mystics".

<sup>20</sup> According to Kindstrand (1981: 18), "it is notable that when barbarians, known for their wisdom, arrive in Greece, they always come from the North and their wisdom is displayed in the religious sphere, connected in most cases with the cult of Apollo. We may here recall Orpheus who came to Greece from Thrace".

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Afonasiina's statement (2007: 30), that Orpheus' attempt to rescue Eurydice is certainly reminiscent of shamanistic practices of rescuing souls. Orpheus failed in his adventure: apparently he did not have enough experience.

<sup>22</sup> Fol, 2020: 72.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Plotinus (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD), who was a Pythagorean and was obsessed with purification – warns about food which obfuscates the astral body of the psyche (Gorman 1979: 196).

Because such knowledge, which is ultimately oriented towards human enlightenment, should not have national or ethnic boundary.

But did Orpheus succeed in reforming the old religious belief system? Probably to a certain extent – old and new beliefs continued to exist for centuries. The sacrifices remained: even a millennium later Cotys I (384/3-360 BC) was offering sacrifices to the gods (Athenaeus 12.42), as was Dromichaetes (300-280 BC) (Diod. 21.12.4), and sacrificial horses were buried in or around Thracian king tombs.<sup>24</sup> At the same time the horse was considered to be a solar animal – the driver of the solar chariot to carry the spirit of the deceased to the Sun.

Whether and to what extent Orpheus could be given credit for the Thracian belief in the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body – we might only speculate. But this belief is clearly attested by Pomponius Mela (2.18):

Some Thracians – and certainly the Getae – are wild and absolutely prepared to die. A range of belief brings this readiness into being. Some individuals think that the souls of the dead will return; others think that even if they do not return, souls still are not obliterated but go to a happier place . . . and Solinus (10.1-2):

Those who sedulously wish to learn of the barbarian Thracians will easily discover that there is disregard of life among them. This is the result of their system of beliefs. Every one of them agrees to a voluntary death, while not a few of them think that their souls return. Others think that their souls are not destroyed by death but become more blessed.

Another confirmation is Herodotus' account (5.4), from which also Pomponius and Solinus most probably got theirs, describing how the Trausians lament when a child is born and celebrate during funerals, because the deceased "is now in perfect bliss."

Purification practices among Thracians are attested by Stabo (7.3.3), who cites Posidonius's account, that the Moesi "in accordance with their religion they abstain from eating any living thing, and therefore from their flocks as well; and that they use as food honey and milk and cheese." Examples of Sun-related practices in Thracian Tombs have already been given. That the Sun (Helios) was venerated by the Thracians is also attested by Sophocles (Fr. 523 = Schol. *Il.* 13.705).<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Orpheus is not just as a talented poet and singer, but also as a Thracian king-priest from before the Trojan War, who had different spiritual understanding (later known as Orphism) and attempted to reform the old religious belief system. Orpheus' education in Memphis might have helped him to further deepen his understanding in the sacred and enlightening solar force reaching Earth, especially through the sunrise, but that tradition was already present in Thrace millennia before him. In addition, bodily purification and the doctrine of the cycle of the soul after its final departure from the body seem to be part of his philosophy as well and we might assume that much later presence of this philosophy among Thracians is, at least to some extent, due to his teaching.

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<sup>24</sup> Gergova, 2013: 11.

<sup>25</sup> Based on Eisele's translation (1909: 255), Alexander Fol (2002: 48) comments that Sophocles' fragment could be understood as an Orphic interpretation of the Sun as a source of sacred force.

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