

MUSEOLOGY OF THE LIVING HERITAGE OF COGNAC CULTURE IN NOUVELLE-AQUITAINE: FOR AN INTERNATIONAL REREADING OF THE HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN DEVELOPMENT OF EAU-DE-VIE OF COGNAC IN THE CHARENTES

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Abstract

Communities have always invented systems to preserve the evolution and the history of their thoughts. Nevertheless, how is the knowledge associated with this human thought cultivated? Where does it come from and in what ways is it constituted? The answers to these questions are partly given through actions intended to preserve and enhance the collections of tangible and intangible artifacts present in museums. From science, society or art, but also ecomuseums, interpretation centres or archives, communities ensure the survival of this knowledge in many ways. This article highlights the knowledge, practices and know-how resulting from the living heritage of Cognac brandy, registered as a French intangible heritage in 2020. The Association des Savoir-faire du Cognac's request for an inscription on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, opens new perspectives for the interpretation of this intangible heritage.

Keywords: *science, cultural heritage, intangible heritage, brandy, Cognac.*

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The request for the recognition of Cognac brandy know-how as a common heritage of humanity provided an opportunity to reflect on a unique cultural heritage system in Charentes. Until now, this system has primarily been valued for its cultural and scientific significance at the international level.

The theoretical framework that is to be developed through this inscription seeks to support and guide a community of practitioners, professionals, and researchers in conceptualizing complex issues – such as the increasing intricacy of intercultural relations in the international spirits market. According to Bateson, a cultural system [Picard & Marc 2013] must be understood from the perspective of individual behaviours, which, in turn, are analysed in relation to the ties between people. These relationships form what Gregory Bateson termed the “ecology of mind” – the entire communicative network that connects humans to their environment, animals, and larger ecosystems. Studying such a “cultural system” is a complex endeavour. It requires examining the interconnections essential to maintaining its organization (structure), the mechanisms underlying its intrinsic logic (functioning), and its capacity for transformation, both stable and disruptive (process).

With regard to the know-hows related to Cognac production, this cultural system is embodied in the creation of the Association des Savoir-Faire du Cognac in 2016. Aimed at uniting key aspects of the extensive study of Cognac’s human cultures, its establishment marked a fundamental step in the communities’ effort to gain recognition as a heritage of universal significance. This association plays a central scientific role in coordinating various issues, including the recognition of know-how, production processes, Cognac varieties, *terroir*, consumption patterns, and UNESCO cultural and intangible heritage recognition.¹ The association works toward this goal while ensuring the active participation of a broad community of practitioners in defining Cognac’s living heritage. This diversity is expressed through the various appellations of Charente and Charente-Maritime, as well as the municipalities of Deux-Sèvres and Dordogne. In this context, its mission extends beyond mere recognition to actively promoting the transmission and enhancement of Cognac’s cultural heritage and knowledge. To achieve this, the association applies the methodology of ICH to the safeguarding of Cognac, focusing on several key actions:

- Conducting a participatory inventory covering the various activities related to Cognac production, including elaboration techniques and associated know-how.
- Coordinating the implementation of a dissemination and promotion plan centred on Cognac’s identity and craftsmanship.

¹ Available: <https://lessavoirfaireducognac.com> (viewed 12.02.2023).

- Enhancing accessibility and fostering the dissemination of cultural and scientific content through diverse media.
- Supporting cultural actors and stakeholders in developing initiatives aligned with the inventory’s findings.

By integrating these efforts, the association not only safeguards but also strengthens the dynamic relationship between Cognac’s heritage, its practitioners, and the broader community.

As of 2023, 676 heritage elements corresponding to 5 regions and 140 countries have been inscribed on the UNESCO List, including 26 for France. 500 cultural heritages are inscribed in the National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage. A majority of these projects do not seek international recognition, when doing so, the candidacy must respect the codes and philosophy of this organ of the United Nations (UN). Notably, to be inscribed as a French heritage property, the Cognac candidacy must then be selected by the intangible cultural heritage experts of the French Ministry of Culture as representative of a common heritage of humanity. The members of this scientific committee will then choose to submit the file to the 127 States Parties of the UNESCO International Commission and then be officially recognized on the Representative List of the World’s Intangible Cultural Heritage. Unlike the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices, this list makes it possible to fully recognize the value of safeguarding the object of the intangible

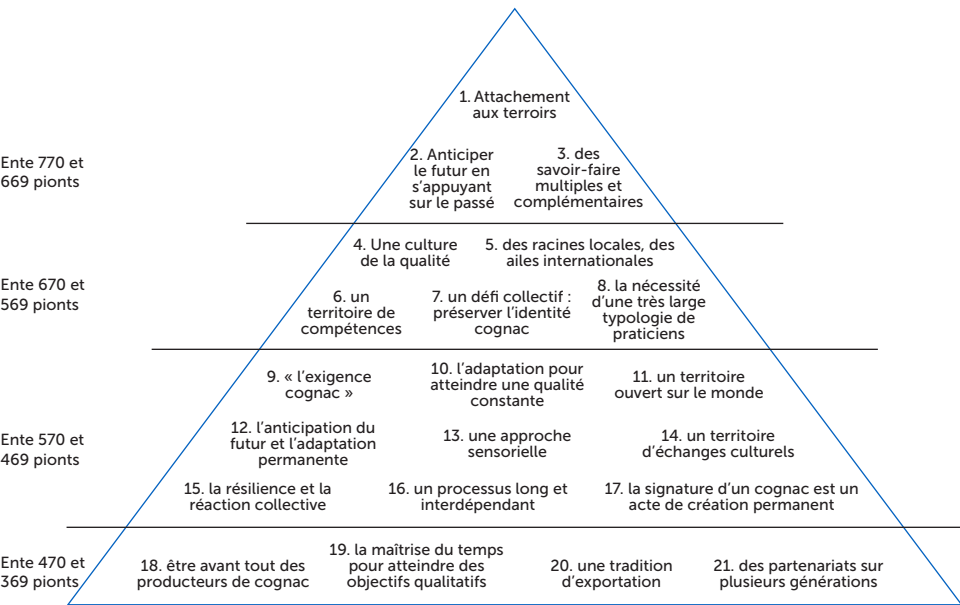


Figure 1. Identity pyramid of the cognac community, ICH inventory sheet.

heritage defended for the common good of humanity and not only the resulting good practices as an example to other communities around the world.

On average, a heritage nomination requires ten years of preparation before being submitted for candidacy to the UNESCO General Assembly of State Parties. The know-how related to Cognac production – from terroir to modes of consumption – has been officially recognized as a representative cultural heritage of France by the Ministry of Culture (Direction Générale des Patrimoines). Since March 2020, it has been included in the national Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) inventory, marking the first crucial step toward submitting a nomination to UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The programs carried out by the association supporting the UNESCO candidacy of Cognac serve to assert the internationality of this common heritage of humanity. This dimension is an important aspect of its safeguarding, because the transmission of this know-how, beyond the locality of Charentes, has been threatened by the emergence of new trends in the fields of the knowledge society, the knowledge economy, knowledge management, cognitics or knowledge engineering which suggest a growing influence of technology, data analysis, and global collaboration in industries like Cognac. While these trends offer new opportunities for innovation and global market expansion, they can also place pressure on traditional methods of knowledge transmission, particularly regarding the protection of artisanal practices and community-based knowledge.

Naming and standardizing for the transmission and innovation of ancestral heritage

The research directions adopted by the Association des Savoir-Faire du Cognac primarily aim to ensure the ongoing participation of the community in researching and formalizing the specific and representative elements of Cognac culture. This work is based on the narratives of community members, collected through collective oral exchanges, individual interviews, and direct observations.

For example, the heritage definition of Cognac culture, entrusted to the association in 2017, was the result of a collective effort initiated jointly by local elected officials and the cognac interprofessional, with the support of professional groups and supported by the Cognac appellation communities and the Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac (BNIC). Furthermore, the association prioritizes studying how the practices of Cognac production are taught and transmitted. The Cognac communities are divided into two main sectors: viticulture and trade. In the viticulture sector, the focus is on the 17 000 practitioners involved in producing and transforming grapes into wine and Cognac brandy, including winegrowers, distillers, cellar masters, tasters, and more. Additionally, 7000

professionals contribute to refining and developing traditional Cognac practices, such as nurserymen, coopers, oenologists, machinery manufacturers, brokers, mixologists, glassmakers, and packaging manufacturers. The second sector, trade, includes 31 000 practitioners working in institutions, unions, and communities who help maintain the vitality of Cognac culture. This group consists of elected officials, researchers, archivists, cultural mediators, cognac educators, and others who facilitate its dissemination. Last but not least, residents of the region, as well as global cognac enthusiasts and collectors, are part of what is referred to here as Cognac culture. Finally, the association adapted the principles of the Convention for Safeguarding ICH to the local context. The diverse community of stakeholders was involved in decision-making at every stage: defining the scope, collecting and prioritizing content, and proofreading.

- **Prior and informed consultation:** Information sessions were held to explain the concept of safeguarding ICH and ensure community consent.
- **Participatory inventory:** Content was developed through 25 collective workshops led by ICH specialists, with decisions made on a one-person-one-vote basis. Special efforts were made to ensure the participation of all practitioners.
- **Consent:** Open and collaborative sessions gathered the community's consent on emerging concepts, as well as the formulation and prioritization of key characteristics. For instance, a meeting on identity fundamentals included a real-time vote, where each participant was given points to allocate to the values discussed in the workshops.
- **Restitution:** A website was created to present the entire inventory through various media. It includes graphic boards, illustrative photos of key practices, and sound portraits, all developed in collaboration with the community to faithfully represent their know-how.

Challenges in Cognac culture today explored in the inscription process

The patrimonialization of Cognac has provided a unique opportunity to address contemporary challenges by expanding the scope of its cultural recognition. Central to this process is the expansion of an existing intercultural approach to embrace a more nuanced understanding of the various actors involved in Cognac's heritage. Through the concept of superdiversity, this approach acknowledges the diverse and evolving social, cultural, and economic forces shaping Cognac production. In rethinking the museology of traditional knowledge, there is a shift away from a sole focus on the technical aspects of production towards a broader, more inclusive narrative that recognizes the international dynamics of exchange.

From the diversity of the Cognac culture to the “superdiversity” of its cultural heritage

The transmission of know-how in Cognac culture evolves in response to both regional territorial expectations and the methods employed by professional circles to preserve knowledge related to Cognac brandy production. A theoretical framework, supported by through-systems analysis, has facilitated the modelling of a “Cognac culture” to enhance the understanding of its complex cultural phenomena. These include the dynamics of social relations within an intercultural and transcultural context. In the process of recognizing Cognac culture as an ICH under UNESCO, two levels of analysis were applied: intercultural and transcultural.

Throughout Cognac’s cultural and political history, the establishment of institutional structures has played a crucial role in managing economic and heritage-related challenges. A Viticulture Committee was initially formed in 1888, later replaced in 1921 by a sectorial organization designed to address economic tensions. In 1946, the BNIC was officially established, succeeding the Bureau National de Répartition des Vins et Eaux-de-vie de Cognac. The BNIC functions as a consultative and decision-making entity for professionals in the Cognac sector, ensuring the protection of the Cognac *Appellation d’Origine Contrôlée* (AOC) and the safeguarding of traditional knowledge shared among diverse heritage components.

Comprising an equal representation of viticulture and trade professionals, the BNIC oversees the interests of 4294 winegrowers, 119 professional distillers, and 265 merchants associated with the Cognac appellation. Its primary responsibilities include securing, perpetuating, and developing the appellation, while also informing and monitoring its status. The organization also plays a role in anticipating industry trends, promoting the image Cognac, and protecting its experiential and material heritage. Since its inception, the BNIC has operated under a public service mandate, representing the Directorate General of Customs and Indirect Taxes. In 2010, it was formally recognized as a Defense and Management Organization (ODG), reinforcing its role in safeguarding the appellation.

Cognac knowledge and craftsmanship, deeply embedded in ancestral traditions, are primarily preserved through professional intercultural exchanges. The BNIC ensures that these living practices continue to evolve within a framework of economic and cultural sustainability. This process is shaped by an epistemological phenomenon that not only addresses commercial imperatives but also aligns with broader multicultural objectives – a development that parallels the more recent academic concept of superdiversity. In this context, the author of the current article draws upon the work of Steven Vertovec (2022), who repositions anthropology around the central issue of “change of change”, a concept previously explored by

Gregory Bateson mentioned above. Within a general theory of communication, the adaptability and transformation of the “spirit” of human societies [Bateson 1972] can be understood in relation to both the tangible and intangible heritage of Cognac. This theoretical approach enables an analysis of the ways in which Cognac culture navigates and integrates multiple cultural influences while retaining its unique identity.

The academic discourse on superdiversity offers valuable insights into the study of Cognac culture, particularly in relation to its patrimonialization beyond France. The preservation and transmission of Cognac culture today intersect with major social, cultural, religious, and linguistic issues, mirroring broader global transformations related to gender, age, and legal status. These complexities highlight two major dimensions in the development and marketing of Cognac brandy. The historical migratory patterns that link Cognac production to global markets, from the Charentes region to the Americas and the West Indies, exemplify how Cognac culture has been shaped by transnational exchanges. These movements have not only contributed to the economic expansion of Cognac but have also enriched its cultural significance through the continuous interplay of diverse social and commercial influences.



Figure 2. Louis XIII Carafe, collection L'Odyssée d'un roi. Photo by Marius W. Hansen².

² Available: <https://www.revuedesdeuxmondes.fr/odysee-du-cognac/> (viewed 12.02.2023).

Thus, the concept of superdiversity provides a critical framework for understanding how Cognac culture has evolved beyond traditional notions of heritage conservation. It underscores the ways in which globalization, migration, and intercultural interactions contribute to the ongoing adaptation and redefinition of Cognac as a cultural and economic entity in the contemporary world.

Living cultural and scientific heritage on the grounds of regional museums

Another cultural and scientific objective of the association is to advance knowledge of the rich heritage of Cognac, notably through the creation of the Musée des Savoir-Faire du Cognac. This institution promotes ongoing scientific research on topics such as the environment, climate change, biotechnology, and genetics. However, the challenges inherent in the scientific domain also extend to the museum field, particularly in regions with strong cultural specificities. The following key questions arise here: What knowledge should be disseminated within and beyond these territories? How can research concerning the unique knowledge of these regions be promoted while ensuring its transmission on both a national and international scale?

In the 21st century, such initiatives contribute significantly to the development of observational methodologies while offering new insights into the challenges of knowledge management in both organizational and societal contexts. The process of patrimonialization also presents an opportunity to examine this art and culture in relation to economic and social issues, existential and societal questions, as well as ethical and environmental concerns. For example, emerging museum models are evolving beyond classical museology by fostering closer relationships with local communities and groups of tradition-bearers. These contemporary approaches integrate the science of the past, present, and future [Schiele 2021]. Consequently, the promotion of a new museography tailored to the patrimonialization of viticultural knowledge is essential.

In 2023, the exhibition *Exel Patrimoine, Des Machines et des Hommes: Une Histoire de l'Industrie Viticole à Cognac* was launched as part of the UNESCO inscription plan. This exhibition addressed scientific knowledge and sought to rewrite the history of industrial heritage. Its inauguration emphasized the role of human ingenuity and its impact on technological advancements in the wine industry. For instance, the introduction of machines facilitated vineyard cultivation and enabled the treatment of *Phylloxera*-related diseases, blending ancestral knowledge with modern chemistry. These developments underscore the continuous evolution of Cognac culture, reflecting the dynamic interplay between tradition, innovation, and scientific progress.



Figure 3. Exhibition Exel Heritage, Machines and Men:
A History Of The Wine Industry in 2023.

Contemporary museography must move beyond classical discourses on the history of science, which often fail to establish meaningful connections with ecological systems. In particular, scientific knowledge related to spirits production should engage with broader ecological and cosmological perspectives, as emphasized in the 2003 UNESCO *Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Rather than simply presenting artifacts to highlight global heterogeneity and cultural richness, museums should address the relationships between traditional knowledge, nature, and sustainable practices. It is crucial to reaffirm the role of indigenous populations as “informed custodians” of Earth’s biodiversity [Bates and Trakansuphakon 2021]. A significant step in this direction was the 2022 inclusion of the Climates and wines of Burgundy in cultural landscape, marking progress in recognizing ecological heritage within sustainable development frameworks. Similarly, Bordeaux’s *Cité du Vin*, inaugurated in May 2016, has integrated sustainability and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into its museographic approach. These developments illustrate how the legacy of the New Museology is embedded within contemporary heritage institutions, shifting focus towards environmental sustainability and the immaterial dimensions of cultural heritage.



Figure 4. 2023 inauguration of the *Cité du vin et des climats de Bourgogne*.

This epistemological evolution has allowed museums to develop tools that are more effectively adapted to ensuring the transmission of the shared heritage they preserve. Consequently, museums globally are embracing innovative solutions for safeguarding knowledge, particularly those aligned with sustainable development in contemporary societies. Cognac museums, in particular, are adopting these new standards, which now enable the redefinition of their material collections while simultaneously identifying those elements that are incorporated under the concept of contemporary immateriality.

Annex

FICHE D'INVENTAIRE DU PATRIMOINE CULTUREL IMMATÉRIEL

LES SAVOIR-FAIRE DE L'ÉLABORATION DU COGNAC



Vendanges. Au fond : maison typique des exploitations cognacaises. © SFC/A. Benavente, 25 septembre 2019.



Distillation charentaise. Au pied de l'alambic charentais : vérification olfactive et visuelle après la coupe. © SFC/H. Nisseron, 5 novembre 2016.



Habillage du produit : installation manuelle du col d'une bouteille. © SFC/A. Benavente, 25 septembre 2019.

Description sommaire

L'élaboration du cognac, eau-de-vie de vin distillée deux fois en alambic charentais, est un processus patient et collectif, qui s'est construit par la transmission des savoir-faire depuis le XVII^e siècle.

La diversité des étapes, du plant de vigne aux modes de consommation, se fonde sur un processus d'élaboration qui s'articule autour de trois piliers : la distillation charentaise, par la production d'un vin de base ; l'assemblage, par l'élevage des eaux-de-vie ; la mise en cohérence du contenu, par l'adaptation du design au mode de consommation de chaque cognac.

L'empirisme et la transmission orale, perpétués de génération en génération et appuyés sur des traditions viticoles et un négoce structuré *in situ* dès l'origine, sont les fondements identitaires de la communauté. Cette tradition s'appuie sur une alliance entre des savoir-faire viti-vinicoles locaux et une culture marchande apportée depuis le XVI^e siècle par les négociants étrangers (hollandais, anglo-saxons, norvégiens...), qui a toujours été fondée sur une logique d'échanges et de complémentarités. Cette création conjointe a façonné une communauté multiculturelle.

Chaque savoir-faire participe, selon des méthodes et une temporalité qui lui sont propres, de la même recherche : pérenniser le profil organoleptique de chaque cognac, en assurant le bon équilibre entre respect de la tradition et renouvellement par la révélation du potentiel aromatique du vignoble. Son élaboration est ainsi ressentie comme une œuvre collective.

Source : *L'inventaire national du Patrimoine culturel immatériel*. (n.d.). Available: <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Patrimoine-culturel-immateriel/Le-Patrimoine-culturel-immateriel/L-inventaire-national-du-Patrimoine-culturel-immateriel>

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