

# THE “INVISIBLE” CULTURAL HERITAGE OF UNIVERSITIES: RESEARCH AND PERSPECTIVES IN BULGARIA - A CASE STUDY OF SOFIA UNIVERSITY ST. KLIMENT OHRIDSKI

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**Abstract:** *The paper analyses the concept of “invisible” cultural heritage in universities based on the case study of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. It conceptualizes the invisible heritage beyond tangible and intangible forms. The historical perspective is augmented with the contemporary role of the university and its social function in Bulgaria. As a result, the paper presents a comprehensive overview of the Sofia university multifaceted contributions to the “invisible cultural heritage” shaping the formation of the cultural and social identity of the institution.*

**Keywords:** *Invisible Heritage; Invisible University; Social Transformation.*

## Introduction

Cultural heritage usually is approached by focusing on distinctions between movable/immovable, tangible/intangible heritage as a collection of cultural values that carry historical memory, national identity, and scientific or cultural significance (Cultural Heritage Act, 2023, Art. 2 para. 1). This paper focuses on a different aspect of the heritage of a specific type of institution — the university and its “invisible” heritage.

Immovable heritage (UNESCO, 2003) refers to behaviours, knowledge and abilities transmitted over generations that hold significant community value for maintaining identity and spirit. The UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage emphasizes the concept of invisibility, or the absence of a material object, which characterizes it. It is made up of informal procedures and activities that are rarely written down, such as unwritten norms, student community creation, academic traditions, and distinctive social interactions that shape the mood and spirit of a place.

Universities preserve and transmit another type of heritage that remains largely overlooked - the “invisible heritage”. This heritage is not tied to monuments, objects, or rituals alone, but to the informal practices, shared values, and unwritten traditions that shape a university’s spirit and identity.

The connection between the past, present and future is becoming increasingly important in an era of drastic transformations. Universities, as repositories of knowledge and centers for intellectual exchange, play a crucial role in this process. To explore this phenomenon in depth, we have selected Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” as a case study and symbol of an educational institution in Bulgaria, a guardian of national memory, generator of ideas, and shaper of personalities, values, and societal changes. From the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Sofia University has been a flagman in spreading modern ideas in Bulgaria. It still plays this role now. This study

analyses how its "invisible" legacy, developed throughout time, persists in shaping its current function.

The aim of this study is twofold:

1. To conceptualize invisible heritage as a distinct analytical category within heritage studies, complementing and extending UNESCO's notion of intangible heritage.
2. To define a clear methodology for the comprehensive identification and analysis of Sofia University's invisible heritage, examining its historical trajectory and contemporary manifestations, and to evaluate its significance for Bulgarian society.

Our main hypothesis is that invisible heritage is crucial for understanding how universities function not only as educational institutions but also as agents of cultural continuity, identity formation and social change.

## Conceptual Framework

Heritage studies have long recognized the importance of both tangible and intangible forms of cultural legacy. Tangible (or visible) heritage refers to material and institutionalized expressions such as buildings, monuments, archives, and formal ceremonies. Intangible heritage, as defined by UNESCO (2003), includes traditions, practices, and knowledge transmitted across generations. However, this binary definition leaves underexplored a set of cultural processes that are informal, evolving, and often undocumented, yet profoundly influential.

The visible heritage is quite comparable to the tangible heritage because it includes physical things like buildings (Rectorate, Library), archive papers, publications, awards, and other physical objects. Invisible legacy is very similar to intangible heritage. It includes things that can't be seen, like cultural traditions, social networks, values, memories, and the university's position as a place, where ideas are born and people come together. Building on Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire*, invisible heritage can be seen as "memory practices" sustained within academic communities.

Sofia University was the only place to get a higher education from its founding in 1888 until the 1940s. It was also a big part of propagating contemporary ideas and meeting national goals. In today's world of globalization and many colleges and universities, it tries to meet European and worldwide standards. However, most people don't see its informal functions and events. For the institution, there could be traditions that have to do with student life, including Student's Day, the university song, established ceremonies, and other activities. The official representational face of the university is made up of the formalised expression of these activities, ceremonies with symbolic importance, and protocol. Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," the oldest university in Bulgaria, has the most cultural events, festivities, traditions, ceremonies, and protocols.

This is why we introduce the concept of invisible heritage to address this gap. Unlike intangible heritage, which can still be codified through unwritten norms, rituals, or customs, shared academic spirit. Often informal, rooted in student initiatives, networks,

and peer communities. Fluid as constantly evolving in response to political and social contexts and contextual as manifested more clearly in moments of dissent or resistance.

## Research Content

The international perspective and debates about the new public expectations for universities have not been a subject of research in our country, even though they have been of interest to European researchers since the 1980s and 1990s (Pelikan, 1992), (Brooks 1994: 202-234), (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995: 14–19), (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 2000: 109-123), (Burton, 1972). A surge of publications has emerged regarding the university's role in a postmodern context, the potential for societal transformation through education, and the university's mission in contemporary society, including a comparison of Western and American models of university development (Readings & MacIntyre, 1996: 107), (Kerr, 2001), (Apple, 2012), (Scott, 2006: 1-39), (Chatterton, 2000: 165-181). Readings and MacIntyre (1996) provide a critical philosophical reflection on the history of the university in the Western world and its role in the contemporary era, developing the thesis that the university has traveled a long historical path: from the idea of reason (with Kant) through the idea of culture (with the German idealists) to the idea of perfection or quality, in the context of contemporary society. At the start of the 21st century, there are more and more conversations about improving language, looking into best practices, and figuring out how institutions might serve society. The researches are also motivated by heightened political pressure and societal expectations, regarding higher education systems post-2015.

There are very few Bulgarian scientific investigations on this subject (Todorov, 2000: 39-54), (Kyosev, 2000: 7-38). Todorov (2000) asserts that the principles of the so-called Humboldt university "come into conflict with some basic modern trends in the development of the university." Furthermore, Kyosev (2000) notes that the global legitimation crisis of universities in Western Europe and the USA has sparked profound philosophical debates regarding the role and values of higher education; however, such discussions are notably harder to find in Bulgaria, attributed to historical and social factors. A study of Varbanov (Varbanov, et al., 2011: 1-13) examines the role of university alumni groups in carrying out the social function of universities. The expression "triple/quadruple helix" emerged, linking universities, science, industry and communities (society) as discussed by V. Petrov (Petrov, 2011: 45-65) and M. Ivanova (Ivanova, 2017: 190-203). The history of the social and political system reveals that the University is an important part of Modernity and a major site where information is created and shared. The university is a place where culture and society interact and impact each other. The contemporary university not only generates and converts information into a scientific format, but also assimilates science into culture, rendering it a fundamental component of societal advancement (Delanty, 2001: 149-153). The university is a reflection of the contemporary state of knowledge and the dynamics of scientific thinking.

The history and importance of Sofia University have been a subject of study since 1939, in honor of the University's 50th anniversary, when prof. Mihail Arnaudov was commissioned to write a special study. This tradition continued afterwards, from 1975, with the publication of the first Almanac of Higher Education Graduates of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" 1888-1974, Almanac of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" 1888-

1939, the Historical Almanac of Sofia University (1888-2018), as well as for individual faculties - Faculty of History 1888-2008, Almanac of the Faculty of Law at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" 1892-2017 and others (Almanah, 1940), (Almanah, 1975), (Almanah, 2017), (Almanah, 2008), (Almanah, 2020). These almanacs focus on the growth of the university, development of faculties, the research advances and the contributions to society. They show continuity and, in general, the "visible" heritage of the university.

While international scholarship has examined universities as agents of societal change, Bulgarian research has largely focused on institutional history and mostly its visible heritage. The invisible dimensions - academic spirit, dissent cultures, and informal networks - remain critically underexplored.

Different publications use the idea of "invisibility" in different ways. Smith, L., and Campbell, G. (2017) examine the concept "invisible/visible" value within the framework of intangible heritage, highlighting its inherent issues, redundancy, and political implications, particularly in heritage studies. The authors assert that "intangible values" refers to the social, spiritual, cultural, or commemorative connections that societies uphold about legacy, frequently serving as a synonym for intangible heritage. Their research indicates that the public predominantly perceives legacy as intangible "associations regarding culture, beliefs, and values" (Smith & Campbell, 2017).

According to Readings (1996) due to the growth of globalization, the single nation-states lose power, and universities are doing increasingly less to protect national culture. It is important to analytically track and critically analyse how universities shape the society and keep its collective memory. These dynamics necessitate that the University possesses the ability to shape the cultural identity of society within an exceedingly dynamic and unstable external environment.

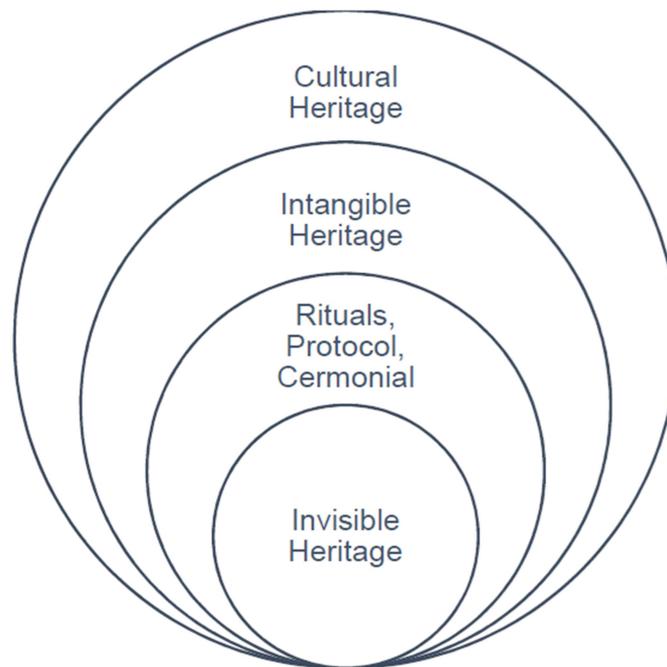
## Discussion and Results

Even though there are many similarities between intangible heritage and invisible heritage, the main difference is that invisible heritage focuses on less formalised and harder-to-trace things that show up in the community, like "academic spirit," "common sense," a sense of belonging to "Alma Mater," unwritten rules, academic humour, and others.

It is quite hard to find, study, and understand this legacy. Invisible heritage is also intangible and always changing, hard to understand and handle. (Melis & Chambers, 2021). There is no obvious way to examine it and figuring out how it has affected society and the community throughout time is not easy. At the same time, invisible heritage is a very strong way for people to show who they are and what they believe in.

The invisible heritage is a very essential aspect of a university's identity because it is founded on shared ideals, spirit, environment, and the "invisible" dynamics of dependencies and relationships. Unlike university ceremonial and procedure, which are formalised, visible, public, documented, and closely tied to the university's history, our idea of invisible heritage is of informal, shared values that shape behaviour, cultural norms and unwritten standards.

The concept of invisible heritage is visualized in Figure 1 as part of the cultural heritage.



**Figure 1. The Invisible Heritage as Part of Cultural Heritage**

Our arguments that invisible heritage can be studied as a separate analytical category are presented in matrix by comparing the tangible/intangible aspects with forma/informal measures in university context (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Matrix of Formal/Informal vs Tangible/Intangible**

	Tangible	Intangible
Formalized	Tangible (buildings, archives)	Intangible (ceremonies, songs)
Informal	Semi-visible (student objects, graffiti)	Invisible (academic spirit, student clubs, counterculture, unwritten rules)

Our study on invisible heritage as a distinct analytical category within heritage studies shows that the concept operates on three levels: (1) academic traditions and value; (2) social and political engagement and (3) contemporary challenges e.g. globalization, university’s “third mission”, etc. All together, these dimensions show how invisible heritage is both a resource for continuity and also, a driver for change.

The role of the university, from its establishment as an institution to its current function in the social evolution of society, transforms and adapts in relation to unseen heritage. The social function of Sofia University has evolved over time, influenced by historical, political, and social contexts. The university has been a part of history and has met national goals for a long time, from its foundation until the 1940s. However, in the age of globalization, its role as a social element for personal growth and its effect on society are changing. In the new setting, its functions become vaguer and in competition with many other higher education institutions. The research recognises that the University can assume a leadership role while remaining interconnected with societal development, aligning with the dynamics of global and European educational processes.

The university as an institution builds and formalises its history as part of its own mission, identity, and competitive strategy. Invisible heritage is neither seen as a topic of

scholarly inquiry nor as an element of ritual practices within university life. People regard the university as a way to make the transition from an unseen to a visible dimension by making it a part of the system. Additionally, as an institution with its own history, authority, and image, it helps to make certain aspects of legacy, such as laws and norms of behaviour, seem more real. The university's cultural legacy sets it apart and establishes its place in today's competitive world, including its ability to affect academic reputation and status. In today's culture, people have higher expectations of universities. These include the quality of education, professional training, scientific research, innovation, and technology transfer, among others. This is also known as the "third mission" (TM) of universities. The rise of the knowledge economy, globalisation, and the many crises that have happened in the past few years have created new problems for universities. They now must go beyond education and science, and also become active players in the innovation ecosystem, technology transfer, entrepreneurship, and direct interaction with businesses and communities. There is pressure and demand for "contribution to society" (Compagnucci & Spigarelli 2020).

The university's relationship with cultural heritage prompts extensive discussions over the purpose of higher education. Newman (2008) says that the idea of liberal education and the liberal arts, which is about developing the mind, is under attack from the need for a university education that is very business-oriented and practical (Aurell, 2024).

The Historian Mihail Arnaudov (Arnaudov, 2008) emphasizes that since its foundation, the university has played a key role in the spiritual transformation of the Bulgarian people and symbolizes the internal unity of the nation. Besides training personnel and forming intellectual power for the state, the academic staff was recruited to occupy responsible positions in the country's governance and as diplomatic representatives abroad. The institution gained international reputation by inviting Bulgarian professors to give lectures at top European universities and by giving the honoris causa of Sofia institution "St. Kliment Ohridski" to some of the world's most famous scientists.

The tangible heritage of Sofia University is shown in its buildings and official publications, but its real strength comes from its invisible heritage, which includes the shared values, academic traditions, and informal networks that mold people and affect society. One of the most clear pieces of evidence for this function is that university professors in Bulgaria are involved in government all the time. The Alma Mater has produced political leaders since it was founded, giving ministers and prime ministers in practically every historical epoch. The examination of data concerning these faculty-ministers indicates that, even during times of political turmoil or authoritarianism, the subtle influence of the academic community has persisted as a significant element, legitimising and altering societal processes. So, the university doesn't merely keep knowledge; it also uses it to help make state policy. This is one of the strongest and least studied examples of its social role.

The "invisible" heritage of Sofia University is brightly manifested through its role as a center of student counterculture and dissent, especially during the communist regime, when informal spaces within the university became hubs for alternative ideas.

Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" has always been more than an educational institution. It is a social catalyst and factor for change, and its students and staff have been involved in many of Bulgaria's most major social events. On November 3, 1988, Zhelyu

Zhelev started the "Club for Support of Glasnost and Perestroika" in the famous Auditorium 65. This was one of the first dissident movements in the country. University instructors and students who were part of informal groups including "Sintez," the "Marx Seminar," Club 39, the "Savremennik" club, and the "Face and the Mask" seminar also spoke out against the dictatorship (Goncharova, 2014). The fact that "The Egg" ("Yaitseto") works as an informal meeting place is also a sign of free thought and resistance to the communist dictatorship. On January 20, 1989, French President François Mitterrand met with Bulgarian intellectuals in Auditorium 272. This meeting directly supported opposition sentiments and was a major step towards democracy.

The university's role as a catalyst for social processes is not confined to this era; it encompasses the expulsion of Tsankov in the early 20th century and extends to the recent student strikes of 1990 and the occupations of the Rectorate in 1997 and 2013, which resulted in governmental resignations and political transformation. The University has also been a victim of political regimes. It was closed in the early 1900s, depersonalised in the 1950s, and more recently, people have tried to use financial mechanisms to control it.

These protests had an impact and caused government resignations and political reforms. They showed that the Alma Mater is not just a place to learn, but also a place where social processes happen. This shows that students are a moral and political avant-garde that creates a new civic identity. This invisible heritage is also based on student clubs and creative groups, like "The Egg" ("Yaitseto") a famous space that became a place for free speech, "Alma Alter," a student theatre, and "Alma Mater," a university radio and television station that gave independent voices a chance to be heard. These examples illustrate the unwritten history of institutional resistance, autonomy, and social participation that have defined the University's identity.

## Conclusions

The conversation and the study results support the key ideas, illustrating that the social function of Sofia University has changed throughout time. The studies of bibliographic and documentary sources facilitate the formulation of fundamental steps for an extensive investigation of the "invisible" cultural heritage of universities, thereby uncovering their role beyond mere education as catalysts of social processes.

The conceptualization and the importance of the invisible heritage showed that Sofia university is a strong catalyst in Bulgaria. This is why we propose a methodology for future research on the topic.

Our study demonstrates that the invisible heritage as a distinct category of heritage is crucial to understand the role of universities as agents of identity formation and social transformation. Sofia University exemplifies how shared academic spirit, informal networks and rituals contribute to the institutional and national memory.

The methodological approach we apply is holistic and multidisciplinary, integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods from several scientific domains. This allows us to analyse both the historical context and the informal processes that determine university culture today. To accomplish this, it is crucial to employ a combination of methodologies, including historical analysis of archive records, comprehensive interviews and focus groups with members of the academic community, alongside a survey, the results from

which will be analysed using the SPSS statistical software. It is also required to conduct content analysis of various materials, and a comparative study will facilitate the evaluation of Sofia University in relation to other universities. Choosing qualitative methods is very significant since they let you get to the heart of informal processes that can't be assessed with numbers alone. This approach is useful because it doesn't try to show final results. Instead, it tries to create a conceptual model for the "Invisible University," which shows the part of it that goes along with its historical development and turns it into a factor for social change and collective memory. Examining issues within the expansive domain of informal networks and behaviours that influence the views of future generations is a difficult endeavour outside the purview and objectives of the current research.

Our study outlines the gap in analysis and methods concerning research of invisible heritage of university, by addressing the existing deficiencies in the maintained community memory of the university's cultural heritage, particularly with its significance in diverse historical contexts. To address the problem of not systematically collecting and digitising historical materials and data, authors suggest making a full plan for digitization and promotion of Sofia University's cultural assets. This means making a digital archive and coming up with fresh, interesting ways to show the "invisible university" to young people and students in particular. These steps will make it easier for individuals to find information and encourage young people to learn about the institution's history and social role, which will help keep the collective memory alive.

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## **„НЕВИДИМОТО“ КУЛТУРНО НАСЛЕДСТВО НА УНИВЕРСИТЕТИТЕ: ИЗСЛЕДВАНИЯ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ В БЪЛГАРИЯ - КАЗУС НА СОФИЙСКИЯ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ „СВ. КЛИМЕНТ ОХРИДСКИ“**

**Резюме:** Статията анализира концепцията за "невидимото" културно наследство на университетите, като изследва неформалните процеси, формиращи културната среда по примера на Софийския университет "Св. Климент Охридски". Историческата перспектива е обогатена с анализ на съвременната роля на университета и неговата социална функция в България. В резултат на това, статията представя цялостен преглед на многостранните приноси на Софийския университет към "невидимото културно наследство", което формира и допринася за създаването на културната и социалната идентичност на институцията.

**Ключови думи:** невидимо наследство, невидим университет, социални трансформации

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