

## Book Reviews

*Natsuko Akagawa & Laurajane Smith (eds.), Safeguarding Intangible Heritage. Practices and Politics, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, Pp. xiv+259, ISBN: 9781138580756*

In recent years, research in the interdisciplinary field of Heritage Studies has become increasingly complex in response to the evolution of the concept of heritage in international policies. Whereas a few decades ago scholarly work centered on conservation and management issues benefitting by specialists' expertise and a discourse mostly concerned with national and regional identities, the current diversity of research topics and methods at work is indicative of a paradigm shift. It was particularly the *Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* (ICHC) adopted by UNESCO in 2003 that generated many such changes, by introducing a new conceptual category with far-reaching political, legal and administrative implications. As defined by the Convention, Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) "means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage." (UNESCO 2003, Art.1) Hence, cultural practices, living traditions, narratives, symbolic spaces and oral histories have secured a more prominent place in debates on the value of various forms of heritage.

*Safeguarding Intangible Heritage. Practices and Politics* is, in this context, a consistent and trustworthy companion to researchers trying to keep up with rapid developments in the field. Its editors, Natsuko Akagawa and Laurajane Smith, have written extensively on heritage in interdisciplinary frameworks including archaeology and anthropology to improve comprehension of the dynamics between cultural expressions and public policies, as well as cultural diplomacy. In addition, they are the co-editors of a ten-year younger volume, *Intangible Heritage*, a work remarkable for its historical outlook on the 2003 Convention, as well as for engaging the contributions of some authors involved in the negotiations prior to its signature.

*Safeguarding Intangible Heritage. Practices and Politics* begins with a summary of the evolution of the concept of intangible heritage over the last three decades, in response to the mainstream view on heritage, referred to as the Authorized Heritage Discourse, of which Laurajane Smith has written in several of her works. This Eurocentric view, associated with the nineteenth-century context of nation-making and identity-legitimizing contributed to an understanding of heritage in terms of objects, sites, and intergenerational transmission of long-lasting values. It was a discourse allied with the institution of the museum, patriotism, nationalism and liberal education, which drew on expert knowledge and state agencies to define and promote the heritage in need of protection. By comparison, the new category of ICH, partly a result of political and diplomatic endeavors to give a voice to historically marginalized or ignored cultures of the Global South, has dislodged many certainties about what valuable heritage means and who establishes this. In addition, ICH mobilized international support due to the ongoing threats posed by globalization to specific cultural practices of communities, especially indigenous ones, small groups still maintaining unique traditions, and mostly communities lacking the necessary means to promote their own culture.

The volume is structured in two parts, the first focusing on the challenges gen-

erated by the ICH in theory, as well as from an institutional and legal point of view, whereas the second is dedicated to examining the practicalities of safeguarding, which is more than a mere nuance to the established terminology of protection-preservation-conservation. Totalling an introductory chapter and 14 articles, it includes contributions which manage to balance theoretical claims with a variety of examples and case studies, providing readers with a clear perspective on the advantages and challenges of ICH. In addition, they discuss important values or practices to which ICH is connected: sustainability, cultural rights and diversity, de-centralization, creative industries or eco-tourism.

Chapters 2 and 3 shed light on the most difficult issues to which the new concept has given rise, i.e. the participation of communities in the selection and safeguarding of intangible heritage elements representative for them and framing ICH within the current regime of intellectual property rights.

Although not a new instrument in public decision-making, community involvement here goes beyond the procedures of stakeholder consultation, and is considered “to re-orient the power relationship from seeing ICH and its bearer communities as subjects of research, to regarding ICH as a value and social resource for its communities” (18). The new forms of partnerships, as well as the role of NGOs connecting the communities and the decision-makers who will prepare the proposal for listing are consistent with the interpretation of ICH safeguarding as a matter of cultural rights of a specific community. Moreover, ICH is naturally connected with sustainable development concerns of communities, by incorporating practices related to land use, agriculture, and biodiversity management. The influence works both ways, since the stakes are high to encourage the listing of those practices contributing to sustainable development, which is one of the values governing the Convention. It is instructive to note that, although “communities” naturally refer to the actual custodians or stewards of heritage, in practice there is often a wider circle at work, including academic institutions, as well as regional and national agencies.

Where intellectual property rights are concerned, ICH presents legislators with far more complexity than the classic notion of heritage, and this is visible in the process of nomination and inscription of elements for which several parties may have claims. Moreover, geographical indications, copyright design, patent and trademark protection, as well as the data publicizing system of inventories are sometimes likely to work not for the real benefit of the source communities, and rather lead to an over-crowding of regulations. This is interestingly illustrated by Chapter 7, which discusses the pros and cons of documenting linguistic heritage by means of digital archives. The process is analyzed in terms of its efficiency, as well as, critically, from the paradigm of power relations between the final beneficiaries, documenters and the communities. In addition, it helps readers better understand ethnographic and ethno-linguistic heritage as a forerunner to ICH, and the pervasive influence of methodologies and institutions on the new context of data collection. In the third place, this case study raises the dilemma of living heritage versus archived heritage, disconnected from the people, practices and environment it originated from.

Since the issue of living forms of cultural expressions is a salient one for the 2003 Convention, it is legitimate to ask whether the creation of lists which generate in turn other lists enabling linguists to trace the evolution of idioms across time and space in a project management logic is of use for the communities themselves, other than by pub-

licizing their existence. As proof of how the post-colonial paradigm of data collection and presentation has influenced linguistic archives, many speakers from disadvantaged communities still lack access to these digital resources. This contrasts expert knowledge with what we know little of, i.e. “speakers’ own linguistic theories, their beliefs about language, and the ways in which they experience the creation of their heritage with the participation of others” (112).

Chapter 14, dedicated to the heritagization of Kyrgyz oral poetry echoes these concerns, and draws attention to another element of living practices, namely improvisation. The case study refers to a particular epic tradition from Kyrgyzstan, *Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers*, included among the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It is a combination of epic art and socio-political commentary, whose improvisational nature is related very much to recent events and the context of the performance. Traditions and social norms are referred to, sometimes critically, in the form of political commentaries. This kind of art illustrates the dynamic and fluid nature of intangible heritage, as “a discursive field where the past and present connect and inform one another, transforming oral poetry performances into a unique folk art that is traditional in form, yet modern in content.” (221) The fact that every such performance is unique does not exclude the existence of a genre transmitted over generations, yet it does raise questions as to how to safeguard such heritage without decontextualizing it and depriving it of its original function, in other words, how to avoid commoditization of living practices.

The relation of ICH with social and economic development is also an important topic, which the volume addresses especially in Chapter 9, dealing with the Indonesian traditional art of batik making and revitalization of economy by creative industries. It discusses the way in which the 2009 UNESCO listing of Batik on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity provided the Indonesian government with an opportunity to nationalize this practice, and to support using a symbol of national cultural unity for economic development. Here again, laws, recommendations, policy initiatives and institutional infrastructures are as relevant to understand the dynamic of ICH definition and promotion as the story about the cultural practices themselves. This reflects a tension between the aspiration of preserving cultural diversity, which is often such because it evolved in de-centralized contexts and, on the other hand, the need of increasing cohesion and mobilizing resources to support projects with wider, national relevance.

This tension brings us to a final issue that can be considered to some extent constitutive to the development of ICH, namely its association with cultural diplomacy or national agendas. As a series of cultural practices that require a form of management, by association with values such as diversity, sustainability, promotion of mutual respect, tolerance and human rights, ICH is of important use for nation branding and affirmation of national identities in the context of globalization. For example, the case discussed in Chapter 13, that of *washoku*, officially inscribed as “traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year” (203), shows that protecting traditional ways of life, as maintained by culinary heritage is often accompanied by more standardization and concerns for supporting related industries. When we think of food we think first of all of variety, and that perhaps more than in any other domain, every little detail of a recipe, preparation, context of serving, ceremonies, local flavors, etc., would make a big difference, justifying therefore the unique character of this kind

of heritage. However, some of the best-known designations, such as “Gastronomic meal of the French”, “Traditional Mexican cuisine” or “Mediterranean food” (203) seem surprisingly general, despite the explanations that accompany them, which refer to a whole series of farming particularities, rituals, traditions, and culinary techniques. The strategic proposal from Japan is interesting in this respect, because it relates the concern for consolidating a sense of national identity with what it identifies as essential for Japanese culture, i.e. respect for nature and sustainable use of resources, health promotion, inclusivity and gender respect. It reflects concern for changing eating habits of the young attracted by “Western food and styles of eating” (207), while aspiring to promote Japanese food internationally, and although it insists on its national character, it aspires to be universal in scope, meeting UNESCO’s targets. As far as cultural diplomacy is concerned, this is, for sure, one fine example of how specific intangible heritage finds its way into the global discourse.

To conclude, *Safeguarding Intangible Heritage. Practices and Politics* is a rich, carefully constructed academic resource, managing to give a clear overview of a highly complex topic, along with vastly documented commentaries, examples and many useful syntheses of conceptual and implementation dilemmas related to intangible cultural heritage.

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