

Intangible Heritage, 2009

Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, (eds.)

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Generally the understanding of 'heritage' in much of the academic literature separates it from 'history' and from simply a concept of 'the past' through the idea that 'heritage' is more precisely how contemporary societies interpret and make sense of the past from their contemporary perspective. Heritage often includes monuments and important sites and these are often marked, preserved or protected in some kind of formal way, but they need not be. Heritage studies tend to blur any neat lines between the built landscape, the natural world and what is now known as intangible cultural heritage. Beyond this basic definition, heritage has become a key focus of international organisations such as UNESCO, the World Intellectual Property Organisation (WIPO), the International Council of Museums (ICOM), etc. In the emerging field of Critical Heritage Studies scholars increasingly focus on the political and economic dimensions of heritage as these become important in such areas as tourism, nationalism, ethnic and national conflicts and state policy making. Overall, the brief definition of heritage as 'the present's use of the past' serves in these areas of inquiry. But does that same definition of heritage carry over into the study of intangible heritage? In many ways it does inasmuch as intangible heritage is often the present society's use of what are considered cultural practices with deep roots or longevity of performance. Furthermore, such activities, from traditional knowledge and folklore to arts, crafts, dress, cuisine, dance, music, drama, religion and religious ceremonies, and sports and games, (to give a

partial list) are increasingly embedded in political and economic contexts that are distinctly contemporary, whether or not the expressive forms themselves continue to be relevant to members of the community. These are some of the issues addressed by *Intangible Heritage*, a much needed and timely collection of essays written by an international group of scholars and heritage specialists, some of whom were directly involved in establishing the 2003 *Convention*.

Edited by Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, the collection contains fifteen entries organised into three distinct parts. The first part is a reflection on the history of, and key concepts within, the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* which was adopted in 2003 and went into effect in 2006. The second part concerns the *material politics and practices of the intangible*, which addresses, critically, the relationships that emerge between communities and states with regard to heritage in the wake of the *Convention*. The third part, entitled *Reflecting on the Intangible* comprises four essays, each of which tackles key aspects of just exactly what 'intangible' means. The driving concern here is maintaining the understanding that intangible heritage is cultural in essence, and that cultures are not simply collections of 'things' that can be bought, sold, lost or stolen in any traditional sense of those ideas. Noriko-Aikawa-Faure, Valdimar Hafstein, Ahmed Skounti and Janet Blake each describe a different aspect of the details leading up to the *Convention*.

Understanding these debates, whether it is the negotiations between states, struggles over definitions of heritage, or conflicts relating to how to engage local communities, is vital to moving forward with studies of how heritage is now being conceived and acted upon. While the *Convention* is frequently supported by scholars, performers, leaders and others, there is often a guarded quality to this support. Problems relating to decision making, implementation, and the as-yet unknown political and cultural consequences are healthy caveats voiced within this book.

Part two deals more explicitly with problems of theorising heritage. Essays by Dawson Munjeri, Mary Lorena Kenny, Henrietta Marrie, Christina Kreps and Amanda Kearney represent on-the-ground examples of the difficulties that can occur when taking the concepts outlined in the *Convention* and bringing them into practice within communities and community institutions. The opinions here are, again, cautious. While Marrie and

Kearney see potential for the *Convention* to benefit indigenous peoples, for example, they are concerned about how certain definitions of heritage may either exclude or limit certain practices, both in their expression and in the way they continue to exist within the community in question. Kreps asks a vital question as well, in exploring implications and potential effects of curation on practices (with curation here meaning long-term preservation and retention of heritage assets and the preservation of regular access to them in a number of ways).

These essays lead nicely into Part three which is somewhat more theoretical in nature and is well handled by Denis Byrne, Regina Bendix, Frank Hassard, and Laurajane Smith and Emma Waterton. Of greatest concern to social scientists working on cultural issues is the way in which cultural activities, taken into economic and political worlds through globalisation, stay relevant to practitioners. Byrne points out that culture is about



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meaning and emotion while Bendix makes the fine point that heritage is not simply something out there that the world now 'protects' but is something created through this very process. 'Creating' heritage is sometimes the best way to stifle 'culture.' This brings me back to my opening commentary and leads me to end with a question. Is the 'heritage' in tangible heritage the same as the 'heritage' in 'intangible heritage'? This is clearly, as this volume demonstrates, not merely a question of semantics. The influence of one over the other has important consequences in terms of the formation of policy for the development of culture industries and for the growth and expansion of tourism just to name two. *Intangible Heritage*, the book, is among the best introductions to the key issues in this rapidly growing field. It should be on the shelf of anyone serious about understanding the heritage landscape. 🇬🇧