

Conference Report:
Tangible-Intangible Cultural Heritage:
A Sustainable Dichotomy?
the 7th Annual Cambridge Heritage Seminar

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Introduction

Nearly a decade ago the Cambridge Heritage Seminars (CHS) began meeting at Cambridge University, creating a forum for discussing ideas, questions, and case studies arising from working with, or studying, cultural heritage, itself a nascent field. From their start the Seminars proved to be fruitful venues for conversation, and through the events themselves and their subsequent publications, have garnered a great deal of interest and comment over many different disciplines.

With the ripening of the discipline of heritage studies (as it has come to be termed) since that time, the remit of the CHS has likewise expanded to include collaboration with academics, policy-makers, and practitioners, with the intent of a mutual enriching of theory and practice amongst these sub-sets of researchers. The 2006 Cambridge Heritage Seminar, held at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research on 13 May 2006, sought to better understand the rapidly evolving concepts of tangible and intangible cultural heritage (sometimes referred to as 'material' and 'immaterial'). Both the structure of the programme and the diverse make-up of the participants continued the CHS tradition of open discussion and interdisciplinary learning.

The impetus for the May 2006 conference was the impending ratification of the UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (here referred to as the 2003 Convention), which came into force the month before the conference, in April 2006. Given the developments in the field that this convention represented, and the debates over the interpretation and implementation that would surely ensue, it was timely to lend it a critical eye. Discussion of the 2003 Convention did figure prominently during the course of the day, but its presence did not prevent a range of other issues from surfacing in the numerous papers, posters, and conversations that took place. Participants spoke eloquently on the perceived dichotomy between tangible and intangible cultural heritage, both praising and questioning its usefulness for theory and practice. To extend the discussion to the wider community in heritage studies, this report contains a synopsis of the conference (divided into three parts), a critical discussion of the issues it raised, and some avenues for future research.

Development of the discourse

From the very beginning, clear and communicable

definitions of the two concepts were a priority. To establish the foundation for the rest of the day, David Stehl of UNESCO presented a history and description of the 2003 Convention, detailing its provisions and obligations for States Parties whilst contextualising it against the 1972 UNESCO *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. Using examples taken from around the world, Stehl emphasised the 2003 Convention's focus on 'living' heritage and the breadth of cultural expression it covers. As with any Convention adopted by UNESCO, however, Stehl took care to point out the need of the member states to follow through on the recommendations the Convention provides - such an international Convention is toothless, he argued, without the full support of its States Parties.

Following Stehl, Claude Ardouin (British Museum, Department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas) argued for the fluidity of the tangible-intangible distinction. He suggested that the role of museums in safeguarding and interpreting objects frequently extends past the visitor's experience of the display case. The T45 Citroen truck, for example, widespread in West Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, had become woven into the songs and oral traditions of those who had driven them, ridden in them, and interacted with them in other contexts. Arguing that the inseparability of tangible and intangible heritage was one of the 'first principles' of contemporary heritage studies, Ardouin exposed the creation of these categories and the intellectual and managerial means by which they were artificially separated. Such separation, he argued, can be successfully countered by appropriate curatorial training that accentuates the links between apparently different 'knowledge clusters.' By uniting the tangible object and intangible associations surrounding it, museum staff and stakeholders may enjoy a richer, more

nuanced relationship with that piece of history.

Like Stehl's and Ardouin's introductory addresses, the following four papers in this session oscillated between the theoretical and the practical. Adrian Calvo-Valderrama (Universite Pierre Mendes-France) offered a sociologist's perspective in his paper *Tangible to Intangible Heritage: A Sociological Question*. Using Emile Durkheim's definition of a category as *a solid frame that contains all of our thoughts*, Calvo-Valderrama traced the evolution of UNESCO's definition of intangible heritage, and considered the implications such a definition would have: implications for everyday conceptualisation, use of language, and praxis. Great care must be taken, he argued, for a definition purporting to exist *for all of humanity*.

These concerns were adopted by Stephanie Koerner and Lorna Singleton (University of Manchester), in their paper *The Unquiet Past: Cultural Heritage and Spaces Where Reasons Matter in the Changing Social Geography of Science, Technology, and Human Values*. They demonstrated how conflict and globalisation, and their effects upon social geography, have given rise to fears that traditional life-ways, languages, practices, and cultures are disappearing. In their view, the 2003 Convention placates these fears through the promotion of safeguarding measures, a major part of the Convention's protocols. Furthermore, Koerner and Singleton argued, the 2003 Convention redresses the postcolonial recognition that the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' (a term coined by Laurajane Smith) has been dominated by Western theories regarding expert knowledge and accountability.

The highly controversial notion of the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' was taken up by the other two participants in this session, Emma Waterton and Laurajane Smith (both of the University of York).

Waterton's paper, *We Have Trouble Communicating: Intangible Heritage and the Dominant Heritage Discourse*, argued that the discourse of 'grand,' 'tangible,' and 'aesthetically pleasing' heritage set out in the 1972 *World Heritage Convention* has become 'naturalised,' that is, largely unquestioned. This explains, she suggested, why the idea of intangible heritage has not been wholly adopted by scholars and policymakers, a situation that is reflected by the significant lack of Western nations that have ratified the 2003 Convention. (As of this writing, in autumn 2006, the UK has not begun the ratification process.) Waterton argued that the establishment of intangible heritage as a third exclusionary category of heritage (after natural and cultural, set out in the 1972 Convention) has only resulted in the unquestioned adoption of the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse': attempts to theorise intangibility have sidestepped the already-established categories of heritage, thereby further reifying its place in the academy.

Echoing Waterton but taking her argument even further, Laurajane Smith argued, in her paper *Heritage and Its Intangibility*, that heritage should not be defined by its materiality or immateriality, but rather by what is *done* with it in a broader cultural context. She described how the 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' obfuscates what heritage actually does in our society by seeing heritage as the actual 'thing' (monument, artefact, building) - as opposed to the values and meanings we ascribe to objects, acts, and events. Contending that on these grounds all heritage is, in fact, intangible, Smith argued that heritage mediates cultural and social change through the continual construction and negotiation of identity, place, and memory. It is therefore active and performative, illustrated by visitors to heritage sites who engage in a cultural ritual by which they acquire cultural literacy and thus social capital. Finally, drawing on the work of Ashworth and Tunbridge on 'dissonant heritage,' Smith argued that all heritage is contested, and that the cultural performance of heritage is about the negotiation of this contest to create and maintain social consensus.

Forms and meanings

In order to explore how these abstract concepts play themselves out, later papers drew on case studies to illuminate their affects and effects in practice. They

explored how cultural heritage is transformed by the visitor experience, and how its consumers determine what becomes heritage and the various forms it will take.

The first two papers presented reflected on the notion of heritage as fictional landscape, and equally, fictional landscape as heritage. John Carman (University of Birmingham) gave a paper entitled *Castles in the Air: the Intangibility of the Tangible*, in which he argued for heritage as a realm of ideas rather than a collection of objects. It is the ideas and memories that we have about objects and the symbolic values that we ascribe to them that transform them into heritage, he claimed, not the other way round. Drawing on examples of heritage linked to battlefield sites, the paper illuminated how memorials and re-enactments both recall and replace the memory of events. In this way, Carman argued, the creation of new objects comes to represent the intangible past. Detailing the transformation of empty space into battlefield space, and then into heritage space, he proposed that what we choose to honour about battles reveals far more about our present needs than about the past events themselves.

Picking up Carman's cues on the transformation of space, Benjamin Morris (of Cambridge University) mapped out the landscape of heritage born out of the literary endeavour. His paper, *Altars of Words and Stone: On Literature as Heritage* focused on instances of heritage that would not have existed in their current form without literature: encounters created not by history or politics but by fiction and poetry. He identified three primary categories of literary heritage: places associated with a literary tradition, the physical remnants of literature that require conservation (such as letters and manuscripts), and the contemporary institutions that exist to nurture and safeguard literary activity. He offered examples such as pilgrimages to writers' homes, like Dylan Thomas' birthplace in Swansea (which is not open to the public but which garners visitors anyway), and to sites that appear in their writings, such as a bare spot of earth in a Georgia cemetery made a tourist attraction by the novel *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Taking Scotland as a case study, Morris charted how the city of Edinburgh had engineered its 2004 designation by UNESCO as the first World City of Literature. He concluded by arguing that literary heritage extends past the spatio-temporal bounds ascribed to tangible heritage, but this process must take into account its consequences on writers living and working today.

Whereas Carman and Morris focused on the intangible heritage of narratives, two other papers analysed intangible heritage made manifest in living persons and practices. In her paper, *Living Human Treasures and their Tangible Products: Traditional Whistles in Matera*, Chiara Bortolotto (Istituto di Arti, Culture e Letterature Comparate IULM) raised crucial questions about the transformative impact that labelling can have. Looking at the production of traditional whistles from the regions of Puglia and Basilicata in southern Italy, she presented the case of a craftsman who was labelled 'living heritage,' and how this labelling transformed him, his practice and the resulting objects. After the recognition had turned his art into a representative symbol of the traditional pottery of this region, he began signing the whistles and turning them into expensive collectors' items. As a result, the whistles became decorative objects and lost their original role in traditional children's games. In this sense, Bortolotto's paper served as an admonition to overzealous heritage managers who seek to append the notion of heritage to too much: it can do as much harm as it can do good, she warned, and the consequences can be devastating.

A paper by Marden Nichols (of the University of Cambridge), *Documenting Folklore? Intangible Heritage in the 20th Century*, examined the development of folklore as heritage in the twentieth century. Central to her expose of the issue and to each of her examples was the issue of documentation, bringing to light the fact that while terminology has changed, there is still tension and disagreement surrounding the documentation of intangible heritage. Her case study of Henry Chapman Mercer's Moravian Pottery and Tile Works suggested a productive route for approaching the safeguarding of intangible heritage. Mercer had not only collected tiles and ceramics, but researched the production techniques involved in their making and design and proceeded to manufacture tiles using this knowledge. The example showed that our condemnation of archives as 'frozen and 'dead' culture discounts the potential of future generations to re-encounter and revamp expressions of heritage long unpracticed. Like Bortolotto's work, Nichols's paper also illustrated how the intervention of heritage managers and other enthusiasts seeking to revive and sustain cultural practices often reflects these interventionists' values - not those of their original creators.

Interpretation and representation

The final session of the day concentrated on assessing the influence and implications of tangible and intangible heritage for cultural heritage management, spanning both presentation- and research-oriented approaches.

Surpassing the usual critique of museums' obsession with the physical relics of the past, Patrick Boylan (City University London) revealed the concern many museums have in fact had with non-material culture in his paper, *The Intangible Heritage: A Challenge and an Opportunity for Museums and Museum Professional Training*. Given that the intangible is increasingly recognised by museums, Boylan discussed the implications for museums of aligning with specific cultural domains outlined by the 2003 Convention. Addressing both collection-centred museums driven by 'scholar-curators' and community-minded 'new' museums led by multi-tasking, holistically-minded teams, he stressed the importance of specialised, general, and lifelong training and capacity-building for museum professionals. In the wake of continual change and redefinition within the museum field, Boylan underlined that protection and promotion of the intangible heritage, especially as codified by UNESCO, is a most timely and crucial concern, and also briefly introduced the forthcoming new International Journal of Intangible Heritage, of which he is Editor-in-Chief.

Codifications are meaningless if they do not have consequences for practice, however. Mohamed Bounhiss (City University London) illustrated these concerns in a paper entitled *Sustaining Intangible Heritage: The 'Eco-Museum' Concept in Morocco*. A native Moroccan, Bounhiss telescoped between local and national contexts to evaluate the museological response to his country's rich and diverse cultural heritage. By tracing the colonial legacies and ideological frameworks that underlie Morocco's contemporary heritage management and museology, Bounhiss exposed the continuing failure of museums to recognise and respond to diverse local political and cultural forms. These museums also privileged tangible heritage, he argued, playing to foreign and tourist interests. In the second half of his paper, Bounhiss contrasted this discriminatory role played by public museums with an analysis of the Ait Iktel village eco-Museum, where local definitions, agendas, and environments contextualise and safeguard tangible and intangible heritage in complementary ways. He argued this it is not only a more effective, sustainable and

renewable type of museum, where cultural identity can be organically and fully constructed, but one in which the assets of territory, community, collections, craft and habitat can be translated into economic growth, community development and broader social empowerment.

A case study on the other side of the world offered similar insights. Sarah Byrne (University College, London) gave a paper entitled *Archaeological Research Implications and the Case Study of Papua New Guinea*, drawing on her exploration of the social meaning of monumental complexes on Uneapa Island in order to question the dichotomy's suitability for research agendas. While acknowledging some positive implications of the tangible-intangible separation for heritage practice, she warned of its limited benefits and even counterproductive effects for understanding past and present social phenomena. She critiqued a post-process agenda that privileges perception over practice and social action over materiality, an approach she claimed, that does not adequately account for the ways that social meanings merge. Byrne advocated balanced research that recognises the subtle interplay between tangible and intangible elements, rejecting the division's true nature as a methodological construct largely devoid of any real social meaning.

Discussion and avenues for further research

The round-up discussion moderated by Beverley Butler (University College, London) suggested avenues for ways forward and further research. Many of the issues raised above will require further analysis before they merit stable conclusions, but there were some broad lessons to be learned from the speakers and participants. First, in homage to the theme of the conference, it appears that the dichotomy between tangible and intangible (or material/immaterial) heritage is frequently unsustainable, as material culture resists interpretation or appropriation without an overt acknowledgement of the meanings and values ascribed to it.

Yet structuralist critics must be headed off at the pass: to suggest a dichotomy is not necessarily to declare an opposition, and a concept as capricious as cultural heritage requires a dialectical approach between materiality and immateriality rather than an oppositional one. Material culture can only be fully understood in the

context of its capacity for social or epistemological action, and likewise, the conceptual bases of material heritage to which we owe a great deal of our cultural identity (not to mention occasions for preservation and conservation) could not exist without the objects and spaces to which they belong. So whilst the interplay between the material and the immaterial has partly been mapped, what remains are accounts of how this interplay translates into legal structure and action. Examining cases in which this translation has proven a success or a failure will greatly increase our theoretical and practical resources, and will open the way for safeguarding practice that is more informed and potentially less disruptive.

Even a brief look at the countries that have ratified the 2003 Convention reveals where most of the thinking on the tangible/intangible interplay has already advanced, and it would be fruitful for Western-oriented researchers to learn from these experiences. One place to start would be UNESCO's list of *the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, though (as Bortolotto argued) it is important to bear in mind that such proclamations will have their own effects on the subject. Cross-cultural comparisons and collaborations, as well as respect for the diversity of understandings of tangibility and intangibility, are one of many ways forward that will bear just this kind of fruit. 

NOTES

For more information on the next conference, consult the CHS website at <http://www.arch.cam.ac.uk/heritage-seminar/> (where archived information on the 7th CHS can also be found).

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