

Touching the Intangible: Safeguarding Intangible
Cultural Heritage, 2012 (by Stefano, Michelle L., Davis,
Peter, and Corsane, Gerard, eds.)

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This new volume in the Heritage Matters Series is a welcome contribution from the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies at Newcastle University. This compilation of articles and interviews with leading scholars in the heritage movement is skilfully edited by Michelle Stefano, Peter Davis, and Gerard Corsane. The twenty-one entries include sixteen articles and five 'Conversation Pieces'. These additional five entries are highly engaging interviews with heritage scholars from a range of disciplines who work with professional organisations in diverse geographic regions. As a whole, the entire compilation is a welcome addition to the literature on heritage due to its focus on the conservation of intangible cultural resources (ICH) within various political, economic, historic, and geographic contexts.

Within legislation and preservationist movements, the focus on protecting heritage often centres on material culture. UNESCO and ICOMOS, as well as various historic trusts, emphasise the preservation of the built environment through creating national registers of historic buildings and establishing historic neighbourhoods. Through the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* that UNESCO's General Conference adopted in 2003, this 'bricks and mortar' approach has been supplemented by increased attention to the less tangible elements of culture. UNESCO articulates this ICH as an array of elements of expressive culture, including oral traditions, language, performing arts, rituals and a variety of artistic forms subsumed under the rubric of folklore and folklife.

Although ICH has been recently codified within international policy and preservationist interests, it has its antecedents in cultural resource protection policies developed in various nations. Mary Hufford's 1994 edited volume, *Cultural Conservation: A New Discourse on Heritage*, for example, articulates a cultural conservation paradigm that enfolds expressive culture within the more conventional tangible elements of movements designed to preserve the built environment. Recently, scholars such as Laurajane Smith in her 2006 book *Uses of Heritage*, critique the dichotomy between tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Many of the contributors to *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage* offer perspectives complicit with ideas offered by Hufford and Smith, as they demonstrate that the significance of heritage resources is derived from the intangible associations and meanings associated with both the built and the natural environment.

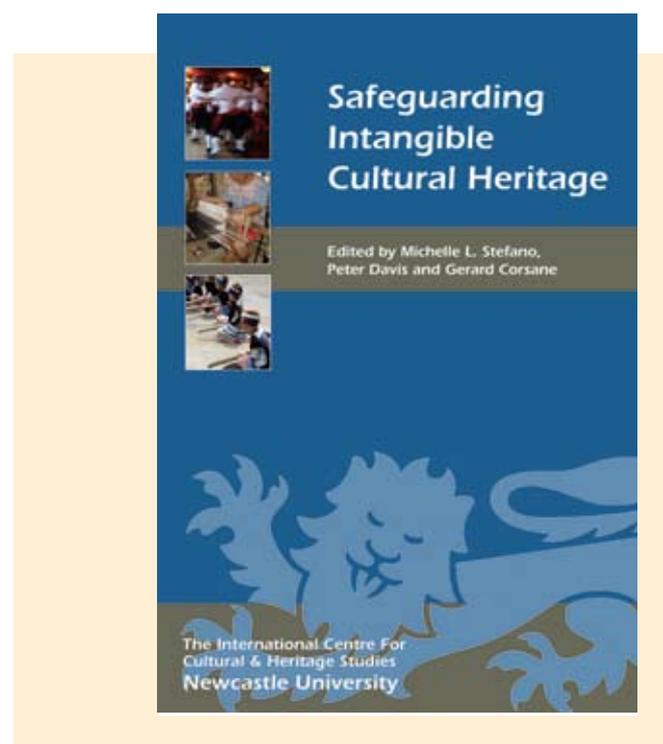
In this respect, Stefano, Davis, and Corsane's masterful compilation of articles offers an important contribution to heritage discourse and preservationist movements. The specific arguments of each article are too numerous, and would require too much context to fully develop in a book review. But salient themes emerge throughout the volume. Following a well-written introduction to the book, Marilena Alivizatos's chapter 'The Paradoxes of Intangible Heritage' opens the volume. She asks readers to consider the challenges and ironies involved in efforts to preserve the ineluctable elements of culture. Her insights contribute to various themes that

the six other authors in the book's first section titled 'Negotiating and Valuing the Intangible' explore. The seemingly paradoxical tension between preserving heritage versus performing culture in museums is explored in Alissandra Cummins' article. She develops the useful perspective that heritage is performed rather than solely ossified in museums. Conceptualising ICH as performance is examined in numerous pieces within this section as contributors discuss how efforts to support the conservation of culture within heritage movements must focus on culture as a dynamic system rather than as a reified compilation of resources – or fodder for the cultural industry. Ewa Bergdahl and Vasant Hari Bedekar's conversation pieces provide especially animated discussions about heritage resources and cultural conservation in relation to policy and programmes in Bergdahl's Sweden and Bedekar's India.

Six entries are drawn together in the second section titled 'Applying the Intangible Cultural Heritage Concept.' Christian Hottin and Sylvie Grenet provide an excellent discussion of ways that the practice of heritage protection is blended with policy making in France – especially in relation to the 2003 UNESCO *Convention*. They present relevant case studies that show the successes and challenges in applying UNESCO policies to particular circumstances, and their discussion moves far beyond the typical descriptions of case studies that are sometimes emphasised in articles dealing with historic preservation efforts. Lyn Leader-Elliott and Daniella Trimboli's discussion of government policy and intangible heritage in Australia is an especially strong contribution to the volume as they explore interconnections between heritage politics on the international, national, and indigenous levels. The remaining articles, and Susan Keitumetse's conversation piece within this section provide useful comparative perspectives that are valuable for exploring cultural politics within the policy and practice of ICH. Comparing and contrasting various case studies in the Netherlands, Wales, Botswana, and Nova Scotia offer helpful perspectives that can be applied to numerous other situations. The writers move beyond simply 'problematizing' issues involved in negotiating diverse political agendas and ideologies, and they demonstrate the importance of recognising how 'heritage' is frequently a contested term – not solely between various cultural groups but also within more seemingly unified populations. The writers all make important contributions by showing the limits to a 'one

size fits all' approach to ICH policy and practice. Rather, the writers show how universalising concepts must be tempered with local needs and interests. Another strength within this section is Andrew Dixey's argument that supporting ICH should encompass more than the preservation of vanishing remnants of cultural expressions and rather include movements that help to revive and revitalise apparently moribund forms of expression.

The third section of the book is titled 'On the Ground: Safeguarding the Intangible.' It includes two conversation pieces by Harriet Deacon and Maurizio Maggi. Deacon's discussion is focused on ICH in South Africa, and Maggi's conversation looks at ICH in Italy. The contrasts are as striking as the similarities in these forums. What makes this particular section especially important, however, is the way that the six remaining articles blend theoretical discussion with various case studies. Each entry logically develops ideas set forth in the previous two sections. The specific issues, and the context for the case studies in sections one and two provide an excellent background for more generalised argument in the book's final section. Michelle Stefano's piece on adopting an eco-museological approach stands out as a major contribution to conceptualising ways to blend historic



preservation and cultural conservation into ICH. Her critique of the 'top-down' system of creating items and inventories is especially important. Stefano examines the problems with creating heritage inventories, and instead posits an approach that is more centred in the needs and interests of local communities and populations. It is unfortunate that this approach is sometimes termed a 'bottom-up' strategy – namely because this terminology can validate classist ideology. But the focus on envisioning ICH within the wider concepts of ecology and vibrant cultural systems is at the heart of Stefano's discussion. Essentially, she offers an alternative to developing policies to preserve ICH using lists and rubrics encoded in official policy. Stefano places ICH within an ecology of space and time that is integral to the ways that people at local levels construct their views of heritage, history and culture. She uses examples that emphasise the value of creating policies and programmes that first respond to local needs and interests. Furthermore, she offers insightful critiques of the potential for the lists and inventories approach to reify and fossilise the dynamic elements of cultural creativity. Her essay provides unifying constructs for more sustainable approaches for safeguarding heritage.

Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage is one of the first major treatments of ICH. It builds on important work within a variety of disciplines. Contributions by anthropologists, folklorists, historians, museum specialists, and historic preservationists are brought together in a surprisingly cohesive treatment of heritage. Insightful, yet highly accessible, the twenty-one articles and conversation pieces provide important resources for enfolding ICH within the discourses on historic preservation and cultural conservation that are inherent within contemporary heritage movements. 🇬🇧