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Rethinking the Nature|Culture Divide and Intangible Heritage

The past ten years, since the birth of the UNESCO 2003 *Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage,* have witnessed a spate of publications exploring the various aspects of intangible heritage. Some of these are compilations of existing articles, others are new collections of edited volumes, but very few are in-depth monographs. This article features three volumes of scholarly work that provide different perspectives and contribute to the meagre literature on rethinking the artificial dichotomy of nature and culture in intangible heritage studies.

Sustaining Living Culture

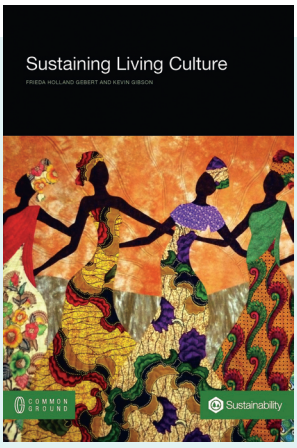
(Eds.) Frieda H. Gebert and Kevin Gibson, On Sustainability book series, Common Ground Publishing, Champaign, Illinois, 2012.
222 pages. Paperback: ISBN-13: 9781612291185
Digital: ISBN-10: 161229118X

Sustaining Living Culture is published in an environmental research series. It addresses the sustainability of intangible heritage, starting with the classic definition of sustainable development as *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.* [i] Central to the 2003 *Convention* is the sustainability of safeguarding intangible heritage. This collection of essays focuses on 'inherent value to' the carriers and transmitters of intangible heritage through their activities. It provides an examination of case studies of 'cultures' that are *both sustained and alive: sustained being defined as nurtured, maintained and allowed to thrive, and alive in the sense of being engaged by present generations and constantly evolving to resonate with its current circumstances.* The chapters, structured around the five cultural practices delineated in the 2003 *Convention*, provide a focused discussion illustrated with case studies. They are interdisciplinary and global in selection.

Part I addresses 'Social Practices and Rituals'. Ian Young deals with the difference between cultural survival and cultural sustainability. Given that intangible heritage is living and dynamic, the argument is for understanding the nexus between culture and development that can be positive and facilitate the continuity of intangible heritage values in hybrid and contextual formations. Denis Rudd and Richard Mills interrogate the symbolic function of culinary arts, arguing for a greater awareness of sustainability and the unintended consequences and changes impacting on living cultures. They underline the importance of food rituals rather than the food itself, through organisational cultural theory, and argue for sustainability through cultural adaptation and the integrated study of culture, food and communication where intangible heritage plays an important role in our changing sense of self-perception as communities.

Part II focuses on the 'Arts'. Frieda Gebert examines the centrality of the arts, in their diverse forms and practices in the US, and how the changes in living and lifestyles impact on evolving cultures. Adam Zanolini examines Paul Gilroy's concept of 'Diaspora' in the *Black Atlantic,* focusing on music and its seamless role in articulating hegemonic and subaltern changes, and how its creativity informs the living cultures and dynamism contributing to diaspora identity formations. Illustrative examples are drawn from Marcus Garvey and the beginnings of the Rastafari movement in Jamaica, to Bob Marley's 'Buffalo Soldier' in which Africans are *Stolen from Africa, Brought to America, Fighting on Arrival, Fighting for Survival.* Here is a powerful conceptualisation of blackness; jazz as a space for intercultural dialogue; and the role of music in furthering shared heritage for the continuity of the complex intangible heritage of diasporic communities.

Part III deals with 'Traditional Crafts'. Amy Russell provides the case study of the *Qiviut,* a craft that has become culturally and economically sustainable, even though the carrier of the intangible heritage element is a small population group. This cottage industry of the Oomingmak, making high quality knitted garments from the wool of musk ox, provides an excellent example for safeguarding endangered intangible heritage. This is a significant demonstration project from Native Alaskan communities, underlining the role culture plays in development as we move towards the UN post-2015 *Development Agenda.* Eva Man-Way Yuen is an internationally renowned artist who works with traditional craft materials such as bamboo and paper-binding to create sculptures and toys. Eva Yuen's contribution illustrates the possibility of the burgeoning number of Biennales and Triennials of Contemporary Art as sites for promoting and safeguarding intangible heritage. Her work provides an intellectual integration of *human-machine interface* bringing together the digital domain



and creativity, and drawing on intangible heritage elements for inspiration.

Part IV is on 'Language and Oral Traditions'. While languages, however endangered they may be, do not fall under the scope of the 2003 *Convention*, they can be safeguarded as the means for the transmission of the intangible heritage by the bearers of intangible heritage elements. This calls for the holistic approach to safeguarding and sustainability addressed by Lindsay Whaley and James Stanford. The argument is that *language should not be treated as an artefact, but is a dynamic part of a living community and interconnected ecosystem.* The authors call for opening up the discourse of sustainability and a paradigm shift from the conventional language of revitalisation approaches which focus on languages in isolation, to a sustainability approach with *wide-ranging, holistic, pluralistic, team oriented, community-conscious design.*

Peter Heffernan offers a penetrating analysis of the globalising and homogenising impacts of dominant languages. He provides a statistical sampling to show that the predominance of academic publications in English has had a profound impact on the erosion of intangible heritage elements, and cautions us that *preserving, maintaining and sustaining living cultures requires conscious awareness of our choices,* and that the cultural and linguistic diversity of the world cannot be taken for granted. Shai Schwartz, Yehuda Shalom and Tamar Shai underline the powerful location of traditional storytelling in *therapy, education, empowerment, and dialogue.* The vitality of stories to living cultures and intercultural dialogue is illuminated, and a model is provided for facilitators and groups as a *tool of empowerment*.

Part V focuses on 'Knowledge, Nature and Practices'. David Crutchfield interrogates the hegemonic dimension of dominant aesthetics and how nature is culturally perceived, and underlines the false dichotomy of nature and culture. He further examines architectural appreciation as based on the dominant aesthetic of the day. He cautions us about the legacies of the *sentimentalisation of nature* to which Jane Jacobs alerted designers and artists half a century ago. David Orr's famous notion of *pedagogical ecological design* is cited to transcend the tyranny of the nature/culture binary opposition, and work towards the holistic 'synergistic context' in understanding contemporary living cultures. Preeti Singh and Krishna Dhote highlight the significance of local knowledge systems for valuing living heritage and ecological embeddedness in indigenous people's design and habitats. They illustrate the argument with reference to tribal communities in Central India.

Part VI is entitled 'From Theory to Practice'. Gina Morrison makes a case with the method of immersion for cultural identity development in building one's sense of self-esteem in the contemporary world where race and ethnicity can become targets for disempowerment of individuals and community groups. The journeys of self-discovery are emphasised as significant in furthering the cultural diversity of humanity. Yosay Wangdi asks the question as to what it means to be Tibetan. She uses the contextual case of identity discourse and empowerment through shared values of both the source and diaspora communities.

The editorial process by Frieda Gebert and Kevin Gibson is exemplary in the way the different threads of arguments and case studies in the volume are interwoven with lucid introductions to each essay. In a wilderness of dozens of edited volumes that have flooded the publishing world of heritage studies in recent years, *Sustaining Living Culture* stands out as a lone star for learners and researchers in our common struggle to raise awareness and maintain momentum in safeguarding the intangible heritage and cultural diversity of humanity. The integrity of purpose of the volume is maintained with the focus on the sustainable development of living culture/intangible heritage. In conclusion, Kevin Gibson examines the valuing of living heritage and scopes the opportunities and challenges of pursuing the sustainable development of intangible heritage elements. He emphasises the role of the UNESCO 2003 *Convention* as a valorising agent in promoting the importance of intangible heritage.

Environmental Preservation and Cultural Heritage in China

Anne E. McLaren, Alex English, Xinyuan He and Catherine Ingram, On Sustainability book series, Common Ground Publishing, Champaign, Illinois, 2013.
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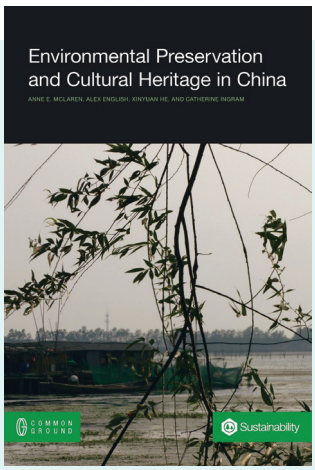
Environmental Preservation and Cultural Heritage in China brings together the scholarship of eminent scholars on China to provide a critical examination of the national policy designated 'Ecological Civilization' that informs Chinese approaches to dealing with living heritage and conservation. The authors provide, by means of a seamlessly integrated intellectual engagement, an in-depth investigation into the twin agendas of safeguarding bio-diversity and cultural diversity concerns, through a comparative analysis of environmental sustainability and the safeguarding and revitalisation of living heritage. Their field work results in the important finding that *an item of cultural heritage, be it a song tradition, or indigenous economic and medicinal knowledge, is inseparable from the "eco-site" that nurtured it.* This is reflected in the paradigm shift in Chinese scholarship, from the earlier conceptualisation of indigenous cultures as less advanced to one that is based on respect and understanding of ethnic minorities and their relationship to land as being of national significance.

Chapter one provides an analysis of three iconic nature reserves in Sichuan, Inner Mongolia and Jilin. The participation of local communities in conservation, and recognition of their local knowledge systems is featured as a significant force. Chapter two examines bio-conservation and intangible heritage in Yunnan villages. They are now recognised as containing rich reserves of bio-diversity and providing illustrative examples of intangible heritage elements whose safeguarding and sustainability has become central to conservation strategies. Chapter three deals with the intergenerational transmission concerns relating to *Kam* big song in upland Guizhou [see also pg 173 of Boylan review]. It is inscribed on the *Representative List of Intangible Heritage* of the 2003 *Convention*. It provides a significant case study of songs as intangible heritage *as mediums for encoding ecological understandings in this remote mountainous region.*

Chapter four deals with the understanding of land use patterns in prioritising and conserving eco-sites, cultural landscapes and intangible heritage elements. Inventorisation of intangible heritage under the 2003 UNESCO *Convention* has become a means of developing holistic approaches to both ecological conservation and safeguarding living heritage in China. This is illustrated through the safeguarding of *Wu* songs and their carrier and transmitter language in the lower Yangzi delta region, a densely populated and affluent area that is endeavouring to address the impact of rapid economic development on the erosion of cultural systems.

Environmental Preservation and Cultural Heritage in China is an exemplar of some of the scholarly research on China, both from within the country and from outside, that is focused on the following three questions within the framework of 'ecological civilization'. The central lines of research are systematic and provide an illustrative basis for national development of policies elsewhere. In the context of rapid economic development in Asia and the erosion of heritage values, such systematic approaches are critical.

1. The long-term goal of economic sustainability in the localities under investigation and the impacts and compromises made on the original eco-sites or cultures of the region.
2. What are the central aspects of sustainability of the cultures of the localities? If tourism is one of them, then what are the measures for minimising environmental degradation and the commodification of cultural elements that can sometimes be beneficial, but are also a serious threat to the living heritage systems?



3. What intangible heritage or 'ecological civilization' or consciousness is considered viable and sustainable to be passed on to the next generations?

To what extent have the concepts of 'authenticity' and 'integrity' from the forty-odd years of the influence of *World Heritage Convention* become influential in attempts to preserve traditional cultures? To what extent can these freezing cultures be considered as 'authentic', and to what extent are concepts of living heritage, dynamism and creative adaptability by primary stakeholder communities changing the broader heritage consciousness following the awareness raising of intangible heritage issues by the 2003 *Convention*? What are the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders, especially the carriers and transmitters of intangible heritage elements?

Intangible Natural Heritage: New Perspectives on Natural Objects

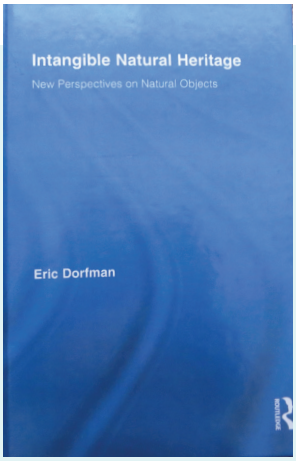
(Ed.) Eric Dorfman, Routledge Studies in Heritage, New York, 2012.
192 pages. Hardback: ISBN-13: 978-0415884921
Kindle: ISBN-10: 0415884926

The volume entitled *Intangible Natural Heritage: New Perspectives on Natural Objects* is a collection of essays inspired by the former President of the ICOM Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History, Dr Gerhard Winter. He took an interest in the developments in Asia actively following the 2002 Asia Pacific Regional Assembly of ICOM in Shanghai, which resulted in the *Shanghai Charter on Museums, Intangible Heritage and Globalisation*; the seminal ICOM 2004 Triennial General Conference in Seoul with the theme 'Museums and Intangible Heritage'; the International Conference on Environmental, Cultural, Economic and Social Sustainability in Hanoi and Ha Long Bay in 2006; and finally the ICOM International Workshop on Traditional Knowledge Systems entitled 'Museums and Intangible Natural Heritage in South Asia' in Hyderabad in February, 2008. He was one of the first ICOM leaders to respect and recognise that the nature/culture dichotomy in museological discourse is hegemonic and Eurocentric, and that ICOM as an inclusive organisation must promote multiple discourses. His successors in ICOM, especially the editor, Eric Dorfman, and other contributors in the volume, have taken on this challenge.

The essays by Eric Dorfman, Adrian Norris and John Long in the first three chapters are useful for discussion in 2014 with reference to the International Museum Day theme 'Museum collections make connections'. Collections are central to museums, and how does one understand and liberate them from legacy discourses to one that is holistic and relevant in the contemporary world?

In the next chapter, Markman Ellis explores the unequalled 'media event' in 18th century Britain relating to the scientific and commercial exploitation of kangaroo specimens. Venugopal builds his research and case study based on the documentary heritage of *Hortus Malabaricus,* considered to be one of the earliest systematic documentations of traditional knowledge systems of so-called natural heritage in Asia.

In Chapter six, Lee Davidson interrogates the legacy discourse of 'landscape for recreation', considering the construct of 'wilderness recreation' in New Zealand. In the next chapter Xingbao Jin and Alan Yen argue for the *community perspectives on wilderness and conservation* using the case studies of crickets and katydids in Chinese culture. In Chapter eight, Ulrike Stottrop examines four exhibitions in Germany where the contextualisation of specimens and objects through interpretative approaches provides an understanding of the cultural context of what are conserved natural collections.



The final chapter offers a synthesis of ideas presented by the authors in the volume, and makes a case for rethinking collections in natural history museums and thus providing a framework for further discussion and research. Here the editors, Eric Dorfman, and Janet Carding open up the field for future research directions in the way we could contextualise legacy and contemporary collections to bring together nature and culture in developing the museum as an experimental space for the new-found commitment to understanding and safeguarding intangible heritage.

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The above three volumes provide fresh perspectives and future research directions, making a valuable contribution to the growing field of intangible heritage studies within the broader framework of ICOM's strategic commitment to bringing together the heritage discourses of tangible and intangible, natural and cultural, and movable and immovable. They refer to, and build on, the diverse understandings of sustainability, especially acknowledging the final report of the Brundtland Commission. However, to further the understanding of natural history collections, a critical understanding of intangible heritage is needed. The extensive research and documentation, centring on the 2003 *Convention*, will be useful. The above two volumes from the Onsustainability Series, and the different approaches they have taken, will also be of value.

All the three volumes refer to the final report of the Brundtland Commission on Sustainable Development, 1987. They could further benefit from examining the outcomes of a complementary report entitled *Our Creative Diversity* by the World Commission on Culture and Development, 1996; and the Stockholm *Action Plan on Cultural Policies for Development,* 1998. Indigenous peoples have also argued, through various international fora such as the United Nations' Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and the *Convention on Biological Diversity,* 1992, that there are four pillars of sustainable development, the fourth being cultural. The UNESCO *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity,* 2001, states:

... cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature; it becomes one of the roots of development understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence.

The UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,* 2007, is also useful. All these documents, as well as standard setting instruments, both hard law and soft law, are supported by substantial research and in fact, they have also generated considerable research since their birth.

All of us lament that the *Millennium Development Goals* from 2000 to reduce world's poverty by half by 2015 did not take into consideration the agency of culture in development as a critical element. In developing a post-colonial discourse of intangible heritage, we could take advantage of the current review and reflections and the drafting of the UN *Sustainable Development Goals* and the UN post-2015 *Development Agenda*. The outcomes and reviews of the Rio Earth Summit 1992, the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002 and Rio+20, all point to rethinking the paradigm of what was broadly called 'Ecological Sustainable Development' (ESD). Its Achilles' heel remains the extension of modernist ideas of conservation with a nature/culture binary opposition. UNESCO has consistently argued that the cultural dimension of sustainable development is critical to measure relevant and equitable outcomes for a human rights based approach that respects the cultural and linguistic diversity of humanity. In this context, gender mainstreaming as a process, and gender equity as an outcome, are yet to be addressed through informed, applied heritage studies to bridge the gulf between theory and practice in safeguarding both tangible and intangible heritage.

i *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future,* United Nations Documents, New York, 1987. Popularly known as the Brundtland Commission after the former Prime Minister of Norway, who chaired the Commission.