



BOOK REVIEW

*UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible
Cultural Heritage,*

Michael Dylan Foster & Lisa Gilman, (eds.),
[Indiana University Press, 2015]

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UNESCO's *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* has generated a wide-ranging academic discourse, not only about intangible heritage but also about the methods whereby heritage elements are selected for inclusion ('inscription') on the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity*. Somewhat slighted, however, have been the effects of the inclusion process on the cultural elements themselves.

Michael Dylan Foster's and Lisa Gilman's innovative volume addresses the issues that arise in the inclusion process. Six essays about individual elements from different nations are included for comparison: India (Leah Lowthorp), South Korea (Kyoim Yun), Malawi (Lisa Gilman), Japan (Michael Dylan Foster), Macedonia (Carol Silverman), and China (Ziyang You). Each of these essays

focuses on the processes whereby an element that has either been included or considered for inclusion on the *Representative List*. The essays are richly informative, wonderfully nuanced, and credibly interpreted, which only persons with a close and extended relationship with local communities and their cultural heritage could produce.

To ease the task of comparison, Foster's 'Introduction' explains six criteria that all the authors were asked to address, with particular attention to local ('on the ground') activities, the consequences, reactions, and understandings of performers or artisans as well as members of local communities. Despite this common structure, the essays are by no means uniform in content, which was intentional *to highlight the impossibility of a one-size-fits-all template for heritage and to emphasise the diversity of reactions and local*

effects of UNESCO decisions [p. 32]. Unsurprisingly, given the cultural and element diversity, the essays contain few obvious commonalities.

Following the six case studies are three critical discussions by scholars who have extensive experience with UNESCO's intangible heritage efforts or have long theorised about its safeguarding.

The first critical discussion, by Anthony Seeger, points to the complexities of UNESCO's organisation and its external relationships. He lucidly explains why there is such diversity in the case studies: *the results attributed to UNESCO are in fact influenced to different degrees by central UNESCO policies, the participation of NGOs, the actions of National Commissions [authorised by UNESCO], and the cultural policies of each country* [p. 340].

The second discussion, by Valdimar Tr. Hafstein, brilliantly identifies similarities between the case studies, albeit at an abstract level. For example:

The heritagisation of traditional practices brings into being new social institutions and concentrates in them the power to make decisions that were previously

distributed among a number of different social actors or else were simply unthinkable before the practices were framed as intangible heritage [p. 362].

and

In all cases, we are witness to an institutionalisation of social relations, a centralisation of powers, and the bringing into being of new social actors: centers, councils, associations, committees, commissions, juries, networks [p. 363].

Dorothy Noyes presents the third discussion, listing a number of points that are largely missing from the earlier essays. After pointing out that *the UNESCO conversation draws on earlier conversations in folklore studies* [p. 390] she turns her attention to the relationship between scholarship and policy and the variable role of the nation state in each of the case studies. Her discussion is also inflected by an activist orientation toward reducing inequalities and empowering local artists and their communities.

All in all, this important new volume sheds welcome light on issues that have been adumbrated in the academic literature regarding UNESCO and the safeguarding of intangible heritage. 

