The Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage,

(eds.) Michelle L. Stefano and Peter Davis,

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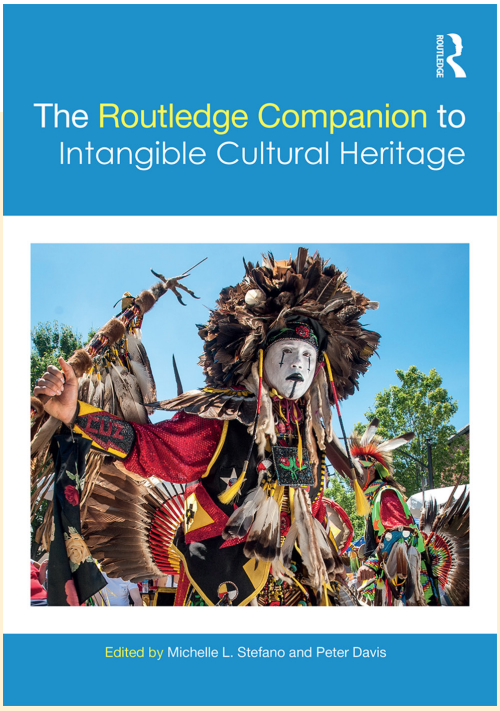
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If ever anything qualifies as a royal gateway into a specific field of knowledge and scholarship, it is the *Routledge Companions*. They exist for a great manifold of topics, ranging from leadership and management to philosophy of language, comics or science fiction. They consist of a broad survey of all the issues at stake, written by leading experts and specialists in the field, from all over the world. This year, finally, Routledge has published its *Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage*. The stout volume consists of over 500 pages. It was edited by Michelle Stefano from the American Folklife Center in Washington DC and Emeritus Professor of Museology Peter Davis from Newcastle University, UK. It is a most welcome addition to literature, and a must-have for all who want to deepen their understanding of the scholarly research into and safeguarding practice of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

This *Routledge Companion contains* 38 articles written altogether by 54 authors. The contributions are organised in 6 sections. Part 1 starts with the reflections on the UNESCO 2003 *Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage* (ICH), and the origins of the paradigm. Part 2 is called the 'reality check', and deals with the challenges facing ICH and its safeguarding; there certainly are big challenges, as Rosabelle Boswell shows in a confrontation of ICH as an unproblematic gift from the past versus ICH as an instrument in the postcolonial settling of the bill and making the past pay. Part 3 is about ICH up close, and contains seven pertinent case studies,

from the USA, India, Thailand and Japan. Part 4 deals with ICH and place and landscape, the way it is linked to specific locations. Part 5 deals with ICH and museums and archives; in a short contribution Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett gives a very interesting example of the use of intangible heritage to construct tangible elements of an ancient synagogue for the displays in the new Polin museum in Warsaw. And finally, part 6 is devoted to alternative approaches to safeguarding and promoting ICH, especially so through eco-museums. Whereas 50% of the authors are from Europe and 25% from North America, and only another 25% are from rest of the world, the majority of the case studies (50%) are from the rest of the world, and 25% each from North America and Europe. So from these basic statistics it seems that the focus is on scholarship in Europe and North America, while the more interesting ICH is in the rest of the world.

This also points to the difference between the two sides of this coin: the policies of safeguarding by government organisations with an aim to promote identity and touristic attraction, versus academia, scholarship and human expression and culture. It is a difference of approach and focus that goes quite a long way. It is articulated very clearly in the interview that editor Michelle Stefano conducted with the *eminence grise* of intangible cultural heritage in the USA, Dr Richard Kurin, former director of the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. Kurin explains that scholarly and institutional engagement with the culture of indigenous cultural groups in the USA goes back a long way; to the founding of the Smithsonian Institution in 1848 and to the days of the American Bureau of Ethnology. It has led to very fruitful and successful forms of celebration and safeguarding of such heritage, for example through the annual Folklife festival on the mall in Washington. But at the same time, there is a strong reservation against the creation of a national bureaucratic agency that would control and regulate the listing of ICH, or in Kurin's own words, that would 'officialise' culture. The same might be true for former Commonwealth countries that have strong first nations and indigenous populations, like New Zealand, Australia, Canada and even the UK. None of them have become signatories to the 2003 UNESCO *Convention*.



What we have now come to call ICH is perhaps the oldest form of human expression. Ever since the emergence of mankind, human beings must have performed dances, sung their songs, cooked their food, celebrated important events. So why did it take so long before the notion of intangible heritage was put forward and it was regarded as a form of culture entitled to listing, safeguarding and studying? Why did intangible cultural heritage only become emancipated in the early 21st century, especially so with the UNESCO 2003 *Convention,* whereas the preservation of tangible heritage in the form of museum collections, monuments and sites has a history going back many decades, even centuries? In her opening essay on the developments leading to the UNESCO 2003 *Convention* Janet Blake mentions in passing the reasons why. It was the European preference for the tangible that has long dominated both the scholarly discourse and the heritage protection paradigms of national governments and international organisations such as UNESCO. And it has long given preference to the interests of detached scholarship rather than to broader issues of community involvement, human rights and sustainable development. Janet Blake traces the transformations in heritage thinking and policies back to the 1982 Mondiacult World Conference on Cultural Politics in Mexico, where the concept of culture was extended from archaeological remains and high end productions to also involve ways of life, social organisation, values and belief systems. These were later joined by notions of sustainable development, social inclusion and human rights – and led to an overlap between the UNESCO agenda of safeguarding culture and of the UNDP's agenda of sustainable development. Ever since the 1990s, sustainable development and the flourishing of culture have been seen as strongly interdependent.

Part 6 of the *Companion*, the one on alternative approaches to safeguarding and promoting ICH, provides some very interesting and convincing case studies of this interdependence between culture and development. They are about eco-museums. Two examples. The Batana Museum in Rovinj, Croatia, revitalised the art of boat building, the use of these small boats in fishing, the group singing of the fishermen and the consumption of the fish in local gastronomy. And in the tiny village of Cortemilia in the Piemonte region, the reconstruction of terraced vineyards and the ruins of a chestnut drying facility led to a revival of traditional handicrafts; as author Donatella Murtas summarised it: *The people of Cortemilia have found a way through ecomuseological processes of shaping their future and ensuring sustainable local development.* With all the benefits that success brings: exposure on national television, growing tourism, generating more income…

With the publication of this *Routledge Companion,* Intangible Cultural Heritage has certainly reached a new level of scholarly recognition. And that is a very good thing. However, I have noticed one tiny flaw. In its historiography of this development, the editors may have overlooked or underrated the important role that Japan, China and Korea have played in persuading the world to recognise intangible cultural heritage as something worth safeguarding, on a par with the safeguarding and listing of monuments and sites. It was the tension between their forms of restoration of historical monuments by employing traditional skills and techniques and new materials, versus employing historical material and modern techniques in the rest of the world, that necessitated the discourse about the essence of safeguarding cultural heritage. And it was ICOM Korea, the National Folk Museum of Korea and the Korean government that forcefully brought intangible cultural heritage to the attention of the international museum world at the 2004 Seoul ICOM conference, and after that, through the establishment of this platform for the scholarly discourse, the *International Journal of Intangible Heritage*.