

PROTECTING INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

Anita Smith defines intangible heritage

Intangible heritage has been defined by UNESCO (2001)¹ as “people’s learned processes along with the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them, the products they create and the resources, spaces and other aspects of social and natural context necessary to their sustainability. These processes provide living communities with a sense of continuity with previous generations and are important to cultural identity, as well as to the safeguarding of cultural diversity and creativity of humanity.”

Intangible heritage includes performance such as dance, song and story as well as knowledge systems—the diverse ways in which peoples understand the world around them, their language, cosmology and spiritual beliefs, even traditional systems of healing.

In Australia, management of intangible heritage takes two principal forms. First, as part of the process of documenting heritage significance, stories about the history, provenance and usage of objects and places are recorded. Secondly, song, dance and other performance and oral histories are recorded and archived in a ‘tangible’ form.

Although there are some general protocols for the recording and conservation of this heritage, most procedures are developed ‘in-house’. The various institutions managing this heritage, including the National Library of Australia, Indigenous organisations, museums, state and federal heritage agencies, have each developed their own methods for collecting, cataloguing and conserving

this heritage, often with very limited resources. Although there are some recognised industry standards there are no national or state heritage policies specifically concerned with the management of this heritage. This makes it difficult to determine the effectiveness of various procedures and to assess the extent to which our very diverse national intangible heritage is being protected.

UNESCO has recognised that this is a global issue. Intangible heritage is pivotal in constructing and maintaining cultural identity. The protection of intangible heritage in the light of cultural globalisation is therefore crucial to maintaining cultural diversity. UNESCO has developed several programs aimed at protecting or ‘safeguarding’ intangible heritage. These include the ‘Living Human Treasures’ (1993) and the ‘Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage’ (1999) which protect this heritage through promoting the teaching of traditional knowledge and skills and through an international listing of outstanding examples of intangible heritage, nominated by UN Member States.

In addition to these programs, UNESCO has now begun a process of developing a new international convention, similar to the World Heritage Convention (1972) for heritage places, to protect intangible heritage. This has raised many issues including what we mean by ‘conservation’ of this living, evolving heritage and how intellectual property and collective cultural rights are to be established and respected.

In the Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific at Deakin University, we are undertaking research examining the theoretical issues and practical implications of the UNESCO programs and policy development for safeguarding intangible heritage in the Australian context. The research consists of interviews with representatives of Australian heritage institutions about current management practices for the identification, collation and documentation of intangible heritage. The primary aim is to begin the process of building national policy for the management of this heritage.

We anticipate the findings of the research will assist heritage managers to formulate consistent, precise and culturally sensitive management practices. In the future this may lead to Australian nominations to UNESCO’s ‘Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage’ and to Australia becoming a signatory of the new convention. In the meantime our aim is to generate discussion and community and government awareness of this increasingly important heritage issue.

If you wish to find out more about our research, please contact us at anitas@deakin.edu.au

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1. For information about UNESCO’s policies, see their Intangible Heritage website at: http://www.unesco.org/culture/heritage/intangible/html_eng/index_en.shtml