Book Review: Practical Considerations for ~~ural Heritage~~
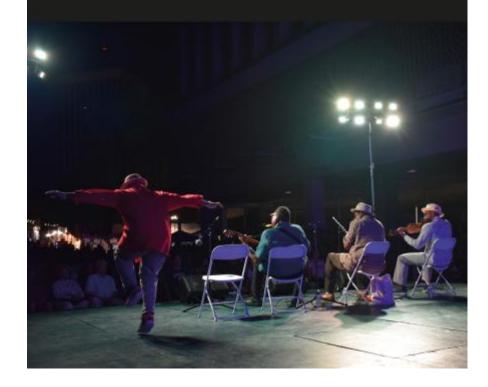
Practical Considerations for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

Michelle L. Stefano

Reviewed by Shahrzad Amiri Farsani

I have read about 500 publications about intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and this book presents highly complex problems and challenges in a different way via the participation of local people in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage through the point of view of folklore. Stefano's research on living heritage belongs, as do most of her works, to a special category of heritage studies that this book calls "the human face of globalization" (p. 5).

In the first chapter (which explores the context of international heritage law, UNESCO conventions and the implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage), much of the terminology mentioned (including the list of intangible cultural heritage in need of urgent safeguarding, folklore and folklife, tradition, communities, safeguarding, etc.) can be found in previous related researches, and is not new to this book, but I think the first chapter puts an end to all the previous isolated theories and theoretical approaches; just presenting the existing theories as a collective is of high importance.

The most important part of the second chapter is, in my opinion, when Stefano presents the phrase "social transformation" in a new and different way. In the writer's words, this phrase can express two views: sustainable and unsustainable. The first view includes cultural diversity, human creativity, etc., and the second includes de-contextualization or denaturalization, non-participation, discrimination, misappropriation of knowledge and skills and over-commercialization.

I find other words—like urbanisation, modernisation and globalisation—to be a bit more challenging to nail down. These words make up the first of four challenges which give this chapter its name: "The challenging UNESCO-ICH Framework". In this chapter Stefano mentions three more challenges of State-driven decision making focusing on the need to retain local community participation. The second challenge mentions the ultimate decision-making power of national governments in the implementation of conventions. The third challenge, inequitable framing of ICH expertise, emphasizes local communities with credentials of knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts that can be decontextualized and recontextualized. The final challenge, "The heightened marketability of ICH", focuses on the urgent need to control overcommercialised processes, especially in the fast-growing market of tourism. In chapter three, part I, the author emphasizes community participation which, in this book, refers to cultural communities, young people and the general public. The reader learns about the intangible cultural heritage of different communities including Arabians in Iraq, shadow play in Syria and Hatajo de Negritos and Hatajo de Pallitas from Peru's south-central coastline.

In this chapter Stefano tries to focus on differentiating views related to community participation. As she also mentions in the second chapter, the national government uses a top-down power in the process of nominating ICH and Urgent List items. She differentiates young people from other parts of the community as she thinks they can be educated in order to stimulate social identity.

Moreover, they can take on these responsibilities and use different ways to communicate. I agree with the author when she says that "to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, it must first be identified" (p. 69). In order to gather people for this purpose, the author suggests workshops, mentorships, celebrations and festivals.

Chapter three, part II emphasizes ethnic principles including the rights of communities, access to related materials and non-governmental organization; Stefano represents the important overlap between the UNESCO-ICH framework and community participation. The writer tries to explain how community participation leads to the transmission of skills and resources, innovation, creative entrepreneurship and vibrant hubs, good safeguarding practices and the return to eco-museology.

In chapter four Stefano explains that (re)turning to eco-museology means returning to theory and practice. It could be a mixture of the community's experimentation, representation, authority and ownership of the basic theory of museology. As she also mentions, the basic theory of museology includes identifying, interpreting, safeguarding and disseminating heritage. This chapter is my favourite one. Although some ideas are not new, I have highlighted almost every sentence and read this chapter from different points of view. I have also discussed it with my museum and tourism students at the Art University of Isfahan, Iran. We have analysed this chapter many times. The author has communicated her ideas clearly which is very important to me when choosing books for my students who have different levels of English! In heritage-related research, I prefer simple, clear, broad ideas which everyone can understand. When theories in heritage studies are difficult in language, idea, theory, methodology, etc., many people conclude that heritage study and participation are not meant for them, which is in opposition with the true need for community participation in the preservation of cultural heritage.

In chapter five, the author focuses on the difficulties and challenges of how public folklore can be strengthened. She also mentions how the definition of public folklore can vary and discusses the complexity of related economic, social, cultural and environmental issues. There are mental, emotional and economic reasons to create art just as there are different reasons to participate in a festival, performance, event, or learn to dance, to play and to communicate. In this chapter Stefano considers national folklore frameworks in the US, which are mostly supported through grants, presentations, trainings and archives.

Chapter six goes deep into everyday life, tracing vendors with rows of food from different nationalities in the United States; finding the reasons why we pass on traditions; the relationship between culture and place; the urgent need for apprenticeship; and new museology in the American Folklife Center (AFC). I see this chapter as the author's attempt to prepare readers with coping strategies for the existing problems in the next chapter.

In the last chapter, the author considers apprenticeship as one of the best strategies to improve social participation and to pass heritage on to the next generation. This book is one of the most stimulating pieces of writing about safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. By discussing the problems, considering a variety of case-studies and coming up with far-reaching strategies, Stefano considers apprenticeship, social needs and cultural exchange as important elements to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

AUTHOR BIO

Shahrzad Amiri Farsani (amirifsi@gmail.com) is a PhD student in cultural studies, Perm State Cultural University, Russia. She received her master's degree in tourism management and her bachelor's degree in museum curatorship at the Art University of Isfahan, Iran. She is the author of the book Persian Potteries, in Persian, and is interested in cultural heritage, museums, tourism and linguistics.