Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage: A New Field of Endeavour

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Introduction

Intangible cultural heritage is a relatively new concept in heritage circles. It offers many opportunities and challenges. Intangible cultural heritage has assumed considerable international prominence and all national governments have been invited to contribute to the discussion. The concept involves people and traditions: knowledge, skills, creativity, products, resources, spaces. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage says that intangible heritage includes ‘oral traditions, expressions and language, the performing arts, social practices, rituals, and festive events, knowledge and practices about nature and the universe and traditional craftsmanship’. Australia has not yet signed up to the Convention. For many people the concept remains, to a large extent, nebulous and difficult to put a finger on. There are different interpretations of the concept and approaches as to how to embrace it. There is confusion about social value (collective attachment to places) and intangible heritage as defined by the 2003 UNESCO Convention.

The National Trust of Australia (Victoria), in association with Deakin University’s Cultural Heritage Centre for Asia and the Pacific (CHCAP), Australia ICOMOS and the Heritage Council of Victoria, held a successful Intangible Cultural Heritage symposium in Melbourne on 1-3 July 2008, and this special issue of Historic Environment is an important outcome.

The National Trusts around Australia have acknowledged and celebrated aspects of intangible cultural heritage over many years. While we have touched on the intangible qualities in our historic properties and collections, heritage listing assessment work (classifications), oral history schemes and partnerships, and publications, we have more overtly recognised intangible heritage in two of our popular public programs: Heritage Icons, based on iconic aspects of popular culture e.g. Aussie Rules Football, and Living National Treasures, based on a list of 100 living treasures who include Dr Germaine Greer, Rolf Harris and Cathy Freeman. These are promotional/educational lists and do not have the same planning implications of our heritage register.

A stimulating and robust discussion at the symposium in Melbourne considered whether Australia should formally move into the field of Intangible Cultural Heritage by ratifying the 2003 UNESCO Convention. A related point of discussion was whether the National Trust should move into the field of intangible cultural heritage protection, and, if so, how. The nomination of the Melbourne Football Club, the oldest club in the Australian Football League and one of the oldest football clubs in the world, to the Trust’s heritage register in Victoria, was one of the main reasons for staging the symposium. How do we acknowledge and protect the intangible and tangible parts of a football club? Do we recognise/list the organisation as a whole, or the team, or the name? Is the club to be recognised in its own right or connected to an historic place, namely the stadium or oval or grandstand? Do we add the club to the icons list or the Trust’s register in general? Should we protect the club from going out of existence? How? This nomination is a perplexing issue because the Trust’s classification system, like the systems for statutory bodies, focuses on the protection of tangible historic fabric. So our current listing system does not allow for intangible heritage as defined by the Convention. The listing process works within the operation of the planning system so that when something might be demolished or changed we make an application to local and state government bodies. We may comment on the loss of intangible qualities when we do that, but under the planning system that is not what people are looking at.

A range of views were expressed at the symposium about the value of signing the Convention. While there was much agreement about the value and the clout of such an international body, there were valid concerns regarding definitions, what is and is not included, and the ethics of including some specific cases or practices. Some of the points of view from the plenary discussion are listed below:

- Australian practitioners are already recognising intangible cultural heritage in their assessment work and questioned whether signing the Convention would make any difference. For example, Lake Condah was cited as an example of where heritage assessment work already acknowledged traditional knowledge, culture and spiritual values.

- There are different views on whether intangible cultural heritage as defined by the Convention involved ‘places’. Dr Richard Engelhardt, the symposium’s keynote speaker from UNESCO, informed delegates that while it was correct to say that the Convention is not about place, it is, however, about interaction between humans and the environment and nature (Article 2), denoting spaces or a sense of place.

- We should not sign the Convention until concerns about human rights issues and other practical matters are addressed.

- The Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act protects national heritage values and world heritage values and that these values are themselves intangible. It was suggested that this Act be investigated.

- Australia should sign the Convention if it was practical about such issues as sustainability.

- We could learn from folk life and community museum development. Many delegates emphasised the importance of encouraging understanding of intangible cultural heritage at the grassroots level.
Dr Engelhardt advocated that Australia should consider signing the Convention because as a nation Australia could make a very important contribution to the international community. Australia can bring best practice to the international arena so it can be shared with everyone else. Professor Barry Jones, the symposium’s Master of Ceremonies who has had experience working for UNESCO as well as Australia ICOMOS, also supported signing up to the Convention.

After the symposium, in late 2008, the Australian Government formally asked heritage bodies and the community for their views on ratifying the Convention. Accordingly, the Australian Council of National Trusts (ACNT), a federal body representing the National Trusts around Australia, sent the Australian Government a submission summarising the views expressed at the symposium. The ACNT concluded that while it was not yet in a position to recommend signing the Convention without further research and discussions with other stakeholders and the Australian Government, it analysed the advantages and disadvantages that are most important for consideration of ratification of the Convention. These are as follows:

Advantages:

1. Australia will have international influence and share its considerable heritage expertise and experience with other state parties (nations).
2. There is growing international interest in intangible cultural heritage. By joining approximately half the countries in the world in ratifying the Convention, Australia will help bridge the divide between the wealthy western countries and the less wealthy nations, which include many ‘third world’ countries, in their support of the Convention. One view from the symposium was that the ‘Anglo’ countries such as the United States, Great Britain, Canada, New Zealand and Australia, which have not ratified the Convention, may give the impression that intangible cultural heritage is not important in their countries or are not prepared to work to overcome any concerns they may have about signing the Convention.
3. A broader definition of cultural heritage (that is, including the intangible) will be more inclusive and engage a wider range of cultural groups and individuals in society. There is a disproportionate emphasis on recognition and safeguarding of places at the expense of intangible concepts not necessarily connected with places such as traditional skills, creativity, rituals, dance, languages etc.
4. Ratification will spur many organisations and individuals to appreciate and safeguard intangible cultural heritage. The official endorsement by the Australian Government will thus raise the awareness of the importance of the intangible elements of our cultural heritage. The two list categories (Representative List and the Urgent Safeguarding List) in the Convention would play an important role in raising the profile of the intangible and encouraging dialogue and engagement with the community.
5. Neglected and threatened areas such as Aboriginal languages and traditional skills of craftspeople will be better recognised and funded. One of the benefits of signing the Convention is that the National Trusts and state heritage bodies would be able to focus on protecting the heritage trades and traditional crafts skills, which are dying out and need to be passed on to new generations.

Disadvantages:

Concerns previously expressed for not ratifying the Convention remain:

1. The ability of the Convention to effectively safeguard intangible cultural heritage, including whether a list-based approach is appropriate.
2. A methodology for establishing the proposed inventories, which could potentially contain thousands of entries.
3. The absence of agreed standards, tools or guidance in the identification, definition, conservation, preservation and management of intangible cultural heritage.
4. The absence of agreed criteria for listing ‘urgent’ or endangered intangible cultural heritage.
5. The possible overlap with other international mechanisms currently in place, including the World Heritage Convention.
6. Human rights may be infringed by recognising the customs of one group and not others etc.
7. It will cost funds to set up the mechanisms and bureaucracy for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage when many heritage practitioners are already doing this work. The funds could be spent on additional programs.
8. A broad range of community groups will require additional resources in recruiting appropriate specialists to do the assessment and safeguarding work. This will be beyond the capacity of many groups, for example, the National Trusts around Australia.

The ACNT does not see that the above-mentioned concerns are insurmountable. They can be addressed, worked through, and a system of checks and balances introduced. If there is enough good will and consultation in the community such concerns can be overcome.

The ACNT supports the establishment of a consultative forum through which the groups likely to be affected by the Convention would be asked whether the Convention would be positive or detrimental to the survival of the skills they sought to protect. The ACNT also says that we would be willing to be represented on a permanent intangible cultural heritage body convened by the Australian Government to lead the assessment and safeguarding work. While there was an excellent range of papers given at the symposium, it was acknowledged that there were gaps in our knowledge of intangible cultural heritage. So there was support to establish a working party and include some practitioners with interests that were not represented at the symposium, such as anthropologists, sociologists, cultural geographers, linguists and musicologists. It was suggested that the Australian Government should establish a body like HERCON, which was a heritage convention organised by the AHC, to convene such experts and examine intangible cultural heritage in detail.

This journal issue, which includes most of the symposium papers, investigates intangible cultural heritage from many different angles and promotes wider debate. Professor William Logan, who plays a ‘devil’s advocate’ role, raises many important points. He says that a number of countries have not ratified the Convention because of the impacts on communities whose intangible heritage has been nominated or not nominated for inscription on the Representative List, and a range of human rights issues. He suggests as an alternative to adopting the listing established under the Convention, a more democratic and broadly based set of consultative programs which might achieve more. The Victorian Minister for Planning, the Hon Justin Madden MLC, discusses how legislative protection is now being provided for a broader range of
heritage, regardless of whether they are associated with a heritage place. Other themes covered in the articles include the heritage and challenges of various marginalised sections of the community: Indigenous people, Jews and Africans; the importance of Australian Rules football as iconic intangible sporting heritage; the role of Australian children’s play activities, which depict the fluid interaction between the intangible and tangible forms, as a demonstration of a holistic and living process; the value of community interaction and story-telling in celebrating social reform. Significant management issues involving competing global and local concepts are discussed by Dr Jane Harrington, while Dr Olwen Beazley argues that intangible heritage values are recognised through the World Heritage Convention.

The symposium steering committee comprised Chair Dr Celestina Sagazio (National Trust, Victoria), Dr William Logan (CHCAP, Deakin University), Dr Timothy Hubbard (Australia ICOMOS), Dr Ursula de Jong (National Trust Board member, Victoria) and Tracey Avery (former Cultural Heritage Manager, National Trust, Victoria). We must thank the steering committee members, contributors and sponsors for making the symposium and this issue possible. We are confident that this issue makes a significant contribution to the debate, and we look to the future for elucidation of many points and a consensus on how to better recognise and protect the intangible in the heritage field.