



BOOK REVIEW

Practical considerations for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage,

Michelle L. Stefano, Routledge (2022), ISBN 978-0-367-47226-9

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Since its adoption by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2003, the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage has been steadily growing in popularity across the world, to date having been ratified by 93 per cent of the UNESCO Member States. Both praised and cursed for its impacts, the 2003 Convention has attracted the attention of not only professionals and practitioners but also heritage studies scholarship. Stefano's book adds to this growing body of knowledge by engaging with the safeguarding scheme promoted under this UNESCO Convention. Framing the discussion around the demand for 'community participation', Stefano reveals the obstacles inherent in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage (ICH) safeguarding scheme while actively seeking means to overcome them. Written in an accessible manner for both researchers and professionals, the book should appeal to all those interested in heritage safeguarding and in what community participation really means in practice.

'As the 2003 Convention matures, how can we address its inherently challenging infrastructure and make it work – in practical terms – better? What theoretical framework and methodological approaches can be drawn on to ensure – as best as possible – that processes of safeguarding living cultural traditions, practices, and expressions are inclusive, ethical, and equitable and, thus, rewarding to all those involved?' (3) These are the core questions that

animate Stefano's work, whose aim is to 'extend the scope of ICH safeguarding to bring in, examine, and synthesize the principles and practices of ecomuseology and U.S. public folklore' (11). This aim is pursued throughout seven chapters. Next to an introductory chapter, which sets the stage, and a concluding chapter in which the main points are brought together and strategies provided, the body of the book concentrates on three safeguarding schemes: the UNESCO-ICH framework, ecomuseology, and US public folklore. While the schemes are thoroughly analysed in the body of the work, Stefano introduces them briefly already in chapter 1, in which the author's personal tone and experience are weaved into a clear and concise explanation of key concepts and terminology.

Chapters 2 and 3, the latter consisting of two parts, explore the UNESCO-ICH framework in depth. The presentation of the framework in chapter 2 is structured around four challenges that present obstacles to community participation, as Stefano argues and skilfully demonstrates through various examples. The challenges concern the universalising aspects of UNESCO's international conventions, the communities' lack of decision-making power, the prioritisation of experts' knowledge over that of the practising communities and the commodification of ICH. While all have negative impacts on communities and their heritage, most troubling of all appears to be that communities lack decision-making power, which is

concentrated in the hands of state actors, referred to by Stefano as the 'pipeline of power' (41). How this relates to and what it means for community participation is shown in chapter 3, which goes deeper into analysing the UNESCO-ICH framework, in particular the role and place of communities (or rather lack thereof) in inventorying, nominating and reporting processes. These processes are illustrated with examples from the implementation of the 2003 Convention for almost 20 years across the world. The analysis further incorporates considerations of corrective measures, but the role of bottom-up approaches and of NGOs stand out. As an example of these, Stefano introduces the Batana Ecomuseum, inscribed on the UNESCO Register of Good Safeguarding Practices in 2016, rounding up the discussion and establishing a transition to the next chapter, dedicated to ecomuseology.

The alternative safeguarding frameworks – ecomuseology and US public folklore – are presented over three chapters. Stefano turns to these frameworks to identify solutions that relate directly to the obstacles to community participation described in the UNESCO-ICH framework. As she shows, these alternative frameworks are not free from challenges and can be appropriated for political and commercial purposes; however, they differ significantly in approaching participation as a community-initiated and community-led process. In chapter 4, Stefano shows how the principles of ecomuseology, anchored in linking heritage to people and territory, enable community resilience; however, she dedicates more space to public folklore, detailed in chapters 5 and 6, which is characterised by the interwoven principles of collaboration and reflexivity, including self-reflexivity. Stefano's expertise in public folklore allows her to enrich the discussion with examples from her own practice as well as from that of other folklorists, whom Stefano interviewed as part of her methodology. Inspired by the experience of alternative frameworks, in chapter 7, which closes the book, Stefano presents practical steps forwards as 'ethical and equitable interventions into ICH safeguarding [that] can improve the UNESCO-ICH framework' (209).

Practical considerations for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is an important addition to heritage practice and scholarship, due to Stefano's approach to the 2003 Convention as not just a legal instrument but also a safeguarding framework. Her book is not the only one that intends to move beyond the UNESCO scheme. Comparable examples are the single-authored book

Intangible cultural heritage and sustainable development: the valorisation of heritage practices, published under Springer's Heritage Studies Series 2021, and the co-edited volume *Intangible cultural heritage under national and international law: going beyond the 2003 UNESCO Convention*, released by Edward Elgar Publishing in 2020. However, no previous book intends to extend the scope of the UNESCO-ICH framework itself, as Stefano's book does. Despite this merit, the potential of US public folklore appears overtly positive; after all, just like the UNESCO-ICH framework, it relies on interventions by the same state actors. Yet the contrast between differing frameworks involving the same actors is valuable, since it shows how much the type of intervention matters. Additionally, by supporting her explanations with examples anchored in local realities, Stefano manages to make an abstract legal framework palpable and understandable enough also for those unfamiliar with UNESCO's normative instruments and language.

The merits of Michelle L. Stefano's book lie in providing practical considerations for how the UNESCO 2003 Convention as a safeguarding framework could work in a way that is ethical and equitable to the practising communities. The development of co-interventions, which integrate bottom-up and top-down approaches, might not be possible in all contexts. Yet her insights provide an excellent basis to understand the role of community participation in safeguarding measures and the conditions that have to be met to ensure inclusive, ethical and equitable practice. Logically structured, with creative transitions and 'views from the field' inserted between chapters, written accessibly for both researchers and professionals, this book will certainly make a lasting contribution to the field. 📖

REFERENCES

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