

## CONTINUITY AND IDENTITY IN CANBERRA:

### *Can Tourism Development Sustain Intangible Cultural Heritage?*

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Is a Thai temple dance performed in a Bangkok hotel heritage; is a temple with no dancers heritage? Or are these aspects of heritage—the built and the ‘intangible’—bound to become static museum pieces or mechanically repeated set-pieces with no ongoing sense of meaning or memory?

These questions are relevant to the use of heritage for tourism, the notion that cultural tourism will provide economic benefit to a community, a region, or a country. But does the development of a heritage site retain, maintain, and sustain its meanings, can the intangible connections and practices continue as living heritage, or do they merely become memories, recorded—to be repeatedly played back to curious or even incurious visitors?

In examining the relationship between heritage sustainability and tourism development, that is the viability of the value to a community of their association with heritage places, I recognise a shift from the *cult of the object to social processes and tradition* (Fulton 2007:157). This is most clearly acknowledged formally when operating within formal systems, such as heritage significance criteria and community consultation requirements, and seen internationally in the more recent UNESCO conventions (Intangible Cultural Heritage, Cultural Diversity). But it is difficult to know how well this move to recognising community tradition and their intangible heritage survives the pressures of tourism development.

These issues are examined from the perspective of sustainability of tradition as well as economic benefit to the communities in the national capital of Australia, Canberra. Canberra, a planned city, the site selected in 1908 to be the capital city of the newly federated country of Australia (1901), celebrates its centenary in 2013. The city sits over a landscape as a palimpsest with past human activity: of early European settlers from 1820 and of 22,000 years of Aboriginal Australians. In its 100 years as capital, Canberra has become a place

of many different cultures—in many ways typifying Australia’s multi-cultural society where a third have been born in another country. This diversity is manifest in many heritage places, stories and activities associated with different communities within the wider Canberra society of 350,000 people.

But will this multi-layering and diversity of heritage remain visible under the pressures of the celebrations and festivities planned for 2013? Does ‘Canberra 100’ provide an opportunity for the current community-based sense of heritage in its variety to flourish and grow given the tourism development expected in that year, when a trebling of visitors from around Australia and internationally are expected; in 2010 domestic and international tourists doubled to 2.5 million visitor nights. Canberra 100 plans include major sporting events, normally held elsewhere, major museum and art exhibitions. Will local heritage be hold its own? Two examples of current community-based heritage tourism show both opportunities and risks for them given the likely upcoming domination and focus on Canberra 100.

The first is a project on current rock art conservation in the nearby national park in partnership with the Ngun(n)awal-Ngambri communities of Canberra. Some 3500 Indigenous ‘archaeological’ sites are known in the Australian Capital Territory dating between 22,000 years ago to the recent past. Other places have intangible cultural importance, secret-sacred meaning that has survived in part during the disruption and displacement—and disassociation over the past 200 years of European colonisation. The rock art in the park on the outskirts of Canberra provides visual evidence of the past belief systems and provide an opportunity for reconnection and revitalisation of such intangible cultural heritage. Indigenous Australians, even in urban areas, suffer poor socio-economic outcomes, and this and other projects are being undertaken in partnership with the Traditional Owners. Employment and training

with the managing authority, as well as heritage grants, enable the local Ngun(n)awal-Ngambri people to undertake their own cultural tourism initiatives. This includes visitor interpretation and guiding, the guiding on the Ngunnawal Trail and the cultural events at the Burringiri Association centre that provide a stronger economic basis for these indigenous groups.

The second example of tourism and local community heritage is seen in the Canberra and Region Heritage Festival held each April for some decades. The Festival in 2011 held 68 events for cultural, Indigenous and non-Aboriginal, and natural heritage with 52 being held by community groups. A number involved the sharing of a particular heritage place accompanied by traditional music, food, dance and other intangible heritage. Some of these events or opening are held throughout the year with an opportunity for extra publicity and recognition during the Festival. Many are only held at the Festival, providing an important source of funding for these small community organisations, recognition for this heritage, and an ongoing connection to that place and its meanings. This Festival is place-centred, unlike the Multi-cultural festival held in the last summer each year, that is divorced from heritage place yet provides a forum for food, music, dance and story for 'non-Anglo' Canberrans.

The potential threat of the Canberra 100 celebrations is a top-down driven tourism development that has a focus of 'Canberra as capital', a mono-thematic presentation of the city, that ignores if not hides its diversity. Or will current community cultural heritage tourism activities be able to build and grow on the opportunity the Canberra 100 celebrations presents, rather than being swamped? If a local community is to 'regain' or retain their heritage and so sustain it, having a say about how it heritage used, including in tourism development, is essential.

The main strengths of both the Indigenous and Heritage Festival projects are the energy and commitment of local communities to such heritage recognition and heritage tourism. The weakness is a potential for 'nostalgia' of 'freeze-framing' of the past in the face of visitors—such as temple dancing staged in Bangkok hotels. An acknowledgement of community control of their heritage within a wider tourism development of Canberra 100 celebrations, rather than merely appearing merely as 'actors playing on the national celebration stage, is essential to a sustainable heritage.

The announcement in April 2011 that that Australian Capital Territory Government will fund a \$3.3m Centenary Trail to showcase the 'Bush Capital'

(affectionate term for the national capital as located inland in the rural countryside) provides one opportunity for community groups to present their heritage, both tangible and intangible together. If however as currently planned, the Trail consists merely of signage and self-drive / walk / cycle touring to places that are not peopled by those with the connections who can relay the meanings, stories, associations with those places, it risks becoming visits to a series of 'empty temples'.

Yet the opportunity remains to anchor many of these community heritage-based tourism activities in the upcoming Canberra 100, which will have a focus on the political and administrative aspects of the capital. Canberrans suffer from the rest of the 22 million Australians often thinking Canberra is only about the federal government, heard in the nightly news. Connecting with the Canberra communities by means of this centenary and the resulted huge increase of visitor numbers is likely. Regaining and retaining a connection with their heritage and sustaining this heritage will hopefully be enhanced by this centenary, and not disappear 'after the party is over'.