

PARTYING ON AND ON

Can we reconcile celebratory intangible heritage practices, spirit of place and sustainability? 77-xLqo-132

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Abstract. This paper asks the provocative question – what happens if heritage practices that use energy and other resources in abundant quantities, though considered fine by International Best Practices (IBP) of heritage management, are found to be in opposition to the achievement of sustainability? Much that is considered intangible heritage today had its beginnings in a very different world to ours now. It was one with a smaller population with few affluent people, more abundant non-renewable resources and much less interconnection. Now almost everything we do affects others in some way. Should we start to adopt a greater concern than in the past with resource use and sustainability? In order to reach a more balanced approach, should action be taken to prevent “the party” from being shut down at a later stage? This paper will look at examples of intangible heritage practices (e.g. festivals, celebrations, food related customs, and some common beliefs).

Intangible heritage is a reflected aspect of a society’s cultural identity and shows how its standards and values are transmitted visually and orally, by imitation or by other means. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, cuisine, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, story-telling and other arts. Put more simply, if tangible heritage assets represent the hard culture of a community, its places and things, then intangible heritage assets represent its soft culture, the people, their traditions and what they know. This description incorporates aspects of UNESCO’s definition of intangible heritage as “folklore (or traditional and popular culture) [that] is the totality of tradition-based creations of a cultural community, expressed by a group or individuals, and recognized as reflecting the expectations of a community in so far as they reflect its cultural and social identity” (UNESCO 1998).

As with tangible heritage, the assessment of the significance of intangible heritage is crucial in planning for its management and in setting conservation priorities. In an ideal world its evaluation would be carried out in the documentation, registration and/or archiving stage before a management policy is devised. Incorporation of its cultural values and their meaning to the wider community would also be an important part of any management plan. When use of resources for festivals and celebrations is an issue in planning, responsible marketing and commodification by the commercial sector connected to these activities, it should also be an important element of any management strategy.

International Context

Japan was the first country to recognise the value of intangible cultural heritage and was the first country to legislate towards its protection. Its **Living Human Treasures** program began in 1950. This program allows 'living national treasures' or 'holders of important intangible cultural properties' to be identified individually or collectively. Although legislation does not necessarily bring with it greater protection or invigoration of intangible heritage, it does provide a basis for a more general recognition of the role of special individuals "as transmitters of traditions" (Larsen in Nishimura 1994:179, UNESCO 2000). One example is the recognition given to the master potters of Arita township on Kyushu Island.

The Korean **Cultural Properties Protection Act** of 1962 allows for a similar category of heritage protection. It was enacted in response to the realisation that rapid modernisation following the Korean Conflict was leading to disinterest in continuing traditional skills and crafts. The law has been amended several times and clearly sets out the role of local and national government authorities in preserving intangible cultural properties (Korean National Commission 2000: 12). By 1995, Korea had listed 167 individual holders and 50 organisation holders. Other programs that recognise the 'elite' of tradition bearers operate in the Philippines, Thailand and France (UNESCO 2000).

Since 1989, UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, has played a leading role in promoting intangible heritage conservation through the adoption of the **Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and**

Folklore. This document highlights to governments the importance of intangible heritage in enabling different cultural groups to assert their cultural identity, and thereby allowing humanity to maintain its cultural diversity. It provides a generalised overall framework for identifying and preserving this form of heritage. In addition, UNESCO has established the first international listing and award system for intangible heritage. Its biannual proclamations of ‘Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage’ honour the most popular and traditional cultural activities or forms of expression. The awards project was formally adopted in November 1999 and is based on an idea put forward by a group of Moroccan and Spanish intellectuals in a working group special meeting in Marrakech for UNESCO in 1997 (UNESCO 1998; UNESCO 1999).

Elsewhere, the recognition of intangible heritage operates on a more ad hoc basis, often driven by political activism by indigenous groups and other parties. In North America, Australia and New Zealand, for example, efforts to recognise the importance of living indigenous cultures have included organizing cultural festivals, lobbying for indigenous languages to be taught in schools and disseminating information through various media, including the Internet. Cultural revitalisation and education of younger generations are key outcomes sought from such programs. Tourism can be a key benefactor, as well as an important initiator of this process. The interest that tourists show in wanting to experience intangible heritage has motivated young people in some host communities to rediscover intangible elements of their own culture (Jafari, 1996).

The loss of ‘the humanistic factor’ in some cities has long been considered a problem connected to uncontrolled urban growth ever since the early 1930s in Europe. It is one of the factors that spurred an interest in integrating social evaluation and commemoration of urban culture in a system of protection in historic towns in many places, such as Poland. Also in Australia, urban renewal projects have tried to deal with it creatively in inner city suburb housing projects, such as those in Pyrmont and Ultimo in Sydney (Harris, 1990; Klosek-Kozłowska, 2002). “International Best Practice” cultural heritage management is increasingly concerned with such issues and how to incorporate the views of the community about the social value of intangible heritage into urban planning.

The above examples assume there is a direct link between the activity and the place where it occurs. However, with rapid physical

change in the environment and the impact of rising incomes, it is important to understand what is behind the socio-economic context of traditional celebratory events or activities these days.

Celebratory Intangible Heritage and its Relationship with Tangible Heritage Assets and Sustainable Resource Use

It is likely that removing an intangible asset from its context or setting will affect its social value for the most community and authenticity for tourists. However, what happens if you leave it in place and that community and the tourism sector pour excessive amounts of money into turning it into a greater spectacle? Whether this is for status reasons or the desire to show off new found prosperity, it still could affect the long-term viability of the urban space, cultural diversity of the community and the environment elsewhere.

Firstly, a definition of a cultural space in this context is a place in which popular and traditional cultural activities are concentrated. In this cultural space, such activities may occur at a specific time (cyclical, seasonal, calendar etc.) or in response to a particular event such as a wedding (UNESCO 1998: Section 3.5.5 1(c)). Intangible heritage management principles suggest that the integrity of a cultural space may play an important role in practising and experiencing an intangible heritage activity.

Cultural space does not necessarily have to be a heritage place. It can be the usual place of performance, an associated object/collection or landscape. For festivals, it could be the streets of city or a religious structure or complex. The association between intangible heritage and cultural space can be based in the past as well as the present. One example of a past association would be a banquet hall that has been used by maharajas for key celebrations, which still has interior furnishings that evince continuity with the past. Could such a place be considered an appropriate cultural space for the modern celebrations such State visits or wedding receptions? One such case was considered in a recent study of heritage assets in India by the author. In the study, such a re-use of the Durbar Hall in the town of Kapurthala was examined as a possibility as it seemed compatible with cultural values of the community and its previous use.

However, it was thought that this recommendation would not be likely to be implemented, because of the recent national Indian government policy of discouraging expensive wedding celebrations. A

series of awareness campaigns against excessive spending had been undertaken, because of the government's concern that the nouveau riche's over-spending on such spectacular events was encouraging poorer classes without sufficient financial and other resources to emulate them. Over-spending on weddings and other celebrations is also causing problems in south-east Asia too. Families end up in debt and traditional dishes served at such events require dishes such as shark's fin and rare coral fish as the ingredients that are expensive and endangered. The developing countries of India and China have growing middle-class sectors, many of whom want to also copy the lifestyles of their wealthy ancestors, maharajas, emperors and high officials, who were not always particularly caring about the environment. Heritage managers should be aware that promoting certain kinds of intangible celebratory heritage must be done with thought towards its ultimate sustainability given this scenario.

Urban environments, streetscapes or 'neighbourhoods' are often under the most tension from rapid social or functional change, and because of the high density of inhabitants, have some of the most interesting examples of complex social patterns and relationships. Although such places are part of dynamic cultural systems, cultural diversity can be lost if change comes in a form that overwhelms the neighbourhood's ability to assimilate that change without losing its essential character. This desire to show off and emulate the wealthy can also lead to a loss of diversity. For instance, if too many garish wedding parlours and hotels are set up in one area and conflict with its existing character. It also does not help if they are cheaply built to cash in on current trends and are not in sympathy with the older building stock in the surrounding neighbourhood.

Conclusion

The current trends in the socio-economic development of cities with rich intangible heritage in Asia will affect the way that they are managed in the future. While some of these governments are not always that sympathetic to the conservation of tangible heritage in their urban centres, much is still undertaken relating to key celebrations and festivals. Growing wealth in this region is increasing the amount energy used and other resources as part of the spectacle provided. The attitude of the Indian government is just one example of a government that is concerned about resource use and overspending.

It would be unfortunate that due to lack of clear policies now about how these events are managed for sustainability that the “party” is shut down in the future by more hardline elements in government in response to those in the community.

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