

Michael Dylan Foster and Lisa Gilman, *UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. viii + 180 pages, 16 black and white illustrations, index. Paperback, \$30.00. ISBN 978-0-253-01953-0.

UNESCO on the Ground: Local Perspectives on Intangible Cultural Heritage is a compilation of articles on specific issues revolving around the issue of intangible cultural heritage efforts undertaken by UNESCO. In the introduction, Foster emphasizes the importance of the local in the cultural heritage landscape, “because of the potential disconnect between this massive international organization headquartered in Paris and the disparate small communities scattered throughout the globe targeted by its efforts and affected by its decisions” (1). The volume is comprised of nine articles in two sections titled “Local Studies” and “Critical Discussion.” The two sections separate field reports from general issues to create a better focus of what is observed “on the ground.” “Grounding” thus anchors the object of research. It is a method to contextualize cultural processes observed in establishing items considered to be “intangible.” The book is important for researchers and curators alike in that it provides insightful examples and critical discussions within an overarching framework.

The chapters in “Local Studies” offer examples from India, South Korea, Malawi, Japan, Macedonia, and China. The geographical selection aims at diversity regarding social and cultural spaces, which often overlap as they denote their communal function in classes, or castes, as well as ethnically determined differences among the agents involved in the processes that determine what is to be considered an item of intangible cultural heritage. The cases reported are of different quality, but taken together they offer insights into the different stages involved in the development of methodological approaches to the study of intangible cultural heritage. Some examples explored in the book were already listed as “cultural heritage” items before they were studied, while some were soon to be listed as such during the study period. Yet others are still in the application process. Despite these differences, each study tells stories behind the scene that include the many manifestations of the forces and obstacles in the development of submissions for consideration to the list of intangible items. Narratives are also provided for the period after items were added to the list of intangible cultural heritage.

The first part starts with a study from Kerala, India, home to Kutiyattam, a traditional form of theatre that was successfully listed as an item of Intangible Cultural

Heritage in 2003. The successful inclusion of Kutiyattam resulted in a positive impact on the reputation of performers, their training possibilities, their general income (though not evenly distributed), and a nationwide acknowledgement of the entire genre. The negative outcomes of the process were that its inclusion did not benefit the reputation of UNESCO. In this chapter, the author also describes a concern about watering down artistic essentials in the art of Kutiyattam. She observed the increasing selfishness of some artists who do not feel committed to contributing to the survival of the genre for altruistic reasons alone.

The detailed study of Kutiyattam is followed by a report from Cheju Island that focuses on the Yöngdüng rite in the Ch'ilmöri shrine, a shamanic healing ritual, which was listed by UNESCO as a representative of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2009. The report suggests that there is a strong relationship between inclusion in the UNESCO list and a successful cultural tourism industry. The report lists a number of provisions for tourists that are explicitly connected to rituals on Cheju Island, among them a visit to the Ch'ilmöri shrine. This “symbolic capital” (46) draws attention in a way that promises benefits to a number of tourist related businesses. The more items are listed the more attractive a destination may become. Cheju Island is a good example of how the “itemization” of cultural practices is deeply embedded and interwoven with the spiritual and material life of their current bearers, but it is also problematic from the perspective of cultural preservation. The distortion of ritual contents due to changes in purpose, place, and especially audiences makes recreating necessary conditions nearly impossible. Though the inclusion was successful, the reputation of shamanic practices in general did not increase. The only impact seems to be increased media attention in times of national festivals.

The following chapter problematizes exactly the impact noted above by reporting on Vimbuza, a healing ritual practiced by the Tumbuka people of northern Malawi, which has been on the UNESCO list since 2008. The Vimbuza is seen as a ritual and a “traditional dance.” The author’s discursive approach sheds light on many problems, such as conflicts with religious opinions like those found in Christianity, which opposes witchcraft rituals. The author also notes the contradictions within an emerging entertainment industry in relation to public cultural policies regarding the healing dance, which is becoming more exclusive, conducted only for limited audiences. The author, however, mentions that UNESCO keeps such issues in the background. As a result, the contested issues remain mostly unknown to many of the participants who personally doubt the detrimental effect that popularization has on the authenticity of Vimbuza.

The next chapter reports on a New Year Eve’s ritual called Toshidon, which is practiced on Shimokoshiki-jima, a small island off the southwest coast of Kyushu. The practice is similar to many rituals in the world, as many religions exploit major events to discipline their children through scaring them with masked figures traveling from house to house appearing as all-knowing beings who scold the children for their wrong doings (81). The author of this report elaborates on the delicate negotiations of the performing community with tourists.

The following chapter about a Macedonian line dance in the mountainous area of Reka is outstanding. The inclusion of this item on the UNESCO list was rejected twice, in 2002 and 2004, due to the nature of the patriotic and nationalistic organizations that applied. In these failed attempts, the applicants excluded portions of the population, such as Muslims and Roma, who in fact contribute to the described

cultural practice. The report discusses the dance's development after the failed applications, thus giving a comparative example of what could have been prevented through the UNESCO inclusion.

The last "Local Study" reports on an item that has not yet been added to the list, the Hongtong Zoutong Xisu, a practice of worship specific to an area around Linfen in Shanxi, China. With detailed support from literature and interviews, changes in power relations between different policy makers and cultural groups are documented and discussed. The article focuses on issues within the involved community before its application submission to UNESCO, which is a very useful angle that enhances the other localized studies in this volume.

The second part, "Critical Discussions," consists of three general articles. First, there is an excellent introduction about the application process, which uses the six examples above to explain the difficulties and obstacles communities face during the preparation of applications and the supervising organizations. This is followed by analyses of the examples provided in the first part, whereby metaphors are used to identify further problems in all six local studies.

A summary then lists a number of basic thoughts on developing the entire approach to intangible cultural heritage as UNESCO envisions it. This concluding chapter discusses the strong governmental influence on non-governmental institutions; the idealization of Western values; the influence of UNESCO on its member states in different hierarchies and orders; a further institutionalizing of cultures; and the limitations of internationality in establishing rules and goals. Referring to the six local studies, the summary develops a closer look into the needs of the directly involved parties: the artists, the musicians, the dancers, and so on. Additionally, the conclusion reminds us that state business has to be conceptualized in a flexible but methodical way that empowers communities and individuals more effectively.

Though the quality of photographs and maps could be improved, the book's contents will be helpful and informative to policy makers, cultural preservationists, anthropologists, museum curators, and ethnomusicologists.

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