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*The Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage* ed.  
by Michelle L. Stefano and Peter Davis (review)

Michael Dylan Foster

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## Book Reviews

**The Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage.** Ed. Michelle L. Stefano and Peter Davis. (New York: Routledge, 2017. Pp. xxiii + 502, notes on contributors, acknowledgments, index.)

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I have always loved hats. As I sat down to write this review, I happened to receive an ad in my inbox from a hat company that linked to a blog about Panama hats. There, I was told that what makes a Panama hat “becoming” is not just “its highly intricate weaving pattern” but also “the cultural heritage that it carries—a weaving tradition that has been passed down for centuries in the remote hamlets of Ecuador” (<https://blog.ultrafino.com/hats/2018/06/panama-hat-care/>). I was struck by this characterization because even as it romanticizes a commodity in order to sell it, it does so by neatly articulating aesthetic value in terms of both tangible and intangible qualities, by invoking tradition, and by emphasizing the importance of community and place. Most strikingly, it also casually employs the phrase “cultural heritage.” This drove home to me the timeliness and significance of the volume under review—which touches upon all these concepts and ultimately demonstrates that *cultural heritage* is not just an abstract scholarly term. *The Routledge Companion to Intangible Cultural Heritage* provides a snapshot—or rather, a whole picture album—of the evolution of a profoundly important cultural policy and paradigm, one that has not only already affected hundreds of communities in dozens of countries but is also reshaping the ways that we conceptualize culture, heritage, and, of course, those things (intangible and tangible) that we call “folklore.”

The editors have assembled here a massive and varied set of essays—38 individual chapters

written by 54 authors, including anthropologists, folklorists, legal scholars, museum professionals, ethnomusicologists, and community members. Some of the contributors—such as Richard Kurin, Janet Blake, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett—have been immersed in Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)-related discourse for decades, while others have joined the discussion much more recently. The volume editors explain that “one of our main aims was to bring together as many diverse perspectives as possible” (p. 2), and they certainly do: some chapters are case studies, some theoretical explorations, some mostly descriptive, and some presented in the form of conversations with cultural workers in various parts of the world. Indeed, the global coverage of the volume is impressive, with voices from the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Africa. The editors deserve praise for bringing such a wide range of contributions together and for valiantly striving to impose structure on this diversity by dividing the work into six sections. Some of these sections feel clear and natural in their focus, such as one that concerns museums and archives and another that explores the relationship between ICH and place. Other sections, such as “Intangible Cultural Heritage Up Close,” seem more amorphous and open ended.

I make this point not as a criticism, but rather to highlight the question of how one is meant to approach this book, part of an expanding series of “Routledge Companion” volumes. To be sure, these are richly detailed essays, and there is a little something for everybody here. Several chapters, for example, address the bureaucratic and legal ramifications of UNESCO’s 2003 Convention; others focus on specific geographical areas, such as China, Norway, Turkey, the US–Mexico border region, or the Lusophone countries; while still others discuss ecomuseums or the interplay of the tangible and intangible in museums and archives.

I can easily imagine individual essays, or perhaps several selected chapters together, being used for teaching. But at the same time, the book as a whole is not a simple introduction to ICH or a comprehensive handbook or “state of the field” snapshot. As a reader, it is difficult to know how to approach the volume; perhaps as a “companion” to ICH, it is something to dip into selectively, to look for case studies to reference or to gain insight into theoretical concerns.

As with any volume of this breadth, the quality of individual contributions varies, but for the most part, the chapters are clearly written, focused, and relatively brief. Some of the case studies are exceedingly detailed and will certainly be of interest to specialists in the particular region or genre under discussion. For me, the most stimulating chapters were those that inspired me to think differently about the UNESCO Convention and ICH-related issues such as “community” and “landscape.” Those included Chiara Bortolotto’s provocative exploration of the spatial characteristics of ICH designations and the fact that the 2003 Convention seems to represent an effort to move away from territorial connections and focus instead on communities that are not necessarily linked to specific regions. Staffan Appelgren and Anna Bohlin’s exploration of the culture of “second-hand” as a form of ICH also opened, for me, new avenues for fruitful theoretical exploration. In addition, I very much enjoyed the “conversations,” in which an interview with a cultural worker is presented as a dialogue—often responding to specific questions and simultaneously touching on provocative ongoing concerns.

But rather than enumerate the contents of the volume, let me instead articulate several impressions I came away with after reading the volume. As I mentioned, it is unclear to me how a book like this should be approached, and certainly reading it from cover to cover should only be recommended for the most enthusiastic student of ICH. Indeed, it is a rather weird experience: you can read the details of China’s bureaucratic structure for dealing with heritage issues and then jump right into a close analysis of aging musicians in Tennessee. Such juxtaposition in terms of geography and scholarly focus

may be disconcerting at first, but it is in fact the very sort of jumbling engendered by the meta-culture of the ICH Convention: the sense of whiplash is appropriate. The following, then, are impressions that reflect both the significance as well as the inherent challenges of creating a book of this scale:

1. One effect of reading the volume all the way through is that you get a sense of the variety of ways ICH and the 2003 Convention are interpreted. They become ciphers, refracting critical issues in each national or regional context. In some cases, they magnify age-old (but apparently not yet superseded) questions of authenticity versus invention and tradition versus change, to say nothing of intranational and international conflicts over identity and cultural ownership. Despite the careful legal language of the Convention text itself, it seems that the ICH concept and its implementation are very much open to interpretation.
2. Several chapters, especially those focusing on museums, effectively problematize concepts of intangibility. When read together, there is a sense of continuum between the intangible and the tangible that makes us question the common binary structures through which we often categorize cultural expression.
3. Many chapters emphasize the necessity of paying attention to local communities and to the fact—long understood by folklorists—that tradition (or ICH, as it is put here) is alive and always changing.
4. For a book this expansive and varied, with so many different geographical regions represented, there are very few typos. This may seem like a mundane point, but it is a tribute to the care shown by the editors, and it reflects the overall thoroughness of the project.
5. Several chapters may prove difficult for the uninitiated because they are chock-full of specialized lingo (UNESCO-speak) such as “States Parties,” “elements,” and “Intergovernmental Congress,” as well as acronyms (e.g., ICOMOS, WHL). At the

- same time, other chapters avoid such technical terms, and some barely even invoke the 2003 Convention at all.
6. In fact, I was surprised to find so many chapters focused on geographical regions (and “States Parties”) that are not actually signatories to the Convention—including the United States and the UK. Alison McCleery and Jared Bowers, for example, discuss the documenting of ICH in Scotland, which—because it “is a nation, not a nation-state” (p. 185)—cannot ratify the Convention itself. Several chapters, including Langston Collin Wilkins’s work on “slab” culture in Houston and Ashley Minner’s discussion of the Baltimore American Indian Center, focus on the United States and, without addressing the Convention itself, use the Convention’s concept of ICH as a starting point for ethnographic examination.
  7. Indeed, there is a split between chapters addressing the 2003 Convention as a concrete bureaucratic policy instrument and others that invoke ICH as an abstract concept, as vague and polysemic as older notions of folklore and tradition. These chapters, of which there are many, may give lip service to ICH and the Convention but often become close readings of particular folkloric phenomena. The editors explain in the introduction that ICH in the volume has “two manifestations”: “In one view, it is examined as a ‘term of policy,’ tied directly to the 2003 Convention and the associated definitions and domains through which it can take shape. In another view, while it is discussed as ‘ICH’ (since the term provides a unifying device for scholarly dialogue), it can just as well be ‘living cultural traditions,’ ‘folklife’ and ‘traditional culture,’ or however it is conceived of within source communities and contexts” (p. 5). They further explain that “a conceptual bridging of the two—somehow—will need to happen for the 2003 Convention to truly work. Nonetheless, while the following chapters draw on both ‘ICH’ manifestations, oftentimes within the same text, they also serve to under-

score their differences and keep them separate” (p. 5).

I quote this passage at length because, to my mind, it suggests the broadest critical thrust of the book when taken as a whole—not only to question what we mean by “ICH” but also to explore a paradigm shift in cultural analysis in which this somewhat euphemistic bureaucratic construction becomes a stand-in for more traditional words and concepts. The fluidity between “manifestations” of the term in the current volume contributes to naturalizing the awkward acronym (awkward for a number of reasons, including, for example, the question of how to pluralize ICH) as a broadly applicable folkloristic/anthropological term. This has its pitfalls: several chapters read almost anachronistically, describing an “ICH” that existed long before the acronym was coined. By employing ICH as a broad etic category, we risk de-emphasizing subtle distinctions of meaning found in the language of a given community. But the normalization of the term also offers provocative ways to interpret important phenomena that might otherwise be overlooked completely. In short, whether or not the volume furthers a “conceptual bridging,” its implicit argument is that ICH may have gotten its start as a bureaucratic convention, but it is also emerging as a new lens through which people understand all those things we used to call folk practices.

In the final analysis, this “companion” to ICH is valuable not for its completeness but because, despite its full 500 pages, it is anything but complete. With its open-endedness, variety, and terminological fluidity, it reflects the current emergent moment of ICH scholarship. It also reflects the discipline of folkloristics itself, in which boundaries between cultural policymakers, scholars, communities of practice, government officials, tour operators, and commercial enterprises are more and more porous. A lot has changed in the 15 years since the 2003 Convention was first adopted; it is hard to imagine how concepts and practices associated with ICH will evolve over the next 15 years. I hope the editors will produce another companion at that time.