

**Inaugural Conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS)  
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## **Introduction**

The following report examines key themes that have emerged from the first conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS), which was held at the University of Gothenburg from June 5<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup>, 2012. ACHS was established in 2011 by a group of scholars from the UK and Australia with the purpose of developing a “global network of researchers and scholars working in heritage and museum studies” in order to promote “heritage as an area of critical enquiry” (ACHS, 2011). The conference served as the official ‘kick-off’ for ACHS and included over 400 participants from Europe and beyond. During the course of four days, eighty-four sessions – with some in two to three parts – convened under topics ranging from World Heritage (of the United Nations Scientific, Educational and Cultural Organization, UNESCO), ‘dark heritage/tourism’, postcolonial heritage negotiations, and intangible cultural heritage to sessions on nation-specific heritage issues, such as within China and New Zealand. From urban to rural settings, and from international to local issues, papers examined the power relations involved in constructing and representing heritage, cultural rights and ownership, and negotiating identities within the heritage enterprise.

While not every session can be discussed, this report covers topics that strongly relate to the work of public folklorists in the US. Coming from a background in museum and heritage studies within Europe<sup>1</sup>, and recently joining the folklife program of the Maryland State Arts Council, Maryland Traditions<sup>2</sup>, I can now appreciate the many overlaps between the study and application of folklore and heritage studies. Perhaps, this is most evident with the emerging concept of ‘intangible cultural heritage’ (hereafter ICH), the UNESCO-endorsed phrase that is increasingly used within the international heritage sector as a means of categorizing living cultural practices and expressions from around the world. It can be considered that the concern for promoting and safeguarding living heritage, or ICH, is one that is shared within the US tradition of public folklore. It is also important to remember that the term, ‘folklore’, was used within early UNESCO documents that sought to raise awareness of living heritage and, thus, a common theoretical background between the two fields certainly exists (see for instance UNESCO, 1987; 1989).

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<sup>2</sup> I have been Program Coordinator of Maryland Traditions since October, 2011.

Nonetheless, as discussed later, the current ICH discourse appears to be dominated by UNESCO efforts, especially as a result of its popular 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (hereafter 2003 Convention) and associated promotional and safeguarding instruments. As such, it is argued that the work of US public folklorists may be overshadowed on the international stage by the current UNESCO-ICH discourse, a prospect that needs to be addressed.

Also pertinent to the work of public folklorists are issues of ‘authenticity’ and the power struggles that persist in defining what ‘the authentic’ is and how it is used in relation to promoting particular heritage representations, practices and expressions at varying geographical scales. Several papers are examined as examples of how local-level, community-based understandings of ‘the authentic’, especially with respect to ICH, differ greatly from those envisioned and constructed by the nation state. As an introduction to the broader themes of the conference, the following section focuses on its main purpose: promoting a new ‘critical heritage studies’. Here, the tradition of heritage studies is discussed, as well as the recently formulated aims of ACHS in encouraging further inquiry into the construction and application of the heritage idea.

### **Critical Heritage Studies**

‘Heritage Studies’ can be viewed as a field that is still relatively new and, most importantly, ever-expanding. It is a field that is highly interdisciplinary, drawing from a range of scholarly areas such as intellectual property law, cultural policy studies, memory studies, archaeological site management and ethnography, to name only a few. At its core, however, it is most concerned with how we – both as heritage professionals and as communities, groups and individuals – designate, interpret and safeguard the cultural material of the past, as well as the cultural immaterial of now. Moreover, heritage studies brings together researchers and practitioners who seek to study the approaches used at ‘sites’ of heritage-making, interpretation and presentation, such as those within touristic enterprises, museums and galleries.

It is also a field that is garnering much attention on university campuses far and wide. It can be argued that its interdisciplinary spread and wide-ranging applicability – both within academia and outside – strongly resonates with issues of cultural globalization/homogenization and, at the same time, cultural ‘glocalization’ – the (re)assertion of local-level identities and cultural representations (Robertson, 1995). Since the 1990s, a significant amount of university programs relating to heritage and museum studies have been established throughout the world, particularly outside of the US. From the UK to Australia and South America, undergraduate to post-graduate students can engage with the many facets of heritage studies, whether from anthropological, museological or architectural viewpoints, as examples. Indeed, the University of Gothenburg has recently recognized the study of cultural heritage as an official “area of strength”, which has the “unique potential to develop new critical perspectives on contemporary ways of handling collective heritage and memory, be it post-political identity, cultural economy, tourism, religion, and so on” (Gothenburg University, 2012). The university’s new Heritage Studies Group, developed for research and postdoctoral fellows within the School of Global Studies, acted as the launching pad for the inaugural ACHS conference.

Even if it is believed that heritage studies is still in its infancy, there is a tradition within the field to critically engage with its theories and practices. For instance, the ecomuseum movement of late-1960's France was shaped by a handful of prominent museologists to question the social roles museums can play within their local communities (see Davis, 2011). As such, a more holistic and integrated model for 'bottom-up' and community-based heritage management was generated, a model that remains highly relevant today. In more recent history, the impacts of tourism on sites of visitation and their local communities, as well as the very process of making 'heritage' through branding and marketing, is becoming increasingly investigated. New disciplines are emerging that study the potential for sustainable tourism practices and cultural regeneration that are responsive to local-level changes and community needs.

Nonetheless, the 'rage to preserve', as Lowenthal (1985) so aptly stated, remains unquestioned in many places and spaces within the global heritage sector. As an example, there still exist museums most interested in the propagation of fixed narratives that serve to celebrate one group and "disinherit" (Smith, 2006) another. In this light, it appears that the need to promote a new 'level' of heritage studies, one that pushes critical reflections of all that we do, is certainly worthwhile. Accordingly, the current manifesto, or "provocation", of ACHS calls for further questioning of what heritage is and, specifically, the "conservative cultural and economic power relations that outdated understandings of heritage seem to underpin" (ACHS, 2011). Additionally, this critical engagement should also "invite the active participation of people and communities who to date have been marginalised in the creation and management of 'heritage'" (ACHS, 2011).

Furthermore, ACHS, as part of its preliminary manifesto, provided a set of 'requirements' for thinking critically about heritage that served to guide the organization process and subsequent discussions at its inaugural conference in Gothenburg. Among eight specific actions, including the establishment of a global network, scholars and practitioners alike are asked to: draw upon wider intellectual sources, such as those within sociology, anthropology, political science and others, to "provide theoretical insights and techniques to study 'heritage'"; collect 'data' that "challenge the established conventions of positivism and quantitative analysis" from a broader range of sources in "novel and imaginative ways"; democratize heritage by "consciously rejecting elite cultural narratives" and, as mentioned earlier, embrace the "heritage insights" of communities, groups and individuals who have traditionally been excluded in the preservationist paradigm, particularly with respect to recognizing 'non-Western' cultural heritage traditions; and promote "debate between researchers, practitioners and communities", groups and individuals (ACHS, 2011).

In general, these ideas helped to shape the discussions that were held in many of the sessions. Numerous papers introduced case studies where 'official' narratives of nationhood, constructed national and regional identities, as well as bids for international prestige, provide the parameters of an Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith, 2006) that exclude – in broad terms – alternative, local-level narratives, memories and cultural expressions and meanings. For example, Alexandra Denes (2012), from the Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center (SAC) in Bangkok, brought to light tensions between local communities and local, regional and national governmental representatives with respect to the designation of a

nationally-recognized historic park in Buriram Province, Northeast Thailand. She (Denes, 2012) emphasized how the official 'AHD' within Thailand, particularly with respect to built heritage, neglects contemporary relationships between local communities and heritage sites.

Specifically, for roughly 150 years, local communities – predominantly Khmer and Lao ethnic groups – have been creating small shrines and holding ceremonies at the two Angkorian-era, Khmer sanctuaries of the park, Phnom Rung and Muang Tam, as a means of maintaining long-standing historical and cultural relationships to the sites. It is important to highlight that the Khmer and Lao groups have inscribed these sites with “their own syncretic Buddhist and Animist beliefs and practices” – that is, as Denes (2012) stated, “their beliefs and rituals have little to do with the original function of the sanctuaries, but they clearly have a strong spiritual connection to the sites nonetheless”, one that persists today.

On the one hand, Phnom Rung and Muang Tam are places for the expression of living cultural heritage and are, thereby, imbued with local-level significance and meanings that are integral to the shaping of their surrounding communities' cultural and religious identities and worldviews. On the other hand, however, governmental representatives value – first and foremost – the archaeological and aesthetic significances of the sites from, what can be argued, non-local, touristic viewpoints. From their perspective, the sites ought to be preserved by limiting the 'damage' of the Lao and Khmer ceremonies via visitation fees and the need to acquire – often difficult to obtain – permits for use. Moreover, these groups are viewed as “settler” communities due to the fact that they did not inhabit the area when the sanctuaries were built and, thus, their connections to the sites remain excluded by the official, Thai AHD – the dominant ideology that has led to the park's national recognition for strictly historical reasons.

In essence, her paper stressed the “need to challenge AHD about 'authenticity' regarding built heritage, since in much of Southeast Asia so-called built heritage is reinterpreted and reinscribed with new meanings by subsequent populations”. Denes (2012) and her team from SAC seek to mobilize existing Thai cultural policies in order to recognize the rights of these groups and to “engender their participation in the management of the sites”. As a starting point, and for the past several months, they have been involved in a community-wide cultural mapping project that aims to ‘re-visualize’ the historical park from the perspectives of those who use it for spiritual and cultural reasons. In turn, this has served to highlight the values and meanings attributed to it by local communities today. Using the cultural mapping approach has also helped to empower these communities by juxtaposing their conceptualizations of heritage, as relating to the sites, with those of the state (and its AHD). Additionally, several stakeholder forums between community representatives and those of the local government have been convened in order to encourage debate around issues of cultural rights, access and ‘ownership’. Denes' work serves as a strong example of critically engaging with the heritage concept and how it is defined and used at the national level. Here, Denes and her team aim to challenge the “legacy of nationalism, and the relationship between archaeology, heritage and nation-state in Thailand” through the recognition of contemporary and living cultural expressions, values and meanings that cannot be placed in the past (Denes, 2012).

## **‘Authenticity’ and ‘ICH’**

The notion of ‘authenticity’ as it relates to heritage and ICH in particular has emerged as a larger, multi-faceted theme of the conference. In general, it was stressed that authenticity cannot be easily dismissed within the heritage discourse as it is a concept that holds great currency at different geographical scales. Indeed, as the research and efforts of Denes (2012) demonstrates, certain conceptualizations of ‘authenticity’ do exist with respect to constructing a national identity, or AHD, around built heritage sites in Thailand. In any case, the fact that there were sessions dedicated to explorations of what ‘authenticity’ is and how it is used by different stakeholders in the heritage enterprise demonstrates that recognizing and understanding its dimensions and uses – even on a case by case basis – is needed. One session, organized by Siân Jones, Petra Tjitske Kalshoven and Sharon Macdonald from the University of Manchester (UK), brought to light that within academia, and as an analytical concept, “authenticity has been problematized because of its nostalgic and essentialist connotations, which are considered to be at odds with the human penchant for experimentality, mimicry, replication and reinvention” (Jones et al., 2012). Nonetheless, in relation to ICH, there exist diverse ways in which ‘authenticity’ is used and defined at the local level within certain cultural communities, especially with respect to understanding that, as a concept, authenticity may be just as mutable as the cultural practices and expressions communities, groups and individuals embody.

For instance, the paper I presented, which is based on ongoing work with Clifford Murphy, Director of Maryland Traditions, examined definitions of authenticity from the perspectives of members of the Singing and Praying Bands living tradition in Maryland (Stefano and Murphy, 2012). This living tradition, which is unique to the Delmarva (Eastern Delaware, Maryland and Virginia) region, is an African-American devotional/musical tradition with origins in West African religion, Christianity, and African-American ring shout traditions. Similar to the ring shout, the ministry of the Singing and Praying Bands takes place in host churches. In the past, almost half of the African American Methodist churches of the counties bordering on the Chesapeake Bay had their own Singing and Praying Band. Since the 1950s, the bands have diminished in number, and the singers have consolidated into one large band comprised of 50-100 members from a declining number of churches.

Since 2007, Maryland Traditions has been working with the Singing and Praying Bands in order to celebrate their living tradition’s history and distinctiveness, as well as to look towards enhancing its sustainability within the past year. Inherent to this intervention is the prospect of changing the tradition through the addition of new, non-source values, particularly those that derive from state-level recognition. In addition, through various promotional efforts, the contexts in which the living tradition is expressed and presented have also changed from the church setting to the more ‘inauthentic’ arena of the performance stage. Based on interviews with Singing and Praying Band members, it is demonstrated that while these efforts may serve to decontextualize the Singing and Praying living traditions, community agency is being exercised and they, too, are weighing the pros and cons of heritage work and guiding the recontextualization process. Significantly, the promotional aspect of the intervention is one that the community values as an opportunity to reach new audiences in order to attract new members.

Most interesting, however, is how the notion of authenticity is conceptualized within the community. Members have expressed that these new changes, such as recently performing at the Maryland Traditions Folklife Festival in Baltimore, may constitute a ‘less authentic’ version of the Singing and Praying Bands religious practice. It has been noted by one of its leading members, Reverend Colbert, that the living tradition “was authentic up until a couple of years ago” (Stefano and Murphy, 2012). Here, reference is being made to the fact that recent attention has brought newly-added entertainment values to those that were once solely religious and community-confined. Nevertheless, there is an awareness in the community of these shifts and, as the Reverend states, the tradition “will never become ‘Showtime at the Apollo’” (Stefano and Murphy, 2012). In fact, he mentioned that the community will work to stay grounded in the idea that the living tradition is first and foremost religious in intent and that “we can always go back home” (Stefano and Murphy, 2012). In other words, the Singing and Praying Bands community can always return to the ‘authentic’ source context of the church by leaving the performance stage. In this sense, ‘authenticity’ can be viewed as a place and – most importantly – one that can be found again. In this case, ‘authenticity’ is a concept that very much exists and, yet, can be kept ‘on hold’ as the community attempts to attract new members through its various performances in more secular contexts.

In contrast to local-level understandings and uses of ‘the authentic’, conference discussions also touched upon how the 2003 Convention, as a framework for shaping the ICH concept, simultaneously rejects and perpetuates authenticity at the ‘non-local’ (national and international) level<sup>3</sup>. Before examining this further, it is important to emphasize the strong influence of the 2003 Convention within the ICH discourse. Aside from the fact that the ‘ICH’ definition has been developed by UNESCO representatives and associated ‘experts’ during the drafting of various recommendations and documents over the course of several decades, the convention, itself, serves to standardize how ‘ICH’ is conceptualized and, thereby, identified, documented and safeguarded on an increasingly global scale. At present, 143 States Parties have adopted and/or ratified the 2003 Convention and, thus, it can be considered that its guidelines and approaches for safeguarding ICH are becoming dominant (UNESCO, 2012a). Most importantly, this dominance was reflected within conference sessions in that the majority of discussions on cultural practices and expressions were framed according to the relatively recent ICH discourse. In this light, papers mainly focused on case study research that critically engages with the 2003 Convention and its associated safeguarding mechanisms, as examined later.

Remarkably, however, it was highlighted that defining ‘authenticity’ in relation to ICH was viewed as unnecessary during the many drafting meetings of the 2003 Convention and, as a result, it is not mentioned in the convention text (see UNESCO, 2003). Indeed, as Chiara Bortolotto (2012), from the Université Libre de Bruxelles, presented, the 2004 *Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which was adopted at the International Conference on the Safeguarding of Tangible

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<sup>3</sup> Here, the term, ‘non-local’, is used specifically to refer to the UNESCO-ICH paradigm. Due to the fact that the 2003 Convention, which provides the structure for this paradigm, is “organized entirely along national lines” (Ruggles and Silverman, 2010), where States Parties have retained a significant amount of power in deciding how ICH is to be safeguarded within their territories, the two levels, national and international, have been combined (see also Blake, 2006; Stefano, 2012).

and Intangible Heritage, organized by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (JACA) and UNESCO, specifically notes that:

“[F]urther considering that intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated, the term “authenticity” as applied to tangible cultural heritage is not relevant when identifying and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage” (JACA and UNESCO, 2004).

Because the Yamato Declaration is officially endorsed by UNESCO, it helps to clarify why there is no mention of ‘authenticity’ in the 2003 Convention and its Operational Directives<sup>4</sup>. As such, it is clear that a tension between local and non-local understandings of authenticity exists within the ICH discourse. According to UNESCO, authenticity is inapplicable to the ‘ICH’ concept; therefore, any discussion of its value to cultural communities is considered irrelevant within the UNESCO-ICH framework.

The idea that authenticity – however it is defined – is too arbitrary for consideration, particularly from the standpoint of large international bodies like UNESCO, was contested by several papers, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, it was discussed that the UNESCO-ICH framework can also serve to perpetuate static, ‘AHD-approved’ versions of ICH “elements” (UNESCO, 2003) as more authentic than others. In this sense, while the framework may officially steer clear of defining and using the concept of authenticity, its main instruments for promoting the importance of ICH worldwide – namely, the international lists – may serve to construct a sense of ‘authentic ICH’ by their inherent selectivity.

For instance, Sadiyah Boonstra (2012), from the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam, examined the changing *wayang* puppet theater living tradition in Indonesia. Focusing on one well-known puppeteer, or *dalang*, Ki Enthus Susmono, Boonstra (2012) discussed how he is instrumental in changing (and popularizing) the tradition by using contemporary puppet characters, such as Harry Potter and Batman. However, the version of *wayang* that is internationally recognized by UNESCO is, what Boonstra (2012) argues, a colonial construction that “turned *wayang* plays and puppets together with the sound of the *gamelan* into symbols of “authentic” Javanese Culture with roots in a pre-Islamic past”. This version does not include the innovations of immensely popular Ki Enthus Susmono.

Here, Boonstra’s paper sheds light on the politics behind the process of internationally recognizing ICH elements: nominations most often originate at the national level, prepared by government representatives and ‘experts’, and are eventually decided upon by an international, UNESCO-appointed jury (see UNESCO, 2012b). In 2003, the *wayang* was successfully nominated by the Indonesian government to be included as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage, the precursor program to the 2003 Convention and, more specifically, the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity* that operates today<sup>5</sup>. Boonstra (2012) questioned if the ‘authenticity’ of the *wayang* version selected at the national level reflects more a constructed sense of nationhood that can be cast on the international stage

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<sup>4</sup> The Operational Directives are a set of administrative and safeguarding guidelines used as an accompaniment to the 2003 Convention. They address the criteria that have to be met for inclusion on the two international ICH lists, as well as other aspect of the 2003 Convention, such as the ICH Fund (see UNESCO, 2012b).

<sup>5</sup> The Masterpieces list was subsumed by the Representative List in 2005.

as ‘representative’ of Indonesian culture, as opposed to the *wayang* of Ki Enthus Susmono. In this sense, Susmono’s work may be viewed as less authentic by the Indonesian Government and, ultimately, the UNESCO-ICH framework, as a result of its contemporary twists.

As stated earlier, the lists of the 2003 Convention, including also the *List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Urgent Need of Safeguarding*, are the main tools for promoting and safeguarding ICH worldwide. Most noteworthy is that making lists – both the national inventories that States Parties are mandated to create and the international lists – is the dominant activity within this UNESCO-ICH safeguarding paradigm. In addition, it has been argued that this process is fueled by States Parties’ desires for international prestige, such as found with the World Heritage List (Turtinen, 2000; Cleere, 2001: 28; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; Smith and Waterton, 2009: 293). Nonetheless, any listing procedure is based on a system of selection and, thereby, exclusion (see Hafstein, 2009). Furthermore, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) succinctly notes, these lists – whether national or international in scope – *are* the context for “everything on it”. In other words: “everything on the list, whatever its previous context, is now placed in a relationship with other masterpieces” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). Thus, these listing mechanisms, which function to valorize living expressions of culture, can serve to construct a multitude of notions, such as ‘universality’, ‘representativeness’ and ‘authenticity’, that differ from conceptualizations held by communities, groups and individuals at the local level. Coupled to the critiques that local-level community participation remains vague within the UNESCO-ICH safeguarding paradigm, it is possible that local-level understandings of authenticity, if they exist, may be lost once a particular ICH element is valorized through the UNESCO-ICH system (see Blake, 2006; Stefano, 2012).

### **Moving Beyond the UNESCO-ICH Framework**

As States Parties implement the 2003 Convention within their national territories, research on the approaches that are used to identify, document and safeguard ICH, as well as their impacts at the local level where ICH lives, will continue to be needed. In addition, conferences such as this are crucial for assessing, from both holistic and nuanced viewpoints, the increasingly widespread framework within which living cultural practices and expressions are itemized, categorized and listed. It is also important to remember that it is the 2003 Convention and associated, UNESCO-endorsed efforts that often bring us – researchers, practitioners and communities, groups and individuals – together in different parts of the world to discuss the safeguarding of cultural practices and expressions. Whether or not implementing the 2003 Convention is the most effective way forward in sustaining and revitalizing living heritage may be less important than the fact that debates about these issues are, indeed, gaining great momentum.

Nevertheless, the ACHS conference has shown that a large part of the discussions on safeguarding ICH are, understandably, centered on UNESCO-sponsored policies and efforts. On this note, the ICH discourse, and the potential discussions encouraged by ACHS, should give greater attention to the wide range of safeguarding efforts that are already underway throughout the world and, most significantly, that lie outside of the UNESCO-ICH paradigm. Particularly obvious are the initiatives undertaken in neighborhoods, towns, cities and regions within countries that have not adopted and/or ratified the 2003 Convention, such as with the US.

Moreover, the 'ICH' concept is still relatively new; however, studying living cultural practices and expressions and working with communities to try and sustain them is certainly not. Within the US, state folklife programs, for example, have been operating for several decades, a fact that appears to have been overshadowed by the more dominant ICH discourse abroad. Similarly, the work of US scholars, public folklorists and other heritage and museum sector professionals can be argued to overlap – as well as contrast – with aspects of the mission and aims of the 2003 Convention and its approaches. In this light the ACHS conference was lacking in US perspectives, especially in terms of bridging what can be perceived as an 'ICH-folklore divide'.

Based upon my experiences of working for Maryland Traditions, I have learned that there is much that can be shared with international scholars and professionals about the approaches taken by public folklorists to promote and sustain living heritage. Reactions to our paper were overwhelmingly positive and audience members were curious about the structures and mechanisms of current public sector folklore. Similarly, it was clear that the work in which Clifford Murphy and I engage is quite surprising to non-US heritage professionals in that it is – generally speaking – unknown, as well as substantially 'grass-roots' in method. As such, the ICH discourse can be expanded, as well as questioned, by including other, non-UNESCO paradigm philosophies, such as those that seek to develop 'bottom-up', community-based safeguarding initiatives and public programming. Despite being part of a state government agency, in many ways our limited budget allows us to work directly – and in situ – with cultural communities, groups and individuals in understanding their living traditions and helping to keep them alive. This aspect of public folklore work in the US contrasts greatly with the 'top-down' approach of UNESCO, where local-level community participation remains vaguely defined, as noted earlier.

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