



'Intangible Values' As Heritage In Australia

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Introduction

The subject of this paper is "Intangible Values as Heritage in Australia". This is the same title as a recent paper of mine in *ICOMOS News* (1st issue 2000), the international ICOMOS newsletter. That paper and others, including one by Dawson Munjeri, were designed to engender discussion leading into the next ICOMOS General Assembly in Zimbabwe in 2002. These papers can also be found on the ICOMOS International website <http://www.icomos.org>.

I see this paper as a scene-setting exercise, but find that my best lines have already been given by others, notably Barry Jones last night at the Conference dinner! Nonetheless I want to take the opportunity to ask questions of the World Heritage Convention and the matters raised in regard to the notion of universal outstanding significance and intangible values. If we had time, I would take Jane Lennon's point further about the need to have fun when dealing with heritage issues. I would have you at least singing *Waltzing Matilda*, if not dancing and telling stories - for intangible heritage is generally seen as the non-physical aspect of heritage - neither place nor object.

Definitions

What do we mean by intangible heritage or intangible heritage values? (I am reminded by Duncan Marshall that we seem to be using the notion of intangible heritage or intangible values interchangeably.)

Heritage, "that which we inherit", has administratively been divided into different types of heritage: place, object or 'intangible heritage', the latter generally understood to be song, dance, story, ceremony. Values attributed to a place or object can also be intangible; heritage significance is a cultural construct and is therefore intangible, however, it would appear that in Australia we have been regarding and historic and scientific as objective, tangible values and social value or aesthetic value as subjective and intangible. The current Australian Heritage Commission criteria explains these two values as:

- **Social Value** - AHC Criterion G *Its strong or special association with a particular community of cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons*

Chris Johnston further explained the nature of social value in *What is Social Value?* (Johnston 1992), explaining it as attachment to:

- *places that are essential reference points or symbols for a community's identity, including for new communities*
 - *accessible and used places, places where major events took place*
 - *meeting and gathering places, and*
 - *places of tradition, ritual and ceremony.*
- **Aesthetic Value** - AHC Criterion E *Its importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group*

The AHC has also further explained this value as:

the response derived from the experience of the environment or particular natural and cultural attributes within it. This response can be to either visual or non-visual elements and can embrace emotional response, sense of place, sound, smell and any other factors having a strong impact on human thought, feelings and attitudes. (AHC 1994b)

I do not wish to spend long on definitions, but I do want to draw attention to some dictionary definitions that help us understand what we are talking about in regard to heritage:

intangible – *incapable of being perceived by the sense of touch – as incorporeal or immaterial things*

yet much that is termed 'intangible heritage' can be seen, or heard, or tasted or smelt – and so is surely tangible
or felt emotionally

as often consists of the feelings associated with a place – these may be felt but not touched – this raises issues of real versus unreal – in some cases a matter of cultural understanding (or cultural tolerance)

ephemeral – *lasting only a day or a very short time – short-lived, transitory*

yet many of the intangible values such as story, song and dance and other traditions that form intangible heritage have persisted, through generations, centuries, and apparently millennia, albeit with some changes, and cannot be thought of as ephemeral, although they may not be bricks and mortar that appear to be more tangible and lasting.

We have heard repeatedly of the lack of success so far to have an Australian non-indigenous place nominated for World Heritage. It has been suggested that this failure may in part be due to a cultural cringe about our cultural history and achievements, or a Eurocentric or art-historical sense of monumentalism, which our heritage places fail. I suggest that it is because we are not yet comfortable with our cultural identity and our intangible heritage values as a New World society. We do not have the long and confident time-depth of the strong indigenous links to the land, and we were cut off from our former connections to place when we migrated. Despite evidence that Australians do hold intangible values in regard to cultural heritage, I do not believe that we are fully confident as to their worth at a national or international level.

Cultural Continuity: a Story

As some of you know, I have returned to Canberra after almost five months' leave in Europe. There I witnessed various expressions of intangible heritage that enable many Europeans to maintain a strong sense of place and cultural continuity. For example, in recent autumn months, I witnessed the beginning of the hunting season and the annual gathering of mushrooms in the woods.

I was reminded that these customs portray a direct continuity from long ago hunting and gathering practices. They have probably been carried out over some 50,000 years and are rites that have persisted through various European cultural transitions. From the beginning of agriculture some 3000 years ago, and more recently to a post-industrial world with a globalized market that can bring farmed game and any type of mushroom to the supermarket shelf at any time of the year.

Hunting is undergoing a fierce debate in north-western Europe today. I watched an earnest TV panel discussion in Germany on the ethical, moral arguments of killing animals, arguments for continued hunting including that it controlled overgrazing and was part of culling regimes, and so managed the forest landscape, as well as the argument that hunting is a traditional cultural practice. Similar positions are put forward in Australia from indigenous peoples in regards to their traditional rights/rites to hunt and gather.

Such persistence of cultural tradition and custom can be seen in many other aspects of cultural life in Europe. The names of places in the landscape – geological formations, hilltops, streams, rocks and glades, often originate in earlier cosmological explanations of the landscape, such as legends of the gods, heroes from sagas, as well as historical events. They form a rich tapestry evoking persistent living cultural traditions, yet adapted and transformed as part of their survival in changing cultural circumstances.

Cultural transformations bear witness to the continuity of earlier intangible heritage: for example, the wooden stave churches of Norway display both a defiant yet cautious inclusion of pagan gods in the iconography of the church sculpture. Christian practice adopted previous ceremonies into Christmas, Easter and Hallowe'en rituals, and seasonal festivals perpetuated earlier rites such as Morris dancing. Some of these have of course been perpetuated throughout the world, evolving into aspects of a global culture that are celebrated in some form everywhere, such as Christmas in Japan.

The 19th century industrial revolution resulted in both a displacement of people from their land and its associated values, as outlined by Michael Pearson in his paper. However, these 19th century social and political upheavals resulted also in the revival or recreation of cultural and ethnic identities based on romantic notions of the heroic past to support political efforts for ethnic independence or unification. Some of these recreations are now being recognized in their own right as of heritage value, and show the acceptance of not only cultural continuity but also cultural revival, recreation and transformation.

Notions of cultural identity are resuming a greater importance in Europe today in a counter-move against the unifying effects of the European Union. There is a strong urge to differentiate oneself according to traditional ethnic and cultural lines, often resorting to intangible heritage values to do so. We are witness to both tragic results of such efforts, for example in the Balkans and Pyrenees, and other examples, that are more peacefully achieved, such as in Scotland or for the Saami

in Scandinavia. Some intangible values are being reinvented or transformed to suit the current times and purposes.

That has always happened in the past, and it has continued to happen in indigenous society in Australia as well. The difference between the European examples and the Australian indigenous ones and the non-indigenous Australian is one of length of time to develop and maintain intangible values – and perhaps this matters – I do not know.

The Australian Experience

For in the case of the non-indigenous Australian, many of these intangible values were left behind in the journey to Australia; connection to place was often already broken and many new settlers arrived as displaced persons. It is true that story (without place), song (without place), and ceremony, dress and food could be taken along, but could they be sustained in a new land? Although Australia was no *terra nullius*, to the newcomers it was a *tabula rasa* and new songs, stories, and rituals have evolved for non-indigenous settlers.

So what intangible values do the majority of Australians have that give them a sense cultural identity and is linked to land and custom, to place? As a new, highly Westernised and mobile society, disconnection from place is a constant problem. As a new, immigrant and increasingly globalized country, Australia regularly debates its national Australian identity. Its various multicultural strands are increasingly acknowledged as vital to its character, and intangible values important traces and links to our past and to place. Could any of them be regarded of World Heritage value given the current application of the criteria? Again, is age or rather length of association an arbiter in this case, or the intensity of association; and which places do we feel so intensely about?

In discussing these issues, I apologise to those in the room not of European descent. I am however deliberately setting a scene of the past European intangible heritage of the majority of today's Australians – an intangible heritage that has largely been left behind. Other Australians have come from other continents that may also have similar stories of having left an intangible heritage that was a strong cultural identifier. Of indigenous Australians I will speak later.

Heritage Places with Intangible Values

Australia ICOMOS and the Australian Government have done much in the past decade on this issue of intangible values related to place, and I have outlined some of these programs, reports and guidelines in the previously mentioned paper. There are repeated themes that emerge:

[As I present this verbally I would like you to close your eyes and think of like places such as described below, that for you have personal association, meaning and memory. Or you could look at me in my funny hat, the Akubra that has emerged from being practical headwear for farmers to an iconic, cultural identifier for all Australians!]

Heroes

Local Legends

Local and national heroes have considerable meaning to the community, with local pride evident where a community can claim to 'house' the location of events associated with their lives. Sometimes the allocation of that association to a particular place is dubious, although heartfelt. For example, Corryong in Victoria, considers itself to be the 'home' of the Man from Snowy River story, with the attribution of the Man to Jack Riley who is buried there. First expressed as a poem by A.B. 'Banjo' Patterson, there is little evidence that the story in the poem is based on a true event. Nonetheless, the story of heroism has been adopted in the region. Films loosely based on the story have made in the area, all adding to the myth, with a museum and an annual festival now devoted to it.

Such uses of local folklore are now rife in Australia, particularly in small struggling country towns, which regard identification with a national legend as one way to draw the tourist dollar. For example, the site of the writing of the Australian national song *Waltzing Matilda* is fiercely contested in various locations of outback Queensland. The creation or appropriation of such legends must now be regarded as part of the heritage significance of that place, whether strictly true or not.

The ANZAC Legend

On 25 April 1915, Australian and New Zealand soldiers were slaughtered as they landed and sought to gain control over part of the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey. Their courageous story lives on in the Australian psyche, with war memorials the centre of moving dawn services in homage on that day throughout the land and beyond. Although only two who landed that day are still alive, there is a growing community attachment to the symbol of ANZAC Day amongst the young and increasing numbers making the pilgrimage each April to ANZAC Cove.

Battlers

Pioneers

In *Bush Lives, Bush Futures*, an exhibition curated by Sheridan Burke of the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, and ICOMOS Vice-President, the triumphant stories are shown of eight country families who have found innovative and sustainable solutions for their land and heritage properties in the face of natural and financial disasters. This powerful and moving exhibition keeps alive the Australian legend of the power of endurance of people in the Bush, and highlights the importance of both tradition and innovation in maintaining heritage.

Forest Places

Community attachment to place has been identified in the several Regional Forest Agreements throughout Australia (<http://www.rfa.gov.au>). Over one hundred participatory community heritage workshops have identified thousands of places of local attachment, including many reflected in the stories and verse of early settler heroes, or in artistic responses to place. Their management is ensured in a balance with nature conservation.

New Lives

Increasing numbers of migrants have come from different parts of the world since WW II, including many from Asia, so that people with a non-English-speaking background form some thirty per cent of today's eighteen million Australians. They bring and strongly maintain certain traditional intangible values, adding layers of attachment to place. Since 1989, a policy of multiculturalism has reflected and celebrated the emergence of Australia as a truly inclusive, diverse society. Food and folklore are the most visible aspects of the ethnic culture of immigrant groups at key festivities in the year, but the arts are also permeated with this diversity of cultures, and heritage conservation is now also paying attention to this aspect of Australia's culture.

Most new migrants go to the city, and Australia's multicultural society is expressed architecturally in many forms. These range from vernacular styles from the homeland, including many different styles of religious buildings, to layerings of expressions of success in a new country which at times are considered to be a stylistic intrusion to earlier architectural styles, such as the adding of Roman columns to Federation houses.

As you see many of these identified types of places to which many Australians have associated and intangible values are romantic, mythic images of our character – they refer to our Bush legend, yet as we know most Australians are city dwellers. It is however true that those in the Bush have been practising a traditional form of human settlement or land-use representative of a culture that is vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change (criterion v of the World Heritage Operational Guidelines). Yet somehow I do not believe that the World Heritage Committee would give such a nomination the same consideration as having universally important values, as the nomadic horsemen mentioned by Henry Cleere. Perhaps certain Eurocentric values are still at play, that perceive the intangible values of non-Westerners as somehow more genuine and more valuable.

The studies done to date do not seem to highlight an Australian awareness of their contributions to democratic processes, such as female emancipation, or significant labour initiatives. Nor is it clear to me that the World Heritage Committee is ready either for such recognition of under Criterion (vi) of ideas or beliefs and their significance to today's modern society, nor in such a case which places would represent these important events and ideas.

And would Australians themselves regard such places, lifestyles, historic events, and intangible values, despite their identification in heritage studies as so important? I think not. It seems that cultural heritage is not large in the community's consciousness; at least that is my experience from the Regional Forest Agreement process.

Perceptions of the Wild

Yet it is clear that the natural environment is of great community and social and even spiritual significance. For example, Australia has thirteen World Heritage properties inscribed, nine for natural world heritage values alone, and four being both natural and cultural values. This reflects Australians' high attachment to the land and natural environment, even as largely city dwellers, they may rarely visit it themselves. A highly urban society, many Australians feel strongly about impacts on the natural environment, and there is an active nature conservation and green movement. We have already heard of, and many of us have experienced, the major community state and federal government disputes in regard to World Heritage listing, and it is little wonder that many Australians understand World Heritage to be about the natural environment. Even the renaming of the South-West Tasmania World Heritage Area as the Tasmanian Wilderness Area, in the post-dam renomination, reflects the high association and meaning that wilderness had for the community at the time. However, the renaming obscures public awareness of the cultural world heritage values for which the area is also listed, and may be offensive to Tasmanian Aborigines.

This current strong awareness of land and nature by non-Indigenous Australians is possibly causing a greater understanding of Australia's indigenous people's intangible values. I do not propose to outline those values in detail, but to say that in this case there is a clear continuous and long link with the past and with place unlike other Australians. Despite that massive and brutal disruption to traditional human settlements of many indigenous cultures, their intangible values have survived in a living form in various parts of Australia, and are undergoing revival in many regions.

The Dreaming - the spiritual explanation of the creation of the land - is timeless with ongoing connections to landscape held by elders who have traditional responsibilities to care for it. A central feature is the indivisible connections between story, song, dance and land in ceremonial acts of recreation. Their languages and culture, which have survived the long period of dispossession, when ongoing knowledge managed to maintain connections between story and place, is now undergoing a revitalisation. These indigenous cultural traditions were not static in the past and nor are they today, and there is a vital continuity and creative energy expressing the Dreaming in modern dance, drama and film.

Spiritual Landscapes

Uluru / Kata Tjuta is of great sacred significance to the Anangu people of Central Australia. Initially only included for its natural heritage values on the World Heritage List, the area is now inscribed also as a spiritual landscape, with many separate Dreaming Tracks formed by ancestral creation figures join and pass through this area. The Management Plan explains the centrality of the traditional belief system for this place and the majority of traditional owners on the Board ensures that the intangible values are sustained.

Conclusion

It is clear to me that much progress has been made in Australia in identifying intangibles values related to heritage place – however I am concerned that we have yet to really advance much as regards the management of intangible values and the monitoring of their survival.

As in the case of identification, I suggest that there are indigenous models for the management of intangible values, including the management of the Kakadu and Uluru / KataTjuta World Heritage Properties that can suggest a way forward. One key issues is that it is essential that intangible values are not made rigid and static by insisting that the values stay the same through time – ‘freezeframing’ as Sharon Sullivan has called it. Intangible values rarely stay the same, they transform through time and adapt to different situations, they have ever done so and will otherwise not continue to be living intangible values.

In heritage management, it is essential for the survival and of intangible values that those who hold the values have a decision-making role – and processes are needed to enable this to happen in today’s fast-changing world. Duncan Marshall and David Young will outline Australia ICOMOS initiatives that should assist us in Australia in this matter.

In the case of the monitoring, Australia’s State of the Environment reporting has also gone some way to measure the degree to which communities have a say in decisions about their intangible heritage values.

These are also all issues that need to be addressed in the context of the World Heritage Convention, where identification criteria have expanded to acknowledge intangible values, but where management requirements may not yet meet the needs of such values. This is an also issue that must be addressed in the UNESCO’s commitment to establish a Convention on intangible values, for traditional culture and folklore that may not necessarily be attached to place. In all these cases, it is essential to put living practice ahead of listing or rigid definitions, otherwise the diversity of cultural practice and intangible values throughout the world will be greatly threatened and our heritage the poorer for it.

References

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