

# EVENTS AND CONFERENCES

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## *What does heritage change?* A Review of the Third Biennial Conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS) Montreal, 3-8 June 2016

After the inaugural Conference of the Association of Critical Heritage Studies (ACHS) held in Gothenburg (Sweden) in 2012, and the Second Conference held in Canberra (Australia) in 2014, this year Montreal hosted the Third Biennial Conference (3-8 June 2016). The Canada Research Chair in Urban Heritage of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM)'s School of Management, in collaboration with Concordia University and the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, presented the conference's theme: "What does heritage change?". Approximately 800 participants of various backgrounds from all over the world gathered together to share their expertise and thoughts concerning a common passion and interest: heritage. Through presentations, artistic performances, posters,

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seminars and workshops, the researchers, practitioners, and artists had the opportunity to address the fundamental issue of the impact heritage has on different sectors, such as society, the economy, the environment, political order, territories and rights. Based on their presentations, the ACHS Conference sought to clarify to what extent heritage can contribute to change and progress in today's society. The Conference made possible a deep and comprehensive discussion on the many aspects of heritage (tangible, intangible, effects of urbanism, tourism, museums, architecture, industry, as well as heritage in areas of conflict), seen from various perspectives and in various contexts.

This short review deals with the discussions that took place at Concordia University on 7 June 2016 (Tuesday), and more specifically those concerning intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the challenges which it faces today, and the issues raised during the panel, "Le patrimoine culturel immatériel: quels nouveaux défis?" [Intangible cultural heritage: what new challenges?], co-chaired by Professor Julia Csergo (Professor of cultural history at UQAM), Dr. Chiara Bortolotto (from France's Institut interdisciplinaire d'anthropologie du contemporain) and Antoine Gauthier (Director of the Conseil québécois du patrimoine vivant). The Conference took place ten years after the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003 UNESCO Convention) entered into force, and sought to examine the impact of UNESCO's instrument on the cultural practices, rituals, knowledge and know-how that are part of the ICH. Eight speakers, mainly academic researchers from various fields (anthropology, ethnology, social psychology and law), but also heritage activists from not-for-profit organisations and museums, critically examined national, regional and local initiatives and policies that promote and safeguard ICH in Mexico, Ireland, Quebec, Morocco, India, France, the Czech Republic, and Italy.

The first speaker, the ethnologist Charlotte Pescayre from the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) described the case of the "Maroma",<sup>1</sup> a festive event which is progressively disappearing in Mexico, and she spoke of the difficulties facing these communities in obtaining the international recognition of their cultural practice, as well as of the adoption by local institutions of measures aimed at guaranteeing their preservation. By referring to the Maroma festivities and the local initiatives to maintain them, the ethnologist's research underlined the complexities involved in registering certain practices on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage at risk. Following Ms. Pescayre's presentation, the economist Jordan Gamble of Edinburgh Napier University raised the issue of the link between ICH and tourism. More specifically, by using the example of artistic events in Ireland, Mr. Gamble described the problems brought

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<sup>1</sup> The Maroma is a festive event held since colonial times in different regions in Mexico (Oaxaca, Guerrero, Puebla, Veracruz) by several communities and indigenous peoples. During community festivities, acrobats, dancers, clowns, etc. perform on a fine wire.

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about by the monetization and commercialization of ICH due to tourism and proposed guidelines for the non-risk exploitation of ICH that will enable communities to reap financial benefits with respect to their practices. The exploitation of communities' and indigenous peoples' ICH by the tourism industry was also pointed out in the following presentation by Dr. Georgina Flores Mercado of the UNAM. The sociologist spoke of another cultural practice in Mexico, the "Pirekua", a traditional song perpetuated by an indigenous people, the Purepechae. Although this form of expression is registered in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the registration was done without the community's consent and has mainly benefited the tourism industry. As a result, according to Dr. Flores Mercado, the cultural practices of indigenous peoples "present themselves as a new area of conflict and social, economic, and political inequality."

At this point I was given the opportunity to question the relationship between ICH and sustainable development from a legal perspective. More precisely, I postulated that according to the 2003 UNESCO Convention and the recent Operational Directives adopted in 2016, ICH is a factor in sustainable development for communities and groups. I then described some examples of ICH policies adopted in Quebec and Morocco and examined how these measures, despite their efforts, do not effectively contribute to communities' and groups' sustainable development. The following speaker, Antoine Gauthier, Director of the Conseil québécois du patrimoine vivant, pointed out a difficulty facing ICH in Quebec; namely that even though Canada has not yet ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention,<sup>2</sup> nevertheless the terms of some cultural measures taken by the Province of Quebec in its 2011 Cultural Heritage Act are not in harmony with the language used by the Convention. He recommended the use of the term "citizens" rather than "communities and groups" in order to present ICH stakeholders as essential actors in heritage policies. The following speaker, Leah K. Lowthorp of Harvard University, also spoke about terminology. Using the example of the material culture of the Kutiyattam Sanskrit theatre of Kerala in India, the anthropologist explained that the 2003 Convention fails to effectively take into consideration the tangibility of intangible heritage, such as for example the material objects that are used for the perpetuation of a ritual. She thus highlighted the fact that the tangible aspects of intangible heritage are lacking in the international instrument. Following this presentation, Zeev Gourarier, Director of the collections of the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MUCEM), criticized the way some museums, such as French museums of ethnology and history, present heritage. He denounced the tendency of these museums to represent and encourage an idealized and glorious

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<sup>2</sup> Even though Canada has not yet ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention, the Province of Quebec inserted within ITS 2011 Cultural Heritage Act certain provisions of this Convention. The issue of Canada having not yet ratified the Convention was discussed the day before the Conference: "Le Canada doit-il signer le Convention pour la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel?", Concordia University, 6 June 2016.

past that has become obsolete. Finally, the last speaker, Dr. Alessandro Testa from the University of Vienna, when referring to the ICH of the Czech Republic and Italy, asserted that heritage changes everything. Using various European examples, the anthropologist demonstrated that the creative process inherent in heritage has an impact on all aspects of society.

In conclusion, the panel on the challenges that intangible cultural heritage faces today and the discussions surrounding the theme “What does heritage change?” highlighted the fact that understanding ICH is a joint venture in which cultural studies need to engage. Whatever one’s school of thought may be, ICH – and heritage more generally – brings us closer and underlines the fact that the changes brought about by heritage are global. Inasmuch as the safeguarding of heritage is also a way to face other global problems, including climate change and the environment, we must consider heritage in a holistic manner. Viewed in this perspective, heritage has no borders and must be examined as a global concept in all its intangible, tangible, natural, and cultural aspects. Therefore, I strongly believe that the challenging discussions held during the ACHS Conference lead to the inevitable conclusion that heritage should move away from a Western view in order to represent the “People” who are responsible for its transmission. As Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell stated on the first day of the Conference, heritage is “an instrument of power” wielded by various States. The ACHS 2016 Conference gives us hope that the changes brought about by heritage in so many aspects of society will also influence those who have knowledge of it. The next ACHS Conference will be held in China in 2018.