

MICHELLE L. STEFANO:  
Practical Considerations for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural  
Heritage  
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Safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a topic that is currently being discussed by various authors, experts and researchers working in scientific and academic institutions or national or international organizations (for example UNESCO) or non-governmental organizations, who are trying to investigate this issue on a theoretical and also practical level. On the other hand, among these groups that create an overall picture of the character and form of ICH are the people in communities who create and at the same time reflect on these phenomena and elements of intangible cultural heritage based on their sense of identity and continuity. These attitudes, approaches and perspectives of these groups of people influence each other, intermingle and mutually form frameworks that together define the issue of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Some experts are interested in these different positions and perspectives, including Michelle L. Stefano, who has been working for more than ten years as a public folklorist in the United States. After completing her PhD. study in the field of Cultural and Heritage Studies at Newcastle University she began to focus professionally on the study of Maryland Traditions. Currently, she is a folklife specialist in research and programs at the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress in Washington. Various cases and experiences from her practice inspired and motivated her to write a book called *Practical Considerations for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*. In this publication, Stefano describes several examples from practice, on the basis of which she clarifies and approximates possible approaches to the safeguarding of intangible (living) cultural heritage.

Her aim in writing this book was to explain and critically review the approaches and definitions, used mainly in UNESCO frameworks, that influence public understanding and perception of these concepts and the subsequent practice related to the safeguarding of ICH. She also provides a new perspective or reflection on the re-conceptualisation of these framework approaches, which affect the everyday reality and experience of people of local communities forming individual elements of intangible (living) cultural heritage. In this regard, the author tries to connect theory with practice, and her effort is also to help provide some “guideline” on how to approach the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

This book is structured into seven chapters. In the first and second chapters, Stefano describes the individual concepts and terminology within the framework of UNESCO, which are related to the issue of safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, thereby trying to point out possible inconsistencies and misunderstandings, which in practice create potential problems when applying them. Terms described by the author include the definition of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2.1) and its safeguarding (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2.3), which is presented within the framework of UNESCO in the *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (UNESCO, 2003). Furthermore, she presents the definitions that are used and conceptualized in certain contexts in the field today. These definitions relate to the explanation of the differences between terms “folklife” and “folklore”, she also tries to describe the meaning of the word “traditional” and

she explains who belongs to the communities called “folk” and “ethnic”, or to theoretically grasp and explain the word community itself. The third chapter is divided into two parts and tries to describe the function and impact of community participation in the UNESCO-ICH frameworks in practice and also suggests improvements that could help after their application.

In the fourth, fifth and sixth chapters, Stefano focuses on the explanation of two alternative approaches, helping to present and maintain living cultural traditions, which are mostly not included in UNESCO frameworks – ecomuseology and public folklore in the context of the United States. The author explains the difference between a traditional museum and an ecomuseum, which consists of the fact that an ecomuseum includes several elements from which a living cultural heritage is created in a place, with the help of participation of the local community and it is also connected with the memory of the people. As indicated by other authors in publications dealing with this issue (Corsane et al., 2009; Davis, 2007; Davis, 2009; Rivard, 1988), ecomuseums are created from the components of territory, heritage, memory and population. In this regard, she also emphasizes the value of ethical practices in presenting history in ecomuseums. The difference also lies in the management and administration of this museum, because the ecomuseum is managed more by people from local communities than by organizations from “outside”, which also contributes to the development of the local region in a significant way.

The author describes her own practical experience, which she gained during museum work and also based on her work as a public folklorist. In this section Stefano presents some examples of implemented projects of many national organizations also related to the work of public folklorists, such as *the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage* (Smithsonian, 2022), *The American Folklife Center* (Library of Congress, 2022) or *the National Endowment for the Arts Folk and Traditional Arts Program* (NEA, 2022). She explains the importance of the work of public folklorists, who are not only documenters of living cultural traditions, but are mainly facilitators applying a reflexive and collaborative approach in their work with artists and communities. In their folklife fieldwork, they use ethnographic methods, but in a way that they work with these people mainly as people and also as friends.

In the seventh chapter, Michelle L. Stefano summarizes her conclusions with the idea that the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is not an immutable and static product, but a process that is subject to change depending on the needs of the people who create living cultural traditions and expressions. The aim of this author was to theoretically describe and specify the terminology of ICH more accurately and, by outlining the possibility of using appropriate approaches, help to create such “tools” for initiatives and programs for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. They could be applicable in the future as well, because they are created in the constantly changing conditions of the present, which shape them. They can also help to solve the problems that arise when the view of ICH is changed as



a dynamic process, which indicates that is necessary to re-evaluate the approaches to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage with regard to the contexts in which they are created.

The author makes a very valuable contribution related to new possible approaches to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. First of all, it raises the question of how it is possible to grasp this issue in such a way that it will bring positive consequences for people creating living cultural traditions and also for stakeholders creating frameworks for safeguarding of ICH in the future. Stefano tries to work with the redefining of concepts created within the framework of organizations such as UNESCO and provides a more critical argument for re-evaluating the meaning of this definition, which also has an impact on future consequences when applying them to the current world and people's lives. Stefano does not criticize these definitions in a way that should disparage the terminology used by UNESCO, but tries to redefine terms to bring the most useful and most applied dimension to help grasp the topic in its current and functional/applicable form. The significant contribution of this publication lies mainly in the fact that Stefano also focuses on research with people and their intangible cultural heritage, who create and continue to create living cultural heritage. In this way, it attempts to change the perspective of research *about* people in local communities and their intangible cultural heritage to create a perspective *with* these people, which in the future can bring beneficial results not only for organizations such as UNESCO, but also for the regional development of local communities.

On a theoretical level, this book by Michelle L. Stefano can be useful for theoretical reflection by redefining key terms, which can create a meaningful space for discussion of relevant concepts that also have an impact on everyday practice in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. When applying knowledge from the book in practice, the approach of individuals, groups, institutions and organizations, such as UNESCO, to the safeguarding of ICH can be influenced and possibly changed, and it can also have a certain positive impact for the people in local communities who are part of this living cultural heritage.

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