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Handbook on Intangible Cultural Practices as Global Strategies for the Future: Twenty Years of the UNESCO Convention on Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage, edited by Christoph Wulf. Springer, 2025. 579 pp., ISBN 978-3-031-72122-9.

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Book Review

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This handbook arrives twenty years after the adoption of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, a moment when the social, political, and environmental significance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is coming under progressively closer global scrutiny. Following the editor Christoph Wulf's illuminating introduction, "Living Cultures in the Anthropocene," this collection locates ICH as a necessary resource for understanding various forms of global transformation that are taking place throughout our planet today—from climate change and demographic shifts to nuanced implications of digitalization and social fragmentation. The key thesis of the book is that ICH practices, by virtue of their corporeal, performative, and mimetically transmitted nature, should not be considered remnants of a bygone past (so-called archaic survivals) but vibrant, future-oriented forms of cultural know-how.

Wulf's opening essay theorizes and stages the institutional frame for the anthology, one of its most substantive contributions. Basing his discussion on historical and cultural anthropology, he contends that intangible cultural heritage is inherently associated with the physical body and its performance, reproduction, and recreation. Here he offers a concise summary of his abiding theoretical repertoire—mimesis, somatic learning, ritualization—to explain why ICH continues and remains socially meaningful. It is this theoretical framework that brings an unusual sense of coherence to the handbook, given its size and nature as an edited collection. It also provides readers with a conceptual language for analyzing the case studies that follow, which include European craft traditions as well as ritual traditions in East Asia and Latin America.

The introduction offers a critical review of how intangible heritage is being defined, documented, and managed at national and international levels. In Wulf's conceptual formulation:

> Heritage is an open generic term for all those tangible and intangible assets inherited from a past to which individuals, communities, or humanity as a whole attach salient importance. What is heritage for a community emerges as a consequence of a complex dynamic of determination and selection as well as of proving, updating, transforming and appropriating through practice and interpretative approaches. (4)

Then, Wulf takes us through different kinds of systems, contrasting the codified systems in countries like Japan and Korea—which are often based on stringent government legislation and deliberate processes and practices for knowledge transmission—with more liberalized, cooperative approaches, as seen in Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands. The comprehensive examination of the German model, encompassing its federal architecture, the

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processes of selection at the state level, and the criteria for eligibility, is especially illuminating and will prove useful for researchers seeking to understand the mechanisms underpinning national records and UNESCO nominations. Through a meticulous examination of the dynamics among governmental entities, non-governmental organizations, and specialized advisory panels, Wulf underscores the inherently political dimensions involved in the process of heritage selection, achieving this without resorting to the reductionist celebratory or technocratic rhetoric that frequently typifies publications associated with UNESCO.

The handbook's five sections span significant geographical and thematic ground. The first section focuses on intangible heritage as a force for social change, including articles by two senior UNESCO officials and leading national policymakers who are looking back over twenty years of the impact of the Convention. For the most part, these chapters are descriptive, though they manage to situate ICH in broader institutional discourses of global public goods, participatory governance, and sustainable development. The second part turns to colonial legacies, minorities, race, and inequality. Chapters on Africa, Brazil, the United States, Indonesia, and Europe examine how existing power relationships shape heritage recognition. The inclusion of case studies that emphasize racialization, exclusion, and the persistence of colonialism matters greatly, given that UNESCO heritage frameworks have long carried a Eurocentric epistemological bias.

The third part examines the influence of ICH on identity formation, conflict generation, and community development. Contributions from Germany, Poland, Switzerland, Korea, China, Colombia, and the Arab world demonstrate the different interpretations and applications of the 2003 Convention by states and communities. The strength of this section lies in its rich empirical evidence, which reveals that the adoption of ICH guidelines is influenced by local governance practices, political contexts, and social systems. Nevertheless, at times, the connections between these chapters and the editor's theoretical perspective seem more implicit than explicit, prompting readers to deduce how the case studies connect to issues of performativity or mimetic transmission. For example, Chapter 14 on Switzerland offers a rich account of federal administrative processes and cultural-policy debates, but it does not link these empirical materials to Wulf's broader focus on embodiment, mimesis, or performativity. Practices such as avalanche-risk management—listed by UNESCO and grounded in embodied, mimetic forms of learning—are presented mainly as administrative items rather than examined through the theoretical perspective the editor proposes.

Part four explores "aesthetic encounters," including music, modern dance, museums, and new institutional environments such as the Humboldt Forum. These chapters effectively demonstrate how ICH circulates within professionalized cultural sectors and the tensions that emerge when community-based practices are reframed through artistic, curatorial, or museological logics. Wulf's own contribution in this section revisits his triad of body–mimesis–performativity and links it to European choral and ritual traditions. Wulf argues that "[a]s practical knowledge, mimesis and performativity are mutually intertwined—for example in the cases of rituals, dances, or gestures—, repetition of the cultural practices plays an important role in the transfer of intangible cultural knowledge" (433).

While this provides a strong theoretical anchor, it also means that other perspectives—for example, feminist approaches to embodiment or postcolonial critiques of museology—are less present than they might have been, given their prominence in contemporary heritage scholarship. A brief engagement with these perspectives would have strengthened the analytical balance of this part of the handbook.

The final part of the volume examines the emerging complexities associated with The final part of the volume examines the emerging complexities associated with digitalization, youth,

cultural economies, and the recovery process following disasters. The chapters on post-digital cultures and social media are especially valuable in this regard. The exploration of children and youth comes at a relevant time, especially as it emphasizes how patterns of digital consumption may interfere with learning across generations. Although these contributions are enlightening, they tend to be mostly descriptive and could have gained from a more profound theoretical exploration of digital anthropology or netnography. Several chapters in this section also introduce concerns related to cultural economies and the role of ICH as a modality of care—topics that are promising but treated rather briefly and that would have benefited from deeper theoretical grounding. Conversely, the chapter discussing Fukushima's *Soma Nomaoi* festival and *Obori Soma Yaki* pottery presents a fascinating examination of how communities navigate cultural continuity in the aftermath of a disaster. It eloquently shows that when disasters change communities, social dynamics, and physical landscapes, the resulting cultural practices inevitably evolve as well. This piece stands out as one of the most compelling empirical studies in the handbook and clearly demonstrates how deeply intertwined cultural recovery and social transformation can be.

One of the book's important arguments is that intangible cultural heritage should be understood as a living, embodied, and socially generative set of practices that help communities navigate contemporary transformations, from environmental pressures to demographic shifts and policy structures such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The chapters that connect ICH with education for sustainable development and the SDGs are among the most innovative, particularly in their argument that intangible heritage should be understood as a cultural asset and a pedagogical environment in which ethics, empathy, and intergenerational responsibility are cultivated. Whether one accepts the SDGs as an appropriate structure for cultural policy will determine how persuasive this argument appears. The handbook generally treats the SDGs as a constructive horizon rather than interrogating their developmentalist assumptions or their tensions with community autonomy. Likewise, the Anthropocene is presented as a common global challenge, with minimal discussion of critiques advocating for different perspectives like the *Capitalocene* or *Plantationocene*.[1] A more thorough examination of these alternative framings may have broadened the book's theoretical scope. These are not missed opportunities so much as reflections of the book's orientation: it is committed to building bridges between heritage scholarship and global governance frameworks rather than scrutinizing those frameworks from a critical distance. Readers particularly attuned to decolonial or political-economic critiques may therefore find some of the book's commitments aspirational rather than analytically rigorous.

For scholars (including myself) approaching the volume from critical heritage studies,[2] the handbook may appear to adopt a more normative than analytical orientation. The more radical critiques of UNESCO's heritage regimes, including their epistemological foundations and institutional asymmetries, receive comparatively limited attention. Nevertheless, these reservations coexist with the recognition that the handbook offers something quite exceptional: a combination of institutional overview, theoretical synthesis, and empirical diversity that will be indispensable for students, policymakers, and researchers engaged with the 2003 UNESCO ICH Convention. In sum, this is a convincing and ambitious volume that succeeds in presenting intangible cultural heritage as a dynamic and socially significant field of practice. Its most original contribution lies in its overarching insistence—articulated clearly by Wulf and echoed by many contributors—that heritage must be understood as a living, embodied, and future-oriented set of practices rather than as a fragile residue of the past. While not all readers will agree with its normative commitments, the handbook will undoubtedly become a key reference for anyone working on ICH, sustainability, and the cultural politics of the Anthropocene. It will be an important resource for quite a broad audience, including graduate students in cultural

studies, heritage practitioners, and policymakers who need a state-of-the-art and theoretically informed picture of the first two decades of the Convention.

Notes

1. For the "Capitalocene" framing, see the collection edited by Jason W. Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. For the "Plantationocene," see Donna Haraway, Anna Tsing, and the debates introduced in Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, which foreground the plantation as a historical ecology shaping contemporary global inequalities.

2. Foundational texts include Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (Routledge, 2006), which argues that heritage is shaped by an "Authorized Heritage Discourse"; and Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (Routledge, 2013), which outlines the political, epistemological, and institutional dynamics underpinning heritage classification systems.