

# Untangling Tangible & Intangible Cultural Heritage

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In the world of cultural heritage, the tangible, such as built heritage and artifacts, has historically been favoured. But since the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (<http://www.mun.ca/ich/home/>), the intangible is making strides in the heritage sector. More than 150 countries have signed on to the Convention. Canada is not one of them, but Newfoundland and Quebec (see <http://www.mun.ca/ich/home/> and <http://patrimoinevivant.qc.ca/cqpv/>) have implemented the Convention at a provincial level with inspiring results which set an example and pave the way for other provinces to follow suit.

**What is it?** Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is the official UNESCO term, but it goes by many names. Since the nature of intangible cultural heritage itself is nebulous, it can be referred to in many different ways. It can be called folklore, which is what I call it, since I am a folklorist. It is commonly called living heritage, as has been adopted by Heritage Saskatchewan and defined in *Living Heritage and Quality of Life: Reframing Heritage Activity in Saskatchewan* by Sandra Massey (2012).

UNESCO defines intangible cultural heritage as “traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.” Furthermore, ICH is: “traditional, contemporary and living at the same time; inclusive; representative; and community-based” (see [www.unesco.org/culture/ich/](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/)).

I like to distill it down to one word: **story**. A story can be a folktale, a tall tale, a recipe, or a method of harnessing a team of horses. It can be an oral history, a verse from a folk song, a memory about a building, or the steps in a square dance. A story entertains, but it also instructs. All cultures and all peoples have stories. When many stories come together, we can weave a larger narrative of a particular place, a particular people, a particular culture.

**What is the difference between tangible and intangible heritage?** With the growing emphasis on ICH, there is the possible consequence of reducing tangible heritage’s importance. What must be remembered is that the two are inseparable. The intangible resides within the tangible, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. Within every building, threshing machine, china teacup, hammer stone, and recipe book

there are embedded narratives. We can easily study objects and buildings based on the tangible alone: this is what it was made of, this is how it worked, this is its design. But to truly capture the meaning of any item of material culture, the heritage enthusiast must ask more questions. Who used it, and *how*? What is its story?

In intangible heritage, there is rarely a complete absence of the tangible. Even in the most intangible of all, oral narratives, there are always references to items of material culture. Sometimes these items are so localized to a particular place, profession or circumstance that an outsider would be hard pressed to understand the items referred to. Sometimes in folktales objects or buildings contain the key to unravelling the plot: the enchanted castle, the cursed talisman, and so on. When we listen to an elder tell the story of his/her life, s/he will inevitably speak about buildings in which s/he lived, worked, and played, and of the objects with which s/he went about life's tasks. When we watch a person, for instance, create perogies from memory, the way she learned from her grandmother, we watch which tools and ingredients she uses, and how she uses them.

It is all interconnected.

**Why is it important?** As outlined in detail in Massey's *Living Heritage and Quality of Life*, it leads to more connected communities and more fulfilled individuals, with all of the benefits therein, such as improved mental and physical health. It creates connections between people and communities. As each offers their interpretation of what a place means to them, the potential is created to forge or strengthen ties between historically disparate groups. It opens the door to interpreting the past in a new way, understanding how it endures in the present, and allowing us to conceive of a future which is more sustainable, more rooted in place, and more inclusive. Perhaps first and foremost, the study of ICH salvages and protects those aspects of our identity that, since they are so often taken for granted or left undocumented, are most vulnerable to the rapid changes in society.

**What can we do next?** What are the consequences for heritage in Saskatchewan? The way forward lies in a more holistic view of heritage, in better integration between the tangible and the intangible. This is already happening. The development of the Saskatchewan Ecomuseums Initiative (<http://heritagesask.ca/resources/saskatchewan-ecomuseum-project>) and the recent launch of the Qu'Appelle Valley Ecomuseum (<http://www.saskculture.ca/news/2014/12/17/quappelle-valley-ecomuseum-officially-launched>) is a primary example of this work beginning to take root in Saskatchewan. The potential to explore our collective intangible cultural heritage is limitless. The landscape is a shifting web of built heritage, tangible objects, remembrances, memories, narratives. Stories, all.