



Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Cultural heritage is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations¹.

Generally, the cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples is considered in two ways, with each strongly interconnected to each other, and to Country, both broadly or specific to a locality or place. These are:

Tangible heritage includes buildings and historic places, monuments, artifacts, etc., which are considered worthy of preservation for the future. These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specific culture.

Objects are important to the study of human history because they provide a concrete basis for ideas, and can validate them. Their preservation demonstrates recognition of the necessity of the past and of the things that tell its story². Tangible cultural heritage has a physical presence.

Intangible heritage includes 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, food and medicine heritage and digital heritage³. Tangible cultural heritage is commonly defined as not having a physical presence.

Processes and actions of colonisation have resulted in disruptions to the referencing, practice, transmission and provenance of tangible and intangible Indigenous cultural heritage. For example, tangible Indigenous cultural heritage items have been collected and removed from their context, "Country", for many purposes, including display in museums. In many cases, no detail about the location or owners of these cultural heritage items was recorded.

Similarly, Indigenous people's intangible cultural heritage has often been poorly understood or disregarded as "too difficult" to properly acknowledge or record in terms of its context, purpose or the persons or places from where it first became known.



For example, a possum-skin cloak, made “on Country” in 2017, has designs painted upon it to represent a key creation story of a particular family group living in, and connected to, a specific area of Country in Victoria. The cloak itself, and any materials used to make the cloak or designs on the cloak (ochre, charcoal, tanning agents, sewing materials, etc.) form the tangible cultural heritage components of the cloak, as they are physically present.

However, the designs painted and burnt on the cloak form a unique representation of a “story of Country” which is of deep significance to the people living in or connected to the place where it originates. Stories may also have important significance to broader areas of Country, and may overlap or interconnect, sometimes over great distances, to contribute to or build a much larger story.

The recounting and transmission of stories ensures that designs and processes for representing stories of Country are carefully managed and protected. The non-physical process of creating or recreating the designs to tell a story of Country on the cloak includes processes to trust, status, kinship, intention and rights given to tell the story.

This is the intangible Indigenous cultural heritage of the cloak, as these processes have no physical form, but are crucial in its production. These are the continuous knowledge systems that Indigenous peoples hold as sacred connections to land and culture. The tangible and intangible Indigenous cultural heritage aspects of the cloak are inseparable, but can be seen as distinct aspects of the design and production of the cloak, and support each other to tell a unique and owned story of Country and its peoples.

Recognising and providing acknowledgement of tangible and intangible Indigenous cultural heritage as an influencer for your research or design is critically important. Indigenous peoples and communities have internal processes for determining ownership and rights with regard to particular tangible and intangible cultural heritage processes and practices. These processes are deeply connected to and reflective of Indigenous people’s relationship to Country, and form part of the “rules” or protocols of living “on Country”.

Often the ownership or rights to these cultural heritage processes is earned by individuals or groups of Indigenous people over a long period of time, and may represent a person’s status, kinship or the respect with which they are regarded



within their family, community or in Indigenous communities more broadly.

Being given consent to utilise or draw upon cultural heritage processes or content is seen by many Indigenous peoples and communities as an act of deep trust or respect, and carries with it the responsibility to ensure that agreements for its use, acknowledgement of ownership, for example, to Elders as knowledge holders, and for outcomes are explicit.

The recording and acknowledgement of ownership of any aspects of tangible and intangible Indigenous cultural heritage is critically important in ensuring your research or design properly accounts for any content which may impact Indigenous peoples or communities rights to manage, control and transmit their cultural heritage.

Acknowledging, recording and reporting key information, with consent, ensures that the exchange of information between researchers, designers and Indigenous peoples and communities regarding cultural heritage is demonstrable and transparent. It also helps to ensure that the context, purpose or intent of Indigenous peoples' or communities' tangible and intangible cultural heritage is preserved, appropriately represented and authentically presented.

1 UNESCO 2003 Working Definitions

2 UNESCO 2003 Working Definitions

3 UNESCO 2003 Working Definitions