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**Sharing Cultures 2009 – International Conference on Intangible Heritage,
Pico Island, Azores, Portugal, 29 May – 1 June.
Graham Busby, University of Plymouth**

The Azores stretch four hundred miles from Flores in the west to Santa Maria in the east; this conference was held on Pico, an island not overly endowed with hotels in Maddalena (there's just the Caravelas) which necessitated many of the delegates travelling thirty or forty minutes by boat each day from Horta on Faial: how common is this for a conference? Sitting next to Chun-Hsi Wang (National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan) on the boat began to make this reporter aware that two days travel was nothing compared to the journeys made by some – reinforced not long after by sitting next to Guido Pigliasco (University of Hawaii) for the Opening Session held in the... town hall. Congratulations to Professor Sergio Lira and the Green Lines Institute for bringing nearly one hundred delegates to the middle of the Atlantic and utilising local facilities. The Saturday and Sunday parallel sessions were held in the recently built Elementary School, adding another facet of community involvement – and only a few minutes' walk from the nearest part of the UNESCO World Heritage Site 'Pico Island Vineyard Culture'.

In the opening plenary session, Emeritus Professor Susan Pearce (University of Leicester) stated that she has been told to be 'provocative' in her comments; for some, she clearly was. Her presentation was titled 'Material Matters' – the argument being that, traditionally, matter is 'bad' and temporal vis à vis the intangible being creative and spiritual. She suggested that from the Greeks, through the Enlightenment and Descartes, mind was perceived as active, matter as passive and, hence, the former superior. The 1964 and 1972 UNESCO charters were seen to favour those cultures with distinctly tangible heritage; hence, with the 2005 UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage, material-based specialists like Pearce were faced with a double assault: product without matter and the material culture needed to be seen as an integrative component. An excellent example was shown, namely a Pitt-Rivers Museum artefact label... whereby the labels have become museum pieces! Indeed, the audience were advised that postcards of these labels are now available,

said to be “a narrative of a narrative”. Susan Pearce emphasised the importance of context to any display; in response to what happens when humans accumulate objects, she showed a slide of one of the bedrooms at the National Trust’s Calke Abbey, a fairly-well known image of what the trust acquired from the Harpur-Crewe family in just one bedroom: stag’s head on bed and other objéts competing for space; as she emphasised, the genesis of the collections at Calke has shown the importance of self-definition: value accrues because of collections.

Other slides illustrated how objects become imbued with symbolic value, leading to the conclusion that there is no distinction between tangible and intangible heritage – Susan Pearce said she “hoped the dualism between mind and matter has been dissolved”. To follow this up, a number of slides of the human brain were marshalled to emphasise that all the neural processes are actually ‘material’!

Plate 1



Photo courtesy of the author

Pico island summit (2,351 metres) above the clouds, from Horta harbour on Faial

The “implications are massive... our aesthetic sense must be material – not spiritual. I put it to you that intangible heritage is a mirage!” Not surprisingly, there was a *hubbub...*

Plate 2



Photo courtesy of the author

Pico town hall, venue for opening sessions.

As per usual in any conference report, the following offers but a glimpse of the numerous papers; indeed, the volume of proceedings runs to 676 pages in 10 point font! Myriam Jansen-Verbeke (KU Leuven, Belgium) offered a fascinating view of ‘Territorial embedding of intangible heritage and cultural tourism’; she argued that “dissociation of intangible heritage from its original territorial roots does not necessarily imply disappearance... (leading) to adaptation to another context in place and time” (Jansen-Verbeke 2009:303); one of the examples being cited was the success of the Jazz in Marciac Festival in the French Pyrenees. The festival was established as the result of a ‘bottom up’ desire by one man to create interest in a village threatened with rural depopulation; it has become a catalyst for the tourism development of an attractive venue in an area with a rich cultural heritage including

local gastronomy and historic buildings – the links between intangible and tangible heritage are dynamic for there was no jazz tradition.

Plate 3



Photo courtesy of the author

Elementary school, Maddalena, Pico:

recently-constructed classrooms used for parallel conference sessions

Tony Seaton (University of Bedfordshire, UK) gave an entertaining presentation entitled 'Badarse Melbourne: national identity and cultural myths of the heroic and transgressive in recent thanatouristic representations of Australian heritage'. As with other conference presentations in the past, Tony always delivers something that is both academic and enjoyable! What a pity that his paper was not finished in time for the volume of proceedings. He emphasised just how thanatouristic Melbourne tourism can be: see all the memorabilia associated with Ned Kelly and visit the prison. Whether this is the representation many local residents wish seems to be another matter.

Plate 4



Photo courtesy of the author

Dr Wanda George with her book *Rural Tourism Development – Localism and Cultural Change* at the conference, 30 May 2009 (examples of island crafts in background)

Yiping Li (University of Hong Kong) presented a truly fascinating résumé of ‘red tourism’ in China; this initiative was established as recently as 2004, by the central government, in order “to stimulate a collective nostalgia among the Chinese people for the communist past and (to) sustain the CCP’s supreme rule in China” (Li & Hu 2009:310). Indeed, red tourism seems to be viewed as a strategic driver for economic growth in areas associated with the communist revolution which also happen, in the majority of cases, to be areas that have not seen dramatic improvements in living standards. Serious financial input appears to have occurred; China National Tourism Administration documentation for 2007 indicates that 1.86 billion RMB (US\$274 million) has been made available to support over one hundred and eighty red tourism-related projects including transportation, water and power supplies. What was more intriguing than this was the assertion that private sector investment was encouraged and nearly 60 million RMB had flowed into projects. Perhaps, not surprisingly, the figures given for domestic red tourism arrivals were

also dramatic. From a conceptual perspective, Li & Hu (2009:315) argued that the “interpretation of ‘red tourism’... may have only initiated a misplaced search for ‘authenticity’”. Without doubt, it would appear that red tourism is but a political strategy to aid consolidation of CCP single party rule.

An interesting location and a fascinating conference organised by Professor Sérgio Lira and Green Lines Institute. Next year it's in Evora, Portugal
(www.heritage2010.greenlines-institute.org)

References

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