Nicole Revel (ed.)


In cultures across Southeast Asia, there exists a remarkably rich oral heritage of epic songs and ballads. The launching by UNESCO, in 2003, of the International Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage lent added impetus to scholarly efforts to record and preserve these masterpieces of oral literature, which are now increasingly vulnerable to loss or ruptures of transmission. This book brings together papers from an international conference on Southeast Asian epic traditions, “Songs of Memory: Safeguarding Cultural Heritage at the Turn of the 21st Century”, which was held in January 2011 at Ateneo de Manila University. It is part of an ambitious and long-running research programme, spearheaded by Nicole Revel, to document and preserve the remarkably rich epic traditions of Southeast Asia. Revel herself, who has done decades of field research on Palawan epics, had first conceived the idea of a multimedia archive of epics and ballads as long ago as 1987 and, with the aid of many collaborators in the Philippines, this has now become a reality (the website, hosted by Ateneo University, can be viewed at: http://epics.ateneo.edu/epics; it contains records from 15 different communities). While many of the book’s chapters focus on indigenous Filipino traditions, the inclusion of others concerning Indonesia, the Malay world, and mainland Southeast Asia provide a wealth of comparative materials that promise to enrich our understandings of the epic form.

The book is divided into three parts. The first of these contains conceptual essays about the idea of intangible heritage and its place in today’s world. The opening chapter by Fernando Zialcita raises some thought-provoking issues about the relationship between tangible and intangible heritage, pointing out that intangible heritage often plays a vital role in providing the cosmological and relational context that gives the tangible heritage its meaning. The maintenance of UNESCO-designated tangible heritage sites might seem more straightforward than the preservation of the intangible, but it can by no means be taken for granted, for tangible heritage too is subject to decay as its social context changes in the face of 21st century pressures. For instance, the maintenance of the famous Ifugao rice terraces becomes increasingly problematic when young people move away or become reluctant to take up the farming life. *Hudhud* epic chants, sung by women during the rice harvest, take this landscape as their setting and “vivify” it with their dramatic narratives. Over the past few decades, young people also lost interest in this tradition, though now a revival is taking place. For all its fragility, therefore, Zialcita urges us to understand that “the
intangible ensures that the tangible will endure” (p. 15), for conservation cannot succeed if the object loses its meaning.

Chapter 2, by Leovino Garcia, draws on Ricoeur to discuss the ethical implications of narratives and the creative powers of language. Epic texts draw upon lived experience to create a work of the imagination, which in performance exerts a transformative power over the imagination of the listener, while at the same time conveying moral messages. Nicole Revel, in Chapter 3, compares the archive of a culture’s epic narratives, held in memory by the bards, to a “treasure chest” (baul) of oral literature. A multimedia archive can provide a new tool to counteract the corrosive effects of globalisation and “help us to struggle against the forces of oblivion and destruction” (p. 28). She discusses in particular the “pathways”, soundscapes and vividly visualised climactic moments summoned into being by Palawan bards in their performance of epic narratives. The stories “allude to historical events in a non-precise but authentic manner” (p. 40), often taking as their themes the formation of marriage alliances and adat customs. Her chapter further provides details of all the communities whose epics have been entered into the Philippine multimedia archive already mentioned above.

The four chapters of the second part of the book each deal more specifically with the music and voice of a particular epic tradition: Maria Christine Muyco writes on the Panay Bukidnon of Western Visayas, the Philippines; Dana Rap-poport analyses modes of speech and song in the rituals of the Toraja of South Sulawesi, Indonesia; Manolete Mora discusses the ritual context of T’boli epic songs; while Rosario Bona de Santos del Rosario deals with the Ifugao genres of hudhud and alim. Part Three focuses on the art of interpretation, and includes chapters by Maria Stanyukovich on the Ifugao, Jacques Ivanoff on the Moken of the Mergui archipelago, Aone van Engelenhoven on shared mythical narratives of Southwest Maluku and Timor Leste, Brandon Reilly on Philippine epics of the early Spanish period, and Muhammad Haji Salleh on the renowned Malay epic of Hang Tuah.

All of these chapters provide rich ethnographic materials; since there is no space here to do justice to the contents of each of them, let me highlight just a few threads of comparative interest that are woven through the book. Epic performances typically take place at night, and often in the context of rituals. In tune with the relative gender equality of Southeast Asian societies generally, we find here examples of both male and female performers and ritual specialists, as well as some transgender performers. There are many points in common across the chapters, concerning the aesthetic and moral qualities of the narratives, the sense of play and of flow, the transformative powers of performance carried out in a ritual context (which may itself be