The theme Diverse Communities – Intangible Heritage aimed to encompass all the many ways that communities engage with and value their heritage from the past, in the present and into the future. The theme sought to connect place, people, nature and cultural practices rather than defining them as separate domains. It also asked what is heritage today and how does it connect communities across and within the diversity of the Pacific region in terms of stories, experiences, practices, needs and futures.

There were three sessions within this theme, one chaired by Wayne Johnson and two chaired by Alex Yen – a total of 8 presentations – across many topics and countries and cultures.

At this Conference, intangible cultural heritage walked hand in hand with our concerns about climate change – and the impacts on the lives and cultures of the diverse communities of the Pacific and beyond.

Intangible heritage was framed for us in several ways – the first way was through words or phrases that encompass the complex connections between people, cultural and place expressed – for example - as a sense of place in Simon Molesworth’s opening keynote, “vanua” in Fiji –people, culture (language, traditions, identity), ecosystems, the land – whenua in Aotearoa, and the Australian Indigenous concept of Country.

Intangible cultural heritage was also defined in terms of the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage – as cultural practices, traditions, knowledge and so on. So there were at least two notions of intangible heritage active at the Conference – one that is based on the tangible / intangible duality and the other about connectivity – sense of place, vanua, whenua, Country and many other expressions.

Intangible heritage was interwoven throughout so many presentations rather than being separated and that at this Conference it was seen as being at the very heart of all heritage.

There were some wonderful presentations in the Diverse communities – Intangible Heritage theme that brought the diversity of communities and the importance of their heritage to the fore. Several presentations in Theme 3 shared the ways that communities were participating in documenting and transmitting their intangible heritage – we learnt how cultural mapping is now embedded in heritage programs and strategies in Taiwan as part of the fifth C; about kastom skul in Vanuatu – a learning program on traditional culture – one of two presentations on language – with our presenters advocating that language is more than a vehicle for intangible cultural heritage – it is an intangible cultural heritage in itself. I noted the phrase ‘language is a library of traditional knowledge’ – and a key part of identity.

1 kastom is a pijin word used to refer to traditional culture, including religion, economics, art and magic in Melanesia, and skul meaning school.
We know that so many languages globally are at risk of becoming moribund, without enough speakers to ensure their future. The other language presentation highlighted current efforts to track down recordings and catalogue them through PARADISEC – Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Service in Endangered Cultures.

In relation to urban settings we heard from New Zealand / Aotearoa colleagues about the Te Aranga Design Principles – a cultural landscape strategy and approach to design thinking and making which incorporates a series of Maori cultural values and principles\(^2\). And from our Mexican colleagues about their research into visitors’ perceptions on the urban aspect, city image and visiting heritage during festival days.

Historical research and objects formed the basis of two other presentations: one on the 1875 Chevert Expedition demonstrated the value and interconnection and disconnections between two knowledge systems – scientific and traditional Torres Strait. The other presentation highlighted some aspects of a shared heritage between colonial Sydney and the Pacific which contributed to the development of modern society in the region.

On Day 2, the keynote address on Theme 3 – by Frances Koya-Vaka’uta - Pacific Heritage for what and whom? Reflections on the relationship between custodianship and sustainability – was a powerful call to us all to really understand how some ways of thinking continue to colonise and appropriate the cultures and expressions of others.

Our journeys in Theme 3 certainly took us far afield – to Sydney and other parts of Australia, across the Pacific, even to Mexico, and I thank our presenters for these wonderful journeys into their places, their communities, cultures and ways of seeing and engaging with the world.

The presentations in this themes were linked by the common thread of recording and retaining cultural identity, and its particular importance to the diaspora of cultures that are, or will become, scattered as a result of technological changes of the colonial and post-colonial Pacific, or through the looming climate changes that have been a dominant concern of the conference in general.

Throughout the Conference we were also challenged to think about our roles as people who work with heritage – the centrality of intangible heritage and community demonstrated at this conference – is something that I will take home with me – along with the extraordinary challenge of climate change where the very connectivity between people, place and culture – the connectivity that makes a people the people they are – is at risk.

Some words that I will take home with me from our theme are that ‘their stories are our stories’. Like the themes in this conference all our stories are interconnected

Chris Johnston

\(^2\) For more, look up the Auckland Design Manual.