

Tarot Reading as Living Heritage: Documenting Contemporary Rider Waite Smith Practice in the UK

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Abstract

Tarot has been used in the UK for many years and is typically categorized as either commercial entertainment or as personal belief. As such, this paper explores the use of Tarot readings with the Rider Waite Smith deck, as intangible cultural heritage: a live practice developed through the repeated actions of the practitioner, social learning and community support.

Using my position as Coordinator of a community led documentation process for the proposed Rider Waite Smith Tarot Reading Practice, which will be submitted for inclusion in the UK Living Heritage Inventories; I describe a model for documenting a current cultural practice as a form of living heritage, that does not reduce it to institutional categories, authenticity testing or single historical narratives.

The documentation process does not represent Tarot as a static body of esoteric knowledge but instead documents it as a flexible cultural technology: a common visual vocabulary and conversational device used by individuals for purposes of self-reflection, creating stories and developing creative ways of making sense of their experiences. The paper provides a context for the process of heritage documentation as a political and ethical process, and raises questions related to issues of authority, representation and who has the final say over what constitutes heritage.