



Intangible Cultural Heritage



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



Intangible
Cultural
Heritage



What is Intangible

We share cultural expressions that have been passed from one generation to another, have evolved in response to their environments and contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity...

UNESCO and cultural heritage

There are things that we regard as important to preserve for future generations. They may be significant due to their present or possible economic value, but also because they create a certain emotion within us, or because they make us feel as though we belong to something – a country, a tradition, a way of life. They might be objects that can be held and buildings that can be explored, or songs that can be sung and stories that can be told. Whatever shape they take, these things form part of a heritage, and this heritage requires active effort on our part in order to safeguard it.

The term 'cultural heritage' has changed content considerably in recent decades, partially owing to the instruments developed by UNESCO. Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also 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.



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Cultural Heritage?

UNESCO, which is the only specialized agency within the United Nations system with a specific mandate in culture, assists its Member States in the elaboration and implementation of measures for an effective safeguarding of their cultural heritage. Among those measures, the adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was a major step for developing new policies in the field of cultural heritage.

🎵🎵🎵🎵 *Albanian Folk isopolyphony*

🎭🎭🎭 *The Carnival of Binche, Belgium*

🎵🎵 *The Duduk and its Music, Armenia*

🗨️ *Oral and graphic expressions of the Wajapi, Brazil*

🏠 *Mosaic floor in Meknes, Morocco*

Intangible Cultural Heritage

While fragile, intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.

The importance of intangible cultural heritage is not the cultural manifestation itself but rather the wealth of knowledge and skills that is transmitted through it from one generation to the next. The social and economic value of this transmission of knowledge is relevant for minority groups and for mainstream social groups within a State, and is as important for developing States as for developed ones.

Intangible cultural heritage is:

- **Traditional, contemporary and living at the same time:** intangible cultural heritage does not only represent inherited traditions from the past but also contemporary rural and urban practices in which diverse cultural groups take part;
- **Inclusive:** we may share expressions of intangible cultural heritage that are similar to those practised by others. Whether they are from the neighbouring village, from a city on the opposite side of the world, or have been adapted by peoples who have migrated and settled in a different region, they all are intangible cultural heritage: they have been passed from one generation to another, have

Photo © Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Colombia



Photo © UNESCO / Yves Parfait Koffi



🌐 The Carnival of Barranquilla, Colombia

🌐 The Oral Heritage of Gelede, Benin, Nigeria and Togo

Intangible cultural heritage depends on those whose knowledge of traditions, skills and customs are passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or to other communities...



evolved in response to their environments and they contribute to giving us a sense of identity and continuity, providing a link from our past, through the present, and into our future. Intangible cultural heritage does not give rise to questions of whether or not certain practices are specific to a culture. It contributes to social cohesion, encouraging a sense of identity and responsibility which helps individuals to feel part of one or different communities and to feel part of society at large.

■ **Representative:** intangible cultural heritage is not merely valued as a cultural good, on a comparative basis, for its exclusivity or its exceptional value. It thrives on its basis in communities and depends on those whose

knowledge of traditions, skills and customs are passed on to the rest of the community, from generation to generation, or to other communities;

■ **Community-based:** intangible cultural heritage can only be heritage when it is recognized as such by the communities, groups or individuals that create, maintain and transmit it – without their recognition, nobody else can decide for them that a given expression or practice is their heritage.

📍 *The Bistritsa Babi – Archaic Polyphony, Dances and Rituals from the Shoplouk Region, Bulgaria*



Photo © Chinese Academy of Arts

📍 *Kun Qu Opera, China*

📍 *The Ahellil of Gouara, Algeria*



Photo © CNRPAH



Photo © Mila Samirova



Photo © National Museum of Cambodia

In **Cambodia** a Khmer shadow theatre featuring leather work puppets, the *Sbek Thom*, takes place three or four times a year on specific occasions and has evolved from being a ritualistic activity in the fifteenth century to becoming an artistic form in the present day.



Photo © UNESCO/Latvian Folk Centre

The Baltic Song and Dance Celebrations in **Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania** maintain and develop the region's tradition of performing folk art. Large-scale festivals lasting several days take place every fifth year in Estonia and Latvia and every fourth year in Lithuania providing a showcase for up to 40,000, mainly amateur, singers and dancers.



Photo © Ministère de la Culture de Madagascar

The Zafimaniry communities of **Madagascar** have developed and continue to practise their knowledge and skills revolving around wood, from forestry to building to the elaborate ornamental sculpting of practically all wooden surfaces whether decorative features or functional objects such as tools.



Photo © Lorenzo Amendariz

In most regions of **Mexico**, communities commemorate the temporary return to Earth of deceased relatives and loved ones on *el Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead). These festivities, which fuse pre-Hispanic religious rites with Catholic feasts, take place at the end of October to the beginning of November each year also marking the annual cycle of the cultivation of maize, the country's biggest food crop.



Photo © JK Walumbi

Barkcloth making in **Uganda** involves some of humankind's oldest knowledge, a prehistoric technique that predates the invention of weaving. Barkcloth is mainly worn at coronation and healing ceremonies, funerals and cultural gatherings, but is also used for curtains, mosquito screens, bedding and storage. With the introduction of cotton cloth by Arab caravan traders in the nineteenth century, production slowed and barkcloth's cultural and spiritual functions diminished, until its revival in recent decades.

Safeguarding a living heritage

Just like culture in general, intangible heritage is constantly changing and evolving, and being enriched by each new generation. Many expressions and manifestations of intangible cultural heritage are under threat, endangered by globalization and cultural homogenisation, and also by a lack of support, appreciation and understanding. If intangible cultural heritage is not nurtured, it risks becoming lost forever, or frozen as a practice belonging to the past. Preserving this heritage and passing it on to future generations strengthens it, and keeps it alive while allowing for it to change and adapt.

In order to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, we need different measures from the ones used for conserving monuments, sites and natural spaces. For intangible to be kept alive, it must remain relevant to a culture and be regularly practised and learned within communities and between generations.



Photo © CULTIVAT

📍 The Al-Sirah Al-Hilaliyyah Epic, Egypt

📍 The Samba de Roda of Recôncavo of Bahia, Brazil



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Communities and groups who practise these traditions and customs everywhere in the world have their own systems for transmitting their knowledge and skills, usually dependant on word of mouth rather than written texts. Safeguarding activities must therefore always involve the communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that bear such heritage.

There is a risk that certain elements of intangible cultural heritage could die out or disappear without help, but how can we safeguard and manage a heritage that is constantly changing and part of 'living culture' without freezing or trivializing it? Safeguarding them is about the transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. In other words, safeguarding focuses on the processes involved in transmitting, or communicating intangible cultural heritage from generation to generation, rather than on the production of its concrete manifestations, such as a dance performance, a song, a music instrument or a craft.

Safeguarding means making sure that intangible cultural heritage remains an active part of life for today's generations that they can hand on to tomorrow's. Safeguarding measures aim at ensuring its viability, its continuous recreation and its transmission. Initiatives for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage might include identifying and documenting such heritage, research, preservation, promotion, enhancement or transmission of it – particularly through formal and non-formal education – as well as revitalizing various aspects of it.

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is also an important source of economic development, though not necessarily through income-generating activities like tourism, which may damage living heritage. Instead, the focus should be on enhancing the functions of intangible cultural heritage within society and promoting its mainstreaming in economic policy planning.



Intangible cultural heritage includes 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.



Photo © National Institute of Folk Culture (NVLK)



Photo © Institute of Culture and Information of Vietnam



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🌀 *The Space of Gong Culture, Viet Nam*

🌀 *The Oral Heritage of Gelede, Benin, Nigeria and Togo*

🌀 *The Arts of the Meddah, Public Storytellers, Turkey*



Photo © National Commission of Turkey for UNESCO

A Convention for international recognition

As a driving force of cultural diversity, intangible cultural heritage has received international recognition and its safeguarding has become one of the priorities of international cooperation.

The Convention adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in 2003 is the first international treaty to provide a legal, administrative and financial framework to safeguard this heritage. A Convention is an agreement under international law entered into by States and that establishes rights and obligations between each party and every other party.

The 2003 Convention aims at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage that is in step with international agreements on human rights and that meets requirements of mutual respect among communities and of sustainable development.

At a national level, the Convention calls for the safeguarding of the intangible heritage present on a State's territory. Among other things, it also asks each State to identify and define such heritage with the participation of communities, groups and relevant non-governmental organizations.

All States that have ratified the Convention meet in a General Assembly that elects the 24 members of an Intergovernmental Committee in charge of promoting the Convention's aims and monitoring its implementation. Among other things, the Committee makes decisions about which intangible heritage should be inscribed on the lists of the Convention, about providing international financial assistance or disseminating good safeguarding practices.

When an element is found on the territory of more than one State Party, the State Parties concerned are encouraged to jointly submit multinational nominations.

If selected by the Intergovernmental Committee, the intangible cultural heritage element will be inscribed on the List of the Intangible Cultural heritage in Need of Urgent safeguarding, or on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The Urgent Safeguarding List is the most important list since it aims at taking appropriate safeguarding measures for those intangible cultural heritage expressions or manifestations whose viability – that is whose continuous recreation and transmission – is threatened. Inscribing an element on the Representative List is done in order to ensure its visibility and awareness of its significance and to encourage dialogue, thus reflecting cultural diversity worldwide and testifying to human creativity.

The Committee also publishes and updates a register of programmes, projects and activities that it has selected as best reflecting the objectives and principles of the Convention. These programmes, projects or activities may serve as safeguarding examples and be disseminated as good practices.

Although only governments from States Parties to the Convention can nominate intangible cultural heritage elements for the Committee to consider, the proposal must be made with the full participation and consent of the community or group concerned.

🌀 *Slovácko Verbůnk, Recruit Dances, Czech Republic*

Where do we start?

Just as monuments and works of art are identified and collected, intangible cultural heritage can also be gathered and recorded. In fact, for a State, the first step in safeguarding it is to identify those expressions and manifestations that can be considered intangible cultural heritage and making a record, or inventory, of them. These inventories may then serve as basis for developing safeguarding measures for the manifestations and expressions of the intangible cultural heritage included, and described, in the inventory. The communities themselves must take part in identifying and defining their intangible cultural heritage: they are the ones who decide which practices are part of their cultural heritage.

Inventories of the intangible cultural heritage should include all kinds of expressions, no matter how common or rare they are, how many or how few people in the community take part in them, or how much of an effect or influence they have in that community. It might also be advisable to think about what intangible cultural heritage is most under threat or under the greatest pressure. Indeed, how widespread the manifestations and expressions are, how many participate in them and how much of an impact they have will be noted in inventories in order to show how weak or strong each of them is. Since intangible cultural heritage is constantly subject to changes, inventories should be regularly updated.

The Convention supports the efforts of its States Parties (countries that have ratified the Convention) in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. States Parties can submit requests for international assistance to the Intergovernmental Committee for the safeguarding of the heritage inscribed on the Urgent Safeguarding List, for the preparation of inventories and for the support for programmes, projects and activities.



Photo © Museo del Hombre Dominicano

➤ *The Cultural Space of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos of Villa Mella, Dominican Republic*

➤ *The Patum of Berga, Spain*



Photo © Mamel Escobet / Giru / UNESCO

➤ *The Polyphonic Singing of the Aka Pygmies of Central Africa*

A group of young men, likely from a traditional African community, are captured in a dynamic pose. They are shirtless and wearing traditional loincloths made of light-colored, possibly animal skin or plant material, which are tied around their waists and hang down. They are also wearing beaded or feathered anklets. The men are standing on a dirt ground, and the background is filled with lush green foliage, suggesting a natural, outdoor setting. The lighting is bright, highlighting the textures of their clothing and the intensity of their expressions. The overall scene conveys a sense of cultural tradition and community activity.

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Intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.