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**UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC, SCIENTIFIC AND  
CULTURAL ORGANIZATION (UNESCO)**

**PRESERVING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

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*“Finally, to be able freely to build one’s identity, drawing on various cultural sources, and to be able to develop one’s heritage in a creative way are the foundations of a peaceful and sustainable development of our societies. This is an essential issue, and a challenge for the future: integrating culture into a global vision of development.”*

Message from the Director General of UNESCO on World Day for Cultural  
Diversity for Dialogue and Development, 21 May 2018

“That the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil[sic] in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern ”

Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization, accepted 16 November 1945

“Recognizing that the processes of globalization and social transformation, alongside the conditions they create for renewed dialogue among communities, also give rise, as does the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage, in particular owing to a lack of resources for safeguarding such heritage ”

Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 17 October 2003

## COMMITTEE BRIEF

### **Introduction**

A primary challenge in the fight to preserve intangible cultural heritage is inherent in the name. Intangible cultural heritage is rarely something people can look at, like a work of art or a historic building. More often, when the international community refers to something as being part of an intangible cultural heritage, it is frequently referencing things like specific skills and cultural features that are passed on from generation to generation, such as certain fishing techniques among Aleut and Inuit persons in the Arctic Circle, Japanese *washoku* cooking<sup>1</sup>, or the *Cante Alentejano*, a genre of polyphonic choral singing unique to the south of Portugal.<sup>2</sup>

But how, exactly, can these things be preserved? As they are not artifacts that can be placed into a museum behind a glass case, they are often forgotten when discussing the preservation of historical landmarks. Yet, their preservation is just as important, and necessary, to ensure that this information is passed on from generation to generation. After all, every great work is dependent upon the intangible skills and techniques used to create said masterpiece. The need for protection is universal, as every culture has intangible heritage that it wishes to preserve and protect. For example, Cambodian traditional dancing, which survived the brutality of the Khmer Rouge<sup>3</sup>, French cuisine<sup>4</sup>, the tango in Argentina and Uruguay<sup>5</sup>, and even traditional Traveler tinsmithing in rural Ireland.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reuters, “Michelin-Starred Japanese Chef Fears Loss of Simple, Traditional Food” May 13, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Eli Gottlieb, “In Portugal, a Land Finely Aged Like Wine” *New York Times* January 16, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Seibert, “Dancing Well is the Best Revenge” *New York Times* April 4, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Glusac, “In Transit: As if Reason Were Needed to Celebrate French Food” *New York Times* September 11, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Itzkoff, “The Morning Feed” *New York Times* September 30, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Holland, Kitty. 2019. “One of Ireland’s Last Tinsmiths Wonders Who Will Carry on the Tradition after Him.” *The Irish Times*. July 18, 2019.

## One Man's Heritage ...

As part of its mandate to help build inclusive societies throughout the world, UNESCO is uniquely situated to work with its member states and their individual communities to preserve and protect elements of heritage. To this effect, UNESCO drafted the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003, which set out to define what exactly intangible cultural heritage is. UNESCO thereby defined intangible cultural heritage as:

[...] the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts [sic] and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.<sup>7</sup>

Within this definition, UNESCO dictates that the manifestations of this heritage – in other words, the ways this heritage can be shown in a tangible manner – can include the use of languages, physical demonstrations, the performing arts and manufacturing techniques. For example, the Argentine tango has been listed as an example of intangible cultural heritage, as it is something that must be demonstrated or explained rather than put into a display case. The preservation of the tango could take the form of diagrams showing the dance steps required to execute the tango properly, classes where the tango is taught, films of expert dancers performing the tango, and so on. At the time of this writing, the tango is one of 630 elements of intangible cultural heritage recognized by UNESCO for protection and preservation.<sup>8</sup>

## The Act of Preservation

Preserving task-based elements of cultural heritage can take many different forms. Videographers and anthropologists can work together to record a master craftsman as they perform their task, allowing future generations to watch the video and learn from it. Some member-states, like Japan, actively find individuals in their territories that represent the idea of "living cultural heritage" – people who are some of the last remaining individuals capable of doing certain things, like specific types of art (both performance and visual). UNESCO sets specific guidelines on how one can be deemed an example of "living cultural heritage", such as ensuring that the person or persons nominated has the appropriate skills, and the ability to pass down these skills. This ensures progress towards UNESCO's eventual goal of the "perpetuation and development of their knowledge and skills" among subsequent generations.<sup>9</sup>

Intangible cultural heritage can also refer to language on the brink of dying out. UNESCO estimates that nearly 43 percent of the world's languages are either under

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<sup>7</sup> UNESCO, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003," 2003, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>.

<sup>8</sup> —, "Lists of intangible cultural heritage and Register of best safeguarding practices," n.d., <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>.

<sup>9</sup> —, "Guidelines for the Establishment of National 'Living Human Treasures' Systems," n.d., <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/00031-EN.pdf>.

moderate to severe threat of becoming extinct – or have already vanished.<sup>10</sup> With the advent of the internet and other ubiquitous technologies, as well as increases in globalization and trade, so-called common languages like English, French and Chinese are becoming more widely spoken as first, second or third languages, much to the detriment of other, more regional languages, like Dutch, Irish, or Swedish, which have little utility outside of national borders. This is exacerbated by a lack of support for some smaller languages by companies like Apple, who refuse to offer support to languages like Icelandic, seeing the cost as not worth the gain. A language cannot survive if speakers need to use another language to communicate digitally.<sup>11</sup>

Technology is not always a harbinger of doom for languages under threat, however. For example, some linguists and scholars in lesser-spoken languages have worked tirelessly to use technology to spread their languages more widely and to preserve knowledge in those languages. A classic example of this is the efforts to create multiple, localized versions of Wikipedia, a free encyclopedia. Speakers of Breton, a dialect of French, began working on a Breton-based Wikipedia more than a decade ago to serve the language's some 200,000 speakers; they hope that its continued development will encourage people to continue to speak the language and learn about it. Similarly, efforts have been made to translate pieces of software into Māori, an indigenous language of New Zealand, both to expose older Māori speakers to technology, and to provide burgeoning speakers with a way to practice their skills through a medium they are already familiar with.<sup>12</sup>

In order to assist in preservation, UNESCO relies on sending facilitators throughout the world to help collect information and examples of this intangible cultural heritage. Working with both local facilitators and with trained, peripatetic officials, UNESCO aids local museums, nongovernmental organizations and others in order to record and preserve various kinds of intangible cultural heritage. Facilitators come from all over the world and are trained to operate in a variety of languages, but even so, more assistance is needed to ensure facilitators can reach more places throughout the world; at present, only 141 facilitators are under UNESCO's full time employ, and they are expected to handle cases all over the world.<sup>13</sup> Member states must understand the importance of the “boots on the ground” perspective provided by facilitators, and their ability to seek out and identify intangible cultural heritage.

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<sup>10</sup> Moseley, Christopher (ed.). 2010. Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, 3rd ed. Paris, UNESCO Publishing, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000187026>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/04/24/digital-devices-snub-icelandic-language-which-is-a-problem-for-iceland/>

<sup>12</sup> Welfringer, Laura, "Disappearing languages get lifeline from technology," *Global Journalist*, 12 January 2015, <http://globaljournalist.org/2015/01/disappearing-languages-get-lifeline-technology/>

<sup>13</sup> UNESCO, "Global network of facilitators," <https://ich.unesco.org/en/facilitator>.

## Funding Projects

As part of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, member-states agree to participate in a contribution fund that helps pay for UNESCO's operations in preserving intangible cultural heritage. As this fund is strictly voluntary, however, member-states are not compelled to donate any percentage of monies to the fund to ensure its solvency. Similarly, those who do choose to contribute to the fund can choose to cease contributing at any given time. Their contributions, which are to be made at least once every two years, may take place at any given time – or at no time at all.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, countries are timely about contributing into this fund, with most contributing at least part of what is due by the end of each calendar year. In 2018-2019, expenditure overtook donations, marking the first time the fund has run at a loss. This is compounded with 42% of member states not paying their contributions as of December 31st 2019.<sup>15</sup> A further 28 countries have made additional, voluntary contributions to this fund,<sup>16</sup> out of the 180 who have ratified the Convention.<sup>17</sup>

Because there is no mandatory contribution system in place, or an enforcement mechanism for those countries who are in arrears, UNESCO also looks to outside sources for contributing to the fund, or assisting the agency in its efforts. UNESCO has established a series of so-called Category 2 centers, located throughout the world, where elements of cultural heritage from the region are cultivated and displayed for the public to see. With these centers, UNESCO hopes that public awareness for these parts of intangible cultural heritage can increase as more people are able to enjoy them for themselves.<sup>18</sup> UNESCO has also partnered with the Quai Branly Museum, although other plans for museum collaboration appear to be shelved at the moment.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, UNESCO partners with media organizations throughout the world to share information about parts of intangible cultural heritage that may be of interest to their audiences, and to provide representatives for interviews. This work has only borne two partnerships, however, both of which have expired as of the time of this writing.<sup>20</sup>

Another avenue taken by UNESCO is private partnerships, such as one 2004 partnership with South Korean economic juggernaut Samsung, which funded everything from texts on intangible cultural heritage to the very website that hosts the text of the resolution.<sup>21</sup> Compounding issues with UNESCO's public relations is the confusing layout of their website. More funding partners are mentioned, with no additional information given. An improvement to UNESCO's web presence may be needed to increase awareness on the issues at hand.

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<sup>14</sup> UNESCO, "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2003."

<sup>15</sup> "Working document of General Assembly on the use of the Fund for 2020/2021: LHE/20/8.GA/7 Rev," [https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/LHE-20-8.GA-7\\_Rev.-EN.docx](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/LHE-20-8.GA-7_Rev.-EN.docx)

<sup>16</sup> "The Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund" <https://ich.unesco.org/en/intangible-cultural-heritage-fund-00816>

<sup>17</sup> "The States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003)" <https://ich.unesco.org/en/states-parties-00024>

<sup>18</sup> —, "Category 2 centres under the auspices of UNESCO," n.d., <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/Category2>.

<sup>19</sup> —, "Partnerships with museums," n.d., <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00441>.

<sup>20</sup> —, "Partnerships with media," n.d., <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00500>.

<sup>21</sup> "UNESCO-Samsung Partnership for the Intangible Cultural Heritage", <https://ich.unesco.org/en/samsung-00113>

## Case Study- Óró Sé Do Bheatha Abhaile (Welcome Home)

Despite Ireland's status as a tourist destination, and its reputation as a peaceful land of scholars, it has been a conflict zone at least in some form or another from 1167 to 1998, with occasional flare ups taking place since. Six of the thirty-two historical Irish counties are disputed with the United Kingdom, and as these six suffered the most from colonialism, they now suffer from widespread ethnic and religious conflict. Although there has been an answer to the 32 county debate since the 1998 signing of the Good Friday Agreement, tensions are still high.<sup>22</sup> The Gaelic language and Irish culture had persisted until the 18th century in all but the northeasternmost counties, but in the 1700s was stamped out by a combination of religious, economic, and political factors, especially the Wolfe Tone led Rebellion of 1798. This decline led to a wave of bilingualism, which was hurried on by the great famine of the late 1840s.<sup>23</sup>

In response to this decline, writers such as Pádraig Mac Piarais, Peadar Ua Laoghaire, and Pádraic Ó Conaire launched the Gaelic Revival movement in the late 1800s,<sup>24</sup> with many Gaelic organizations following shortly after, such as the Conradh na Gaeilge (Gaelic League) in 1893, which advocated for Gaelic activism and the promotion of the Gaelic language.<sup>25</sup> Another key organization founded in the Gaelic Revival is the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)<sup>26</sup> in 1884, which to this day preserves several traditional Irish sports, such as Rounders, Irish Handball, Irish Football, and Hurling, a sport that best can be described as full contact lacrosse, but everyone has a baseball bat instead of a netted stick.

Despite these efforts, the Gaelic language has faced a steep decline, especially with pressures from globalization. It is thought that the last monolingual Gaelic speaker, the storyteller and fisherman Seán Ó hEínirí, died in 1998.<sup>27</sup> Daily use of the Irish language has been reduced to the Gaeltacht, a small group of areas in rural Ireland. There have been efforts to encourage an increased use of the Irish language, however, including mandatory Irish classes in all schools, and total immersion schools that only teach in Irish except for English class. Even with these policies, many young people in Ireland still regard Irish as a pain to learn, and outdated in the modern world.<sup>28</sup>

Even with the decline of the Gaelic language, Irish culture continues to rise in popularity. From Halloween to Riverdance, Irish culture has come to prominence in many countries, with an Irish pub being a constant in almost every city one travels to. As of writing, Liam has been the most popular boys name in America since 2017, and in the top three since 2013.<sup>29</sup> Ireland has three Irish works of culture inscribed on the Intangible Cultural Heritage listing. These include the sport of Hurling, Irish Harp playing, and

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<sup>22</sup> "A BRIEF HISTORY OF "THE TROUBLES""

<https://emu.edu/now/peacebuilder/2009/02/a-brief-history-of-the-troubles/>

<sup>23</sup> "A Brief History of the Irish Language"

<https://cnag.ie/en/info/...irish...irish.../36-a-brief-history-of-the-irish-language.html>

<sup>24</sup> "Gaelic Revival" <https://exhibits.library.villanova.edu/jack-butler-yeats/revival>

<sup>25</sup> "Gaelic League" <https://exhibitions.lib.udel.edu/easter1916/home/gaelic-revival/gaelic-league/>

<sup>26</sup> "Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)"

<https://exhibitions.lib.udel.edu/easter1916/home/gaelic-revival/gaelic-athletic-association-gaa/>

<sup>27</sup>  Monolingual Irish Speaker [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UP4nXIKJx\\_4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UP4nXIKJx_4)

<sup>28</sup> "The slow decline of Irish as a living language"

<https://www.mayonews.ie/comment-opinion/townland-ales-2/38219-the-slow-decline-of-irish-as-a-living-language>

<sup>29</sup> "Top 5 Names in Each of the Last 100 Years" <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/top5names.html>

Uilleann piping (an instrument similar to bagpipes with a less harsh, more smooth tone).<sup>30</sup> As Ireland only ratified the treaty in 2015, there may be more submissions yet. Ireland's National Inventory contains over 80 submissions, ranging from traditional sheepherding to the playing of the carillon bells of the Cobh Cathedral.<sup>31</sup> While Ireland must make strides to recover its language, its practices of supporting intangible cultural heritage both at home and abroad is admirable.

Ireland's story is an example of a postcolonial nation that has worked to protect its endangered languages and intangible cultural heritage, even in the face of globalization and technological revolution. However, further action is needed, and member states must realize that Ireland is not a best case scenario. Ireland is instead only a goal to reach on the pathway to true heritage preservation.

## **Conclusions**

Despite the work undertaken to diversify contributions, more work can be done. With only one museum taking part in UNESCO's efforts so far, more national museums can be enlisted to assist in the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. Additionally, many of these museums may have already undertaken efforts to preserve such that would meet UNESCO's criteria, allowing the organization to further identify pieces of cultural heritage that have been protected. Similarly, continued development of public-private partnerships may help supplement the fund UNESCO uses to finance its initiatives; if technology firms or other nongovernmental organizations are working to make sure certain elements of intangible cultural heritage endure, it may be worth UNESCO's time and efforts to see whether collaborations can be fostered. Even in examples as small as the ringing of an Irish cathedral's bells, those that live there see culture. A broadening of what can be admitted into the registry may prove necessary for ensuring the preservation of culture in the long term.

There are also more efforts UNESCO and its partners can undertake to improve the education and the awareness of these specific elements. By providing educational curricula to primary and secondary schools about national, regional or supranational cultural elements, students can gain an increased knowledge of them, which could lead to their willingness to want to protect them as they mature. Culture is shared among every inhabitant of this place we call Earth. Member states must ensure that elements of this global cultural tapestry do not die out, proud cultures fading away into obscurity. With technological advancement comes new risks and challenges, but also tremendous leaps forward in global cultural awareness and archival ability. Cultural immortality is now conceivable, but it will be up to organizations such as UNESCO to ensure it is attainable.

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<sup>30</sup> "UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage"  
<https://www.dfa.ie/prep/paris/unesco/unesco-in-irish-life/intangible-cultural-heritage/>

<sup>31</sup> "National Inventory of ICH" <https://nationalinventoryich.chg.gov.ie/national-inventory/>



## **Resource Review**

### **United Nations Documents:**

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage." 17 October 2003.

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/convention>

The originator of Intangible Cultural Heritage in UNESCO, this convention is the backbone of all subsequent efforts to protect and enhance intangible cultural heritage. It laid out everything from the payment structure, to parliamentary procedure and the process of getting cultural heritage on the list.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Register of good safeguarding practices". Continuously Updated. <https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists>

Although this list is not in traditional document formatting, it is still invaluable as it is a comprehensive, easy to access, and continuously updated list of all recognized elements of intangible cultural heritage, with accompanying data analytics and statistics.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE FUND Statement of assessed contributions for the period 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2021". <https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/55755.pdf>

This 8 page spreadsheet contains exact data on the current payment status of contributor countries, and how either delinquent or ahead they are, along with the date of last payment. Note that all amounts are in USD, and numbers are in accounting format, where negative numbers are expressed in parentheses, not with a negative sign Ex: \$(100) instead of \$-100

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Non-Governmental Organizations accredited to provide advisory services to the Committee".

<https://ich.unesco.org/en/accredited-ngos-00331>

A 217 strong list of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) accredited by UNESCO to advise with proceedings. With participating NGOs from around the world, it is a comprehensive collection, featuring a multitude of various cultures and activities, with relevant information including specialization and the age of an NGO.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "Category 2 centres under the auspices of UNESCO". <https://ich.unesco.org/en/category2>

This list of UNESCO Category 2 centers summarizes each UNESCO associated category 2 organization and its parent country. The organization's scope, and participating countries are listed, along with various reports collected by said organization. The list appears comprehensive, but as the listed meetings in the sidebar stop in 2017, more research should be done.

**Guiding Questions:**

What forms of intangible cultural heritage does your government and/or your population wish to preserve at this time? Has your government petitioned UNESCO for the appropriate designation of Intangible Cultural Heritage? If not, does your government plan to do so in the near future?

What are the most appropriate roles for national governments in preserving intangible cultural heritage? What are the most appropriate roles for civil society partners, including academic institutions and universities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as historical preservation societies, and business leaders in preserving intangible cultural heritage?

Has your country contributed to UNESCO's voluntary contribution fund for preserving intangible cultural heritage? How might more countries be persuaded to contribute and/or increase existing contributions to this voluntary fund

Does your country have any elements of intangible cultural heritage under protection? What steps have been undertaken to preserve them?

Do any of your country's national or private museums take part in preservation efforts for anthropological elements?

Do any nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations in your country work to preserve intangible cultural heritage? Are there institutes of higher education that also work to this effect?