



Intangible Cultural Heritage



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Intangible  
Cultural  
Heritage



Photo © Luis Santoro / UNESCO



Photo © Fernando Bugman / UNESCO

# Questions and answers about... intangible cultural

📍 *The Samba de Roda of Recôncavo of Bahia*

📍 *The Uyghur Muqam of Xinjian, China*



Photo © Yoshi Shimizu/www.yoshi-shimizu.com

📍 *The Mask Dance of the Drums from Drametse, Bhutan*

## **What is intangible cultural heritage?**

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. While these may not be tangible – they cannot be touched – they are a very important part of our cultural heritage. This is intangible cultural heritage, a living form of heritage which is continuously recreated and which evolves as we adapt our practices and traditions in response to our environment. It provides a sense of identity and belonging in relation to our own cultures. As the world changes, modernisation and mechanisation are part of this living process – in many

cases they might even assist and promote creativity. However, people still play the key role in the creation and carrying forward of intangible cultural heritage.

Communities, collectively, are the ones who create, carry and transmit intangible cultural heritage. A community might share an expression of such heritage that is similar to one 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, all are intangible cultural heritage as they have been passed from one generation to another, have evolved in response to their environments and contribute to giving each community its sense of identity and continuity. Sharing similar heritage promotes respect and understanding of the other and reinforces social



Photo © UNESCO / Yves Parfait Koffi

📍 The Oral Heritage of Gelede, Benin, Nigeria, Togo



Photo © Malawi National Commission for UNESCO

📍 The Gule Wamkulu, Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia



Photo © Fured al Gauri

📍 The Song of Sana'a, Yemen

# heritage

cohesion. Learning about different forms of intangible cultural heritage also promotes respect for others and intercultural dialogue.

## 'Protecting' or 'safeguarding'?

To be kept alive, intangible cultural heritage must be relevant to the community, continuously recreated and transmitted from one generation to another. There is a risk that certain elements of intangible cultural heritage could die out or disappear without help, but safeguarding does not mean protection or conservation in the usual sense, as this may cause intangible cultural heritage to become fixed or frozen. 'Safeguarding' means ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, that is ensuring its continuous recreation and transmission. Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage is about the transferring of knowledge, skills and meaning. It focuses on the processes involved in transmitting, or communi-

cating it from generation to generation, rather than on the production of its concrete manifestations, such as dance performances, songs, music instruments or crafts.

The communities which bear and practise intangible cultural heritage are the people best placed to identify and safeguard it. However, outsiders can help with safeguarding. For instance, they can support communities in collecting and recording information on elements of their intangible cultural heritage, or transmit knowledge about the intangible cultural heritage through more formal channels such as education in schools, colleges and universities. Promoting information about intangible cultural heritage through media is also a way to support its safeguarding.

Intangible cultural heritage should nevertheless not always be safeguarded, nor be revitalized at any

cost. As any living body, it follows a life cycle and therefore some elements are to disappear, after having given birth to new forms of expressions. It might be so that certain forms of intangible cultural heritage are no longer considered relevant or meaningful for the community itself. As indicated in the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, only intangible cultural heritage that is recognized by the communities as theirs and that provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, is to be safeguarded. Any safeguarding measure must be developed, and applied, with the consent and involvement of the community itself. In certain cases, public intervention to safeguard a community's heritage is not even desirable, since it may distort the value such heritage has for the community itself. Moreover, safeguarding measures must always respect the customary practices



Photo © Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts

- 🌀 *The Royal Ballet of Cambodia*
- 🌀 *The Al-Sirah al-Hilaliyyah, Egypt*
- 🌀🌀 *The Wayang Puppet Theatre, Indonesia*
- 🌀🌀🌀 *The Azerbaijani Mugham*



Photo © CULTNAT

governing the access to specific aspects of such heritage, which might, for instance, be the case when dealing with sacred or secret intangible cultural heritage manifestations.

### **Why should we safeguard it?**

Intangible cultural heritage is important as it gives us a sense of identity and belonging, linking our past, through the present, with our future. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities also helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life. Intangible cultural heritage is of both social and economic importance. It aids social cohesion and helps individuals to feel part of a community and of society at large.

The value of intangible cultural heritage is defined by the communities themselves – they are the ones who recognise these manifestations as part of their heritage and who find it valuable. The social value of intangible cultural heritage may, or may not, be translated into a commercial value. The economic value of the intangible cultural heritage for a specific

community is twofold: the knowledge and skills that are transmitted within that community, as well as the product resulting from those knowledge and skills. Examples of its direct economic value may be the consumption by the community of traditional pharmacopeia, instead of patented medicines, the commercial use of its products, such as selling the tickets for a performance, trading in crafts or attracting tourists.

However intangible cultural heritage does not only have a direct economic value resulting from the consumption of its products by the community itself or by others through trade. By playing a major role in giving the community its sense of identity and continuity, it supports social cohesion, without which development is impossible. This indirect value of intangible cultural heritage results from the knowledge transmitted, often through informal channels, the impact it has in other economic sectors and from its capacity to prevent and resolve conflict, which is a principal burden for development.

How much is lost if an annual festival that attracts people from outside the

community does not take place this year? How much would be necessary to teach the community the knowledge and skills that allowed them to jointly organize the festival and perform in it? How much is lost if a traditional water or land management system for agriculture is distorted by short-term benefits-oriented market systems?

The cost of depriving communities of their intangible cultural heritage is the economic damage produced when the direct or indirect economic values disappear, or the community's social cohesion and mutual understanding is under threat. The erosion or interruption of the transmission of the intangible cultural heritage might deprive the community of its social markers, lead to marginalization and misunderstanding, and cause identity fallback and conflict.

### **Why UNESCO?**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) is the United Nations' specialized agency working within the fields of education, social and natural sciences, culture and communication to promote international cooperation



in these fields in order to ensure a more peaceful world. To achieve this, UNESCO performs several different roles. It acts as a laboratory of ideas and a standard-setter to forge universal agreements on emerging ethical issues. It also serves as a clearinghouse to spread and share knowledge while helping its 193 Member States and 6 Associate Members to build their human and institutional capacities. UNESCO, as the only specialized agency within United Nations with a specific mandate in culture, is working to create the conditions for dialogue based upon respect for shared values and encourages international cooperation. The Organization has been working for over 60 years in the field of intangible cultural heritage, which culminated with the adoption in 2003 of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

### **Why a Convention?**

The adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by the General Conference of UNESCO in 2003 is the result of long standing efforts by UNESCO's Member States to provide a legal, administrative and financial framework to safeguard this

heritage. As a treaty, the Convention is an international agreement concluded between states in written form and governed by international law. States that ratify the Convention express their consent in being bound by its provisions. By doing so, they become States Parties to the Convention and enjoy all the rights and assume all the obligations included within the Convention.

The main purposes of the 2003 Convention are to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, to ensure respect for it, to raise awareness about its importance and to provide for international cooperation and assistance in these fields. The Convention focuses on the role of communities and groups in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage and is concerned with processes and conditions rather than products, placing emphasis on living heritage that is performed by people, often collectively, and mostly communicated through living experience. It deals with heritage that communities deem important, and strives to contribute to the promotion of creativity and diversity, to the well-being of communities, groups, and

society at large, enabling a peaceful development and living together.

### **How does the Convention work?**

The Convention proposes a set of measures to be implemented at the national and international level.

At a national level, the Convention calls for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage present on a State's territory. It requests each State to identify and define such heritage with the participation of communities, groups and relevant NGOs. States shall draw up, and regularly update, inventories of the intangible cultural heritage. The Convention also proposes several safeguarding measures as well as measures aimed at raising awareness, building up capacities and promoting educational measures in the field of intangible cultural heritage.

At an international level, all States that have ratified the Convention meet in the General Assembly of the States Parties to the Convention every two years. The General Assembly gives strategic orientations for the implementation of the Convention and elects the 24 members of the



Photo © Achille Le Pera / UNESCO



Photo © M. Revelard



Photo © Angéline Vignany / UNESCO

Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which meets every year to promote the aims of the Convention and monitor its implementation.

One of the functions of the Committee is to prepare and submit to the General Assembly for approval Operational Directives to guide the effective implementation of the provisions of the Convention. The General Assembly adopted the first Operational Directives in June 2008, and will continue to complete and revise them in future meetings. Among other things, the Operational Directives indicate the procedures to be followed for inscribing intangible cultural heritage on the lists of the Convention, the provision of international financial assistance, the accreditation of non-governmental organizations to act in an advisory capacity to the Committee or the involvement of communities in implementing the Convention.

**How can intangible cultural heritage be internationally recognized under the Convention?**

The Convention aims at safeguarding intangible cultural heritage that is in

line with international agreements on human rights and that meets requirements of mutual respect among communities and of sustainable development. 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.

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 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.

The Urgent Safeguarding List is the most important 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.

Inscription on the Representative List aims at contributing to ensuring visibility and awareness of the significance of the intangible cultural heritage and to encouraging dialogue, thus reflecting cultural diversity worldwide and testifying to human creativity.

The increased visibility created by being inscribed on these lists may also help with recognizing and appreciating minority groups, and even boost the self-esteem and standing of communities and groups that bear and practise the intangible cultural heritage element inscribed. However, care must be taken to make sure this increased attention does not have a harmful effect on the intangible cultural heritage. For instance, increased tourism could have a distorting effect, as communities may change heritage to suit tourists' demands, or create differences among groups or



Photo © Anders Nyman

➔ *The Duduk and its Music, Armenia*

⚙️ *The Carnival of Oruro, Bolivia*

🎺 *The Gbofe of Afounkaha – the Music of the Transverse Trumps of the Tagbana Community, Côte d'Ivoire*

🎪 *The Carnival of Binche, Belgium*

🎭 *Opera dei Pupi, Sicilian Pastoral Songs, Italy*



Photo © UNESCO / Anahit Mirasyan

communities by recognizing one living expression and not another. There is also a danger of freezing heritage through a 'folklorisation' process or the quest for 'authenticity', or of the disregard of customs that govern access to secret or sacred information. Indeed, this could lead to a 'market value' being placed on the intangible cultural heritage instead of its cultural value, leaving it open to inappropriate commercial exploitation.

An element of the intangible cultural heritage cannot be inscribed on the Representative List and the Urgent Safeguarding List at the same time, since their purpose is different and other inscription criteria, as well as nomination procedures, apply for each of them.

### **Can religions or languages be recognized under the Convention?**

Though religions provide communities with a sense of identity and continuity, they are not included as such in the Convention. However, the Convention refers to cultural practices and expressions inspired by religions. For instance, social practices, rituals and festive events

are considered domains of the intangible cultural heritage by its Article 2. The Convention does not include language in itself or as a whole (grammar, vocabulary, syntax), but underscores that it is a fundamental vehicle for transmitting intangible cultural heritage. Oral traditions and expressions cannot exist without language. Moreover, almost all types of intangible cultural heritage – from knowledge about the universe to rituals and handicrafts – are linked or depend on language for their day-to-day practice and passing down from generation to generation.

### **What can States do for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage?**

As those who create intangible cultural heritage and keep it alive, communities have a privileged place in safeguarding it. Sometimes they may not have the power, or the means, to do this on their own. In this case the State, or agencies, institutions and organizations, might work with them to help safeguard their living heritage.

Through the Convention, States are being encouraged to assist safeguarding by drawing up and updating inventories,

which should include all elements of intangible cultural heritage within their territory. In doing so, they assess the intangible cultural heritage present in their territories, including the heritage in danger of disappearing, raise awareness about it, creating and renewing interest in it and, importantly, bringing new light to what should be an active, ever-changing form of living heritage. States are free to create their inventories in their own fashion. However, communities should be actively involved in the inventorying processes, and the intangible cultural heritage elements should be well defined in the inventories to help put into practice safeguarding measures.

States may also adopt legal, technical, administrative and financial measures aimed at ensuring access to the intangible cultural heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage, as well as measures aimed at creating or strengthening documentation institutions. Can documentation lead to freezing intangible cultural heritage? No, if it aims at showing the state of this heritage at the moment documentation is undertaken. If an element of intangible cultural



NORWEGIAN MINISTRY  
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

With the support of the Government  
of Norway

heritage is threatened and becomes endangered, the record will have to reflect the risks it encounters. Keeping track of living heritage is therefore vital, as possible threats can be quickly detected, and corrective measures put in place.

Moreover, States should ensure recognition of and respect for the intangible cultural heritage in society, in particular through developing educational, awareness-raising and information programmes, capacity building activities for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage and supporting non-formal means of transmitting knowledge.

### **Can I receive funding for safeguarding my intangible cultural heritage?**

Assistance requests can only be submitted by governments. A fund to finance programmes, projects and other activities was established under the 2003 Convention. In distributing funds, special attention is given to the needs of developing countries, particularly less developed countries.

The safeguarding of heritage included on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding and the creation of inventories are given special priority in the allocation of funds. The Fund is also used for providing emergency assistance, or for the participation in the sessions of the Committee of the members of communities and groups and of experts in intangible cultural heritage. All forms and procedures for requesting international assistance are available at [www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/forms](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/forms). UNESCO Secretariat at Headquarters and in the field, National Commissions for UNESCO and local authorities may provide further help in preparing the assistance requests.

### **Are intellectual property rights dealt with by the Convention?**

The Convention focuses on safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage – that is on ensuring its continuous recreation and transmission by identifying and defining the heritage itself – rather than on legally protecting specific manifestations through intellectual property rights, which at the international level falls mainly within the field of competence of the World Intellectual Property Organization. The Convention nevertheless states, in its Article 3, that its provisions may not be interpreted as affecting the rights and



### **Intangible Cultural Heritage**

obligations of States Parties deriving from any international instrument related to intellectual property rights.

Applying intellectual property rights with the current legislative framework is not satisfactory when dealing with intangible cultural heritage. Main difficulties are related to its evolving and shared nature as well as to the fact that it is often owned collectively. Indeed, as intangible cultural heritage evolves thanks to its continuous recreation by the communities and groups that bear and practise it, protecting a specific manifestation like the performance of a dance, the recorded interpretation of a song or the patented use of a medicinal plant may lead to freezing this intangible cultural heritage and hinder its natural evolution. Moreover, as the communities are the ones who create, maintain and transmit intangible cultural heritage, it is difficult to determine the collective owner of such heritage.



Photo © National Garifuna Council

📍 *Language, Dance and Music of the Garifuna, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua*



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



Intangible  
Cultural  
Heritage

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.