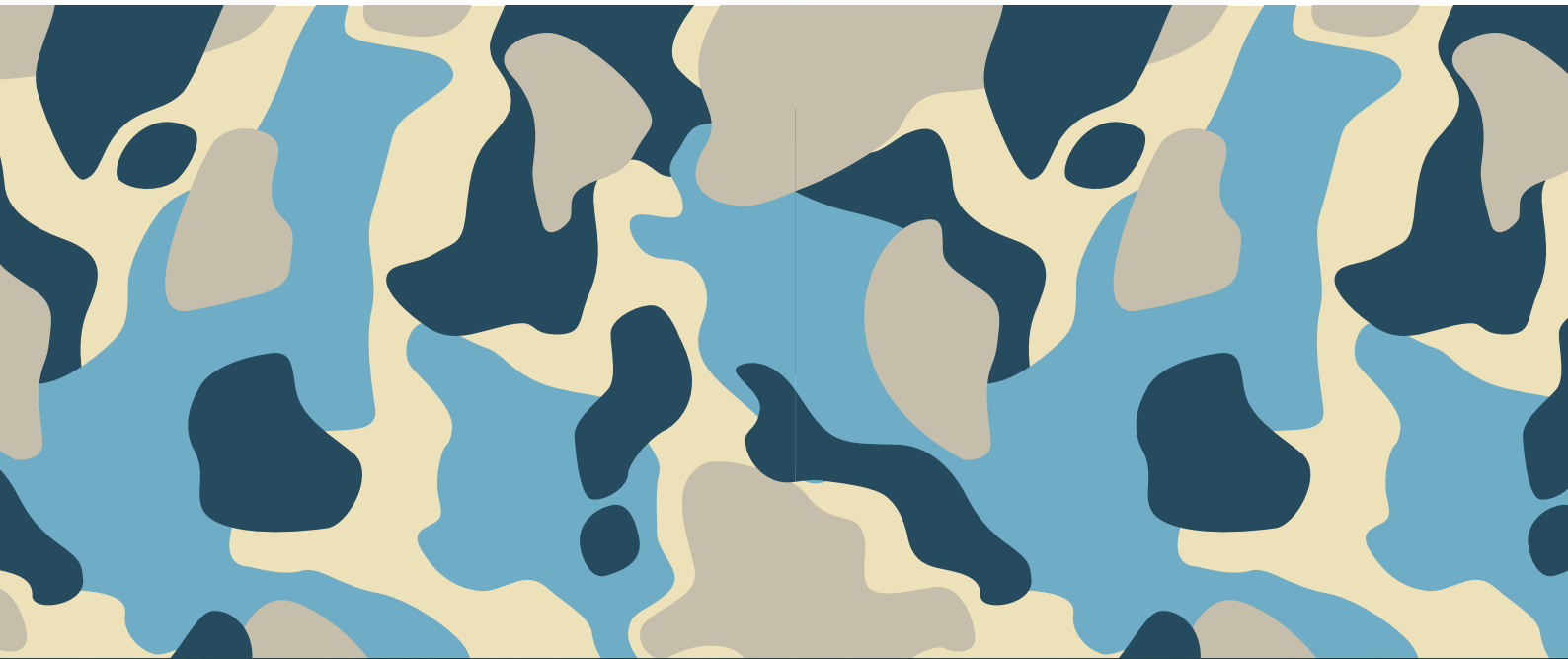
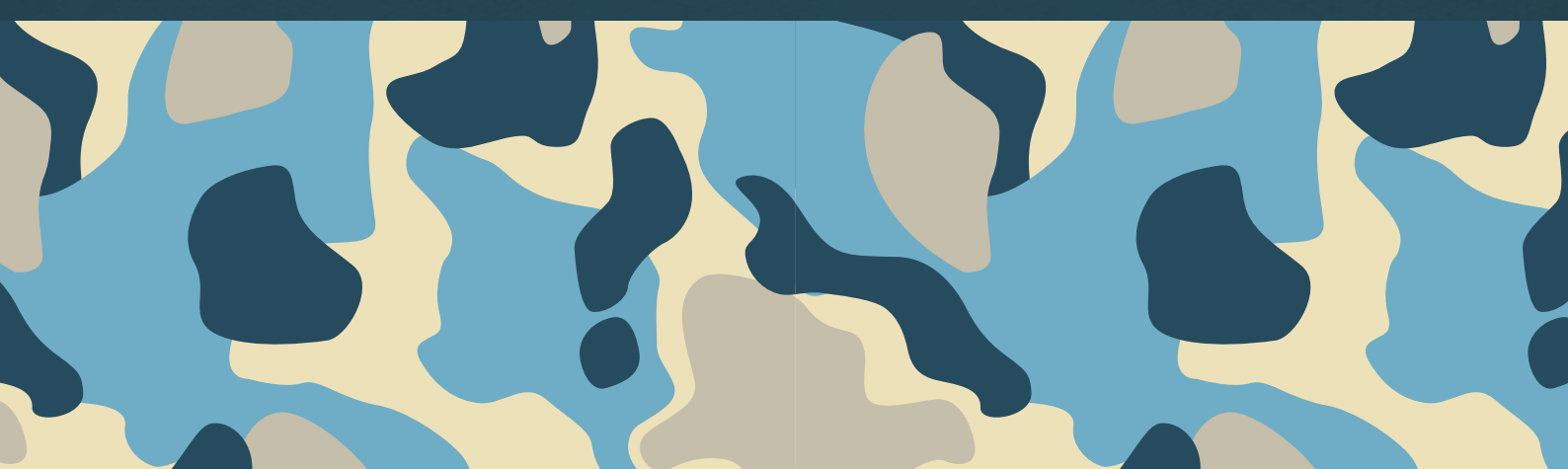
#HeritageAlive Special Edition



ICH and Armed Conflicts

Sharing Experiences from the Field

Eivind Falk **Editor-in-Chief**



ICHNGO FORUM
INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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#HeritageAlive

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Eivind Falk
Editor-in-Chief

Introduction

Eivind Falk
Editor-In-Chief

Just before Christmas in 2022, ten months after the brutal Russian invasion of Ukraine, a delegation of Ukrainian craftspeople came to Norway by bus to participate in a workshop with Norwegian craftsmen and women. The event was held at the local museum in the small town of Fredrikstad, Norway and was organized by the Ukrainian NGO *Democracy Through Culture* and the *Norwegian Crafts Institute*. It became a warm and wonderful meeting from which we all learned a lot. One of the main lessons learned was from one of the Ukrainian craftswomen, who explained that in the middle of this extremely challenging situation, traditional intangible cultural heritage (ICH) was blooming in Ukraine. Folksongs, playing bandura, preparing borsch, painting eggs in the traditional Pysanka-way had become more popular than ever before. She told me that when the soldiers, extremely tired, came back from the frontline for a short break, it was customary that they would join a pysanka class. Imagine the brave, tough warriors painting eggs before returning to the battlefield! This story demonstrates how we, in challenging situations, need our traditional culture more than ever before. It bonds us, provides us with identity, connects us with a community

and it creates dialogue, as it did between the Norwegian and Ukrainian craftspeople. Unfortunately, the armed conflict is still ongoing, and reflections and experiences from Ukraine are shared in two articles in this volume of #HeritageAlive: the first from Oleksandr Butsenko and Valentyna Demian of *Democracy Through Culture*, and the second from Mariia Levchenko of the *Berghof-Foundation*. Both articles clearly demonstrate the important role NGOs can play during armed conflicts.

In October 2024 the #HeritageAlive working group was invited to Istanbul to participate in a conference organized by the ICH NGO forum. After the #HeritageAlive presentation there was a strong request from the participants for the group to do something related to ICH and armed conflicts due to the dire situation in several places in the world, such as Palestine and Ukraine. The idea materialized, and in April 2025 we organized a webinar based on this theme. The webinar was held in cooperation with *NAKS Suriname*, the *Norwegian Crafts Institute* and the *Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage*.

I had the pleasure of assisting the Palestinian community and practitioners in their work on the inscription of their wonderful embroidery tradition. This art, which includes the practices, the skills, the knowledge and the rituals of Palestinian embroidery, was successfully inscribed on UNESCO Representative List for the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021. One of the main lessons learned from working on this inscription was that several of the practitioners concerned did not live in Palestine, but in other places such as refugee camps in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon. Yet, the embroidery tradition is vibrant and alive, and more important than ever before. Even if the land is occupied, people have lost their homes and are forced to live like refugees in another land, the living heritage cannot be erased. Living heritage is ingrained in our bodies and a part of our identity and DNA. I was therefore very happy when Sara Green from the NGO *Art for Refugees in Transition* suggested that she write about their program for refugees related to *Tatreez (Palestinian embroidery)*. She points out that the embroidery tradition is more than a craft technique, *"it's a symbol of resilience, heritage, and identity."* By embracing Tatreez, Palestinians are not only preserving their history but also making a statement about their ongoing connection with their homeland and their commitment to cultural survival.

The webinar in April 2025 on ICH and armed conflicts truly proved that this topic, unfortunately, is a very urgent one. Current conflicts in many countries - and large numbers of people who are internally and externally forced into displacement - call for immediate action. Working together with NGOs operating in the regions concerned, we collected case studies where ICH and armed conflicts were highlighted. These case studies provide several current examples of how war and other conflicts could have a huge impact on ICH and its bearers. At the same time we have witnessed how ICH could play an important and crucial role during armed conflicts. During the webinar these NGOs, from different parts of the world, shared their experience and reflections on ICH in armed conflicts.

After the webinar, the participants and the presenters expressed the need for #HeritageAlive to publish a special edition dedicated to ICH in armed conflicts. This publication is therefore based on the contributions from the webinar in April, in addition to a few added contributions from NGOs working in the regions concerned.

Hanna Schreiber from the *Association of Folk Artists* presents a different approach to the other authors. She participated in the first-ever conference and workshop that brought military forces, heritage specialists, NGOs and government officials together to examine the role of armed forces in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. Her article critically reflects on the outcome of that gathering. She then situates the outcomes in the framework of UNESCO's 2020 Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding ICH in Emergencies and the 2022 MONDIACULT Declaration. The military plays a crucial role in relation to cultural heritage. Valentyna Demian and Oleksandr Butsenko demonstrate this in their article, where they write:

> **"By August 2025, over 1500 historical and cultural monuments were completely or partially destroyed, especially in Kharkiv (336), Kherson (289), Odesa (179), Donetsk (173), and Kyiv (111) regions. Thousands of copies of books about Ukrainian culture and history in Ukrainian language were seized and deliberately burnt in occupied cities."**

Luckily not all armed conflicts are ongoing. However, there can also be huge challenges in a post-war situation. In Okello Quinto's article he explains how his NGO is working on the healing process *after* the war. *The Gulu Theater Artists* use traditional music, dance and drama to heal the wounds in the Acoli community. As Okello Quinto writes:

> **"We would like to prove that even great ideas can be conveniently communicated to everyone in a manner that is simple, interesting, friendly, familiar, attractive and affordable using songs, dance, poetry, drama and exhibitions, which all are part of a rich and entertaining culture."**

Sincere thanks go to all the NGOs who have been willing to share their experiences and reflections, to the always hardworking #HeritageAlive Editorial Board, and to our long-time partner, ICHCAP. For this publication we have also received an important contribution from ICHCAPs Haejee Park, who highlights the topic from a broader

perspective, a bit different from the other, and more hands-on articles. Allow me to thank Dr. Janet Blake, who has been one of the initiators of this important work. Thanks also to our current #HeritageAlive Editor-In-Chief, Dr. Rachel Gefferie, who asked me to make a comeback as the Editor-In-Chief for this special publication. Given the importance and the relevance of the topic, I was happy to accept the challenge. In previous publications of the #HeritageAlive journal, I have ended my introduction by asking the readers to enjoy the book, as the publications have been celebrations of ICH and the wonderful work that the NGOs do in the field. In this case, unfortunately, I cannot. This publication is different and is no celebration. This journal shares important experiences and examples about the important role of NGOs working with Intangible Cultural heritage - both during and after armed conflicts - in healing wounds and bringing people together. It shares experiences from refugee camps and from the communities concerned in the most difficult situations. More than ever, we need to be reminded of the wise first words of the UNESCO constitution "*Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed*". I wish this publication was not necessary. Unfortunately, it is.

Introduction

Eivind Falk
Editor-In-Chief

Juste avant Noël 2022, dix mois après la brutale invasion russe de l'Ukraine, une délégation d'artisans et d'artisanes ukrainiens est venue en Norvège en bus pour participer à un atelier avec des artisans norvégiens, au musée local de la petite ville de Fredrikstad. Cet événement, organisé par l'ONG ukrainienne Democracy through Culture et par le Norwegian Crafts Institute, fut une rencontre chaleureuse et inspirante dont nous avons tous beaucoup appris. L'un des enseignements les plus marquants nous est venu d'une artisane ukrainienne, qui a alors expliqué que, dans ce contexte extrêmement difficile, le patrimoine culturel immatériel traditionnel connaissait un renouveau sans précédent en Ukraine. Les chants populaires, le jeu de la bandoura, la préparation du bortsch, la peinture d'œufs selon la méthode traditionnelle pysanka devenaient plus populaires que jamais. Elle nous a raconté que lorsque les soldats revenaient du front pour une courte pause, épuisés, il était devenu courant qu'ils participent à un atelier de pysanka. Imaginez ces soldats courageux et aguerris peignant des œufs avant de repartir sur le champ de bataille ! Cette histoire illustre à quel point, dans les situations les plus éprouvantes,

nous avons besoin plus que jamais de notre culture traditionnelle. Elle nous relie, nous donne une identité, nous rattache à une communauté et crée du dialogue – comme ce fut le cas entre les artisans norvégiens et ukrainiens.

Malheureusement, le conflit armé se poursuit encore aujourd'hui. Dans ce numéro de #HeritageAlive, les réflexions et les expériences venues d'Ukraine sont partagées à travers deux articles : le premier, signé par Oleksandr Butsenko et Valentyna Demian de Democracy through Culture, et le second, par Mariia Levchenko de la Berghof Foundation. Ces deux contributions montrent clairement le rôle essentiel que peuvent jouer les ONG en temps de conflit armé.

En octobre 2024, le groupe de travail #HeritageAlive a été invité à Istanbul pour participer à une conférence organisée par le ICH NGO Forum. À la suite de notre présentation, de nombreux participants ont exprimé le souhait que nous abordions la question du patrimoine culturel immatériel en période de conflit armé, au vu de la gravité de la situation dans plusieurs régions du monde, notamment en Palestine et en Ukraine. L'idée a pris forme, et en avril 2025 nous avons organisé un webinaire consacré à cette thématique, en coopération avec NAKS Suriname, le Norwegian Crafts Institute et le Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage.

J'ai eu le privilège d'accompagner la communauté palestinienne et les praticiens dans leur démarche d'inscription de leur magnifique tradition de broderie. L'art de la broderie en Palestine — ses pratiques, ses savoir-faire, ses connaissances et ses rituels — a finalement été inscrit en 2021 sur la Liste représentative du patrimoine culturel immatériel de l'humanité de l'UNESCO. L'un des principaux enseignements de ce travail fut de constater que de nombreux artisans concernés ne vivaient pas en Palestine, mais dans des camps de réfugiés en Syrie, en Jordanie ou au Liban. Pourtant, la tradition de la broderie reste vivante et vibrante — plus importante que jamais. Même lorsque sous l'occupation, lorsque l'on a perdu son foyer et que l'on est contraint de vivre en exil, le patrimoine vivant ne peut être effacé. Il est ancré dans nos corps, fait partie de notre identité et de notre ADN.

J'ai donc été très heureux lorsque Sara Green, de l'ONG Art for Refugees in Transition, m'a proposé d'écrire sur leur programme destiné aux réfugiés autour du Tatreez — la broderie palestinienne. Elle souligne que cette tradition est bien plus qu'une technique artisanale : c'est un symbole de résilience, d'héritage et d'identité. En perpétuant le Tatreez, les Palestiniens ne se contentent pas de préserver leur histoire — ils affirment leur lien indéfectible avec leur terre et leur engagement pour la survie culturelle.

Le webinaire d'avril 2025 sur le PCI et les conflits armés a démontré combien ce sujet est, malheureusement, d'une actualité brûlante. Les conflits en cours dans de nombreux pays, et le grand nombre de personnes déplacées à l'intérieur ou à l'extérieur de leur pays, appellent une action immédiate. Avec les ONG actives dans ces régions, nous avons réuni plusieurs études de

cas mettant en lumière les interactions entre patrimoine culturel immatériel et conflits armés. Ces exemples montrent combien la guerre et les crises peuvent détruire le patrimoine vivant et bouleverser la vie de ses porteurs. Mais nous avons aussi constaté combien le patrimoine culturel immatériel peut jouer un rôle essentiel et constructif en période de guerre. Durant le webinaire, ces ONG venues du monde entier ont partagé leurs expériences et leurs réflexions sur le patrimoine culturel immatériel dans les contextes de conflit.

Hanna Schreiber, de l'Association of Folk Artists, a présenté une approche différente des autres auteurs. Elle a participé à la toute première conférence réunissant militaires, spécialistes du patrimoine, ONG et responsables gouvernementaux pour examiner le rôle des forces armées dans la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel. Son article propose une analyse critique des résultats de cette rencontre, qu'elle replace dans le cadre des Principes et modalités opérationnels pour la sauvegarde du PCI en situation d'urgence adoptés par l'UNESCO en 2020, ainsi que de la Déclaration MONDIACULT de 2022. Le rôle des forces armées dans la protection du patrimoine est crucial — comme le rappellent également Valentyna Demian et Oleksandr Butsenko :

> **« En août 2025, plus de 1500 monuments historiques et culturels avaient été totalement ou partiellement détruits, notamment dans les régions de Kharkiv (336), Kherson (289), Odessa (179), Donetsk (173) et Kiev (111). Des milliers d'exemplaires de livres sur la culture et l'histoire ukrainiennes ont été saisis et brûlés dans les villes occupées. »**

À l'issue du webinaire sur le patrimoine culturel immatériel et les conflits armés, les participants et intervenants ont exprimé le souhait que #HeritageAlive publie une édition spéciale consacrée à ce sujet. Cette publication repose donc sur les contributions du webinaire d'avril, enrichies de quelques autres articles d'ONG œuvrant dans les régions concernées.

Heureusement, tous les conflits armés ne sont pas permanents. Cependant, les défis demeurent immenses dans les situations d'après-guerre. Dans son article, Okello Quinto explique comment son ONG œuvre au processus de guérison après le conflit : les artistes du Gulu Theater utilisent la musique, la danse et le théâtre traditionnels pour panser les blessures de la communauté acoli. Comme il l'écrit :

> **Nous souhaitons démontrer que de grandes idées peuvent être partagées avec tous, de manière simple, intéressante, conviviale, familière, attrayante et accessible — grâce aux chants, à la danse, à la poésie, au théâtre et aux expositions, qui constituent autant de facettes d'une culture riche et vivante.**

Je remercie sincèrement toutes les ONG qui ont accepté de partager leurs expériences et leurs réflexions, au comité éditorial de #HeritageAlive pour son travail constant, ainsi qu'à notre partenaire de longue date, l'ICHCAP. Je souhaite également remercier Dr Janet Blake, l'une des initiatrices de ce travail essentiel, et Dr Rachel Gefferie, rédactrice en chef actuelle de #HeritageAlive, qui m'a proposé de reprendre temporairement cette fonction pour la présente édition spéciale. Étant donné l'importance et l'urgence du sujet, j'ai accepté ce défi avec enthousiasme.

Pour les précédentes publications de #HeritageAlive, je terminais mon introduction en invitant les lecteurs à « profiter du livre », car ces éditions étaient des célébrations du patrimoine culturel immatériel et du formidable travail des ONG dans ce domaine.Mais cette fois, je ne le peux pas. Cette publication est différente. Elle n'appelle malheureusement pas à célébration.Elle partage des expériences et des exemples concrets du rôle vital des ONG œuvrant à la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel, pendant et après les conflits armés — un rôle de guérison et de reconstruction du lien social. Elle transmet des voix venues des camps de réfugiés et des communautés les plus durement touchées.

Plus que jamais, il nous faut nous souvenir des premières paroles de la Constitution de l'UNESCO :

« Puisque les guerres prennent naissance dans l'esprit des hommes, c'est dans l'esprit des hommes que doivent être élevées les défenses de la paix. »

J'aimerais que cette publication n'ait pas lieu d'être. Malheureusement, elle est nécessaire.

Eivind Falk is the director of the Norwegian Crafts Institute. He has more than 20 years' experience in safeguarding of traditional crafts in Norway and abroad. From 2016-2019 he was a member of the UNESCO evaluation body, where he has evaluated more than 200 files for inscription. He was the Editor-in-Chief for the #HeritageAlive from 2012-2022, but he is doing a come-back as the Editor-In-Chief for this publication. He is currently a voting member of ICOMOS, and an expert member of ICICH.

ICH in Armed Conflicts - Finding Effective Responses and the Role of NGOs

Janet Blake
Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage

01

01. ICH in Armed Conflicts - Finding Effective Responses and the Role of NGOs

Janet Blake
Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage

Abstract

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) during armed conflict presents a very different challenge from the approach generally taken in international humanitarian law (IHL) for the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict. This body of law, including the 1954 'Hague' Convention for protecting cultural property during armed conflict has hitherto focused on material heritage, including movable cultural objects. Some of the protections for civilian non-combatants and civilian objects, can provide a degree of protection to ICH. Overall, however, ICH and its bearers do not yet enjoy sufficient protection under IHL. Armed conflicts today are numerous, with 50 countries experiencing varying levels of conflict worldwide in 2024 and NGOs active in safeguarding ICH have a role to play in preserving this heritage and supporting the related communities. Although ICH is often directly impacted by conflict, it can also help to prevent conflict and also serve as a potential resource for communities and individuals to rebuild their lives and societies during conflict and displacement and after conflict. Some cases that illustrate this potential are presented in this paper. It is therefore essential that we move from the current situation of incidental safeguarding of ICH and its bearers under IHL towards a strong imperative to safeguard this heritage and the communities and individuals that practise it.

Introduction

Safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) during armed conflict presents a very different challenge from the approach generally taken in international humanitarian

Pantun (Indonesia and Malaysia) inscribed in 2020 (15.COM) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. © Policy Research Center of Education and Culture, Ministry of Education and Culture, Indonesia, 2017

law (IHL) for the protection of cultural heritage in armed conflict. Taking a primarily legal approach, this paper also presents relevant cases and NGO experiences to illustrate how ICH is impacted by armed conflict and the role(s) it can play in responding to it. IHL, which is also known as the 'Rules of War', encompasses a well-developed set of customary rules and a treaty regime that has grown out of these (Fleck, 2021). The main treaties that govern the conduct of armed conflicts, the protection of civilians and the protection of cultural property are the fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, UNESCO's 1954 'Hague' Convention on the Protection of Cultural Property in the Time of Armed Conflict and the Additional Protocols of 1977 to the 1949 Geneva Convention regime (Toman, 1996).

This law has been focused mostly on the material heritage – in particular buildings of cultural and religious significance which are frequently targeted, especially in internal and inter-ethnic conflicts – as well as movable cultural objects. There are some protections also for civilian non-combatants and civilian objects, especially in the aforementioned Additional Protocols of 1977, but the effect of these is limited. Overall, ICH and its bearers do not enjoy sufficient protection under IHL. It is essential that we move from the current situation of incidental safeguarding of ICH and its bearers under IHL (for example, through applying rules that protect civilians and their property) towards a strong imperative to safeguard this heritage and the communities and individuals that practise it.

The sad reality is that armed conflicts of various kinds are rife around the world today, as the experiences of our fellow NGOs shared later in the #HeritageAlive webinar in April 2025 on *ICH and armed conflicts* bear witness. In 2024, 50 countries

experienced "extreme, high, or turbulent levels of conflict" of which Palestine, Myanmar, Syria, and Mexico were the worst situated (ACLED, 2024). The extreme suffering caused by modern armed conflict to civilian populations, in particular women and children – who face disproportionate impacts as a consequence of displacement, insecurity, lack of access to food and water, lack of access to sanitary products and reproductive health and so on – must be addressed. Some of these conflicts in Central Africa and Latin America have been continuing for decades, causing deep social dislocation and the consequent loss of, and damage to, ICH elements. As much as ICH is directly impacted by conflict, it also represents a potential resource for communities and individuals to rebuild their lives and societies both during and after conflict and displacement.

Culture of Ukrainian borscht cooking (Ukraine) inscribed in 2022 (5.EXT.COM) on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. © NGO Institute of Culture of Ukraine, 2020

Disproportionate Impacts on Civilians

As we have seen in the recent conflict over Gaza, civilians are nowadays the main victims of increasingly disproportionate force. This force is indiscriminately used against areas –including food distribution centres, schools and hospitals – in which civilians congregate and are sheltered (ICJ, 2025). Since ICH is primarily and predominantly a form of heritage located in the human person and in human society, it is one of the few forms of heritage (with the exception, possibly, of small objects and digital heritage) that can be carried by individuals, and whole communities, when they are displaced as a result of armed conflict.

When we consider the safeguarding of ICH during armed conflict, we need a strong focus on the protection of civilians and civilian objects, whether in conflict zones or as displaced persons and refugees. This is particularly true in view of the great numbers of non-combatants currently trapped in armed conflicts around the world and of those displaced by such conflicts, whether internally or as refugees. By the end of June 2024, 122.6 million people worldwide were displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order, in the majority of cases by armed conflict (UNHCR, 2024). This has important implications as to how we safeguard ICH during and after armed conflicts. The experience of Croatian women in refugee camps in Dubrovnik in the early 1990s is instructive: Traditional lace-making, a skill of the women refugees was a key social

and economic resource for them and continuing it in the camp helped them to hold together their society which had been devastated by the experience of conflict and displacement. It also allowed them to preserve their social and cultural identity and their dignity.[1] Furthermore, it provided psychosocial support and, by restoring the social status they previously enjoyed, helped strengthen their personal security.

1 Interview with a Croatian ex-refugee woman during a UNESCO conference in Tehran in 2001. The Lacemaking in Croatia element was inscribed on the Representative List of the 2003 Convention in 2009.

What is the Place of the 2003 Convention?

We need to remember that peacetime treaties, especially those with a strong human rights basis, are not suspended during armed conflict (Scobbie, 2014). The primary international law of relevance to this question is the regime set out by UNESCO's 2003 Intangible Heritage Convention. The Preamble to this treaty makes reference to threats facing ICH (UNESCO, 2003: Preamble, 4th recital), including "the phenomenon of intolerance, to grave threats of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage" and so armed conflicts and their causes are clearly mentioned here.

The definition of "intangible cultural heritage" includes the requirement to be compatible with "mutual respect among communities" (UNESCO, 2003: Article 2.1) which signals that it can both be a potential source of conflict and a means to prevent or resolve conflicts. The definition also contains two other important points: (i) that it encompasses material objects, namely the "instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated" with the intangibles of ICH; and (ii) that it is "constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their […] history" which could also be an indirect reference to ICH as a memory of past conflicts (Ibid). This memory can, of course, be both a source of future conflict as well as a catalyst for seeking to prevent these.

Such allusive references in the main text of the treaty find clearer expression in its associated texts. The two key documents which we should refer to here: (1) The Operational Directives for the implementation of the Convention (UNESCO, 2024: OD 194-97); and (2) the Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Emergencies (2019) (UNESCO, 2024). Chapter VI of the Operational Directives addresses safeguarding ICH and sustainable development, and section 4 addresses preventing and resolving disputes (OD 195), restoring peace and security (OD 196) and achieving lasting peace (OD 197). States Parties are "encouraged" to support research studies that identify ICH elements which contribute towards "dispute prevention and peaceful conflict resolution" (OD 195). Further, they are encouraged to support these elements, reduce their vulnerability during and in the aftermath of conflicts, and help them to act in a complementary manner to other, more formal, mechanisms of dispute prevention and peaceful conflict resolution.

Manden Charter, proclaimed in Kurukan Fuga (Mali) inscribed in 2009 (4.COM) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
© DNPC, 2008

The other main relevant text of the 2003 Convention is the Operational Principles and Modalities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in emergencies (UNESCO, 2024). These begin by recognizing the vulnerability of ICH during armed conflict, but also its "dual role" as directly threatened while also being able to "effectively help communities to prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies" (UNESCO, 2003: Preamble 1st recital). These Operational Principles and Modalities are framed predominantly in terms of "how best to ensure that intangible cultural heritage is most effectively engaged and safeguarded in the context of various types of emergencies" (Ibid: Preamble, 3rd recital), and so are highly practical in their approach. They are divided into three stages, namely: Preparedness, Response and Recovery. It also sets out six general principles of which the third notes that, the communities shall play a primary role in all phases of emergency (conflict) in identifying how their ICH might have been affected and what measures are needed to safeguard it. However, this is unlikely to be possible during an armed conflict and so will be more relevant to post-conflict responses.

Potential of ICH to Prevent Conflicts and Support Post Conflict Resolution

In this section, four cases are presented that illustrate ways in which ICH elements can support peaceful co-existence in conflict-ridden areas, help to prevent disputes and provide for the peaceful settlement of disputes.

The *Xeer Ciise: Oral customary laws of Somali-Issa communities in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia* element was inscribed on the Representative List (RL) of the 2003 Convention in 2024 (Decision 19.COM 7.B.36) as a multinational inscription in Northeast Africa where Ethiopia and Somalia[2] are currently experiencing conflict situations, while Djibouti faced civil conflict in 1991-94. It relates to oral customary laws of the Somali-Issa communities of the three countries, including a code of social conduct regulating collective and individual behaviour. Together, they help ensure peaceful coexistence within the community and with other ethnic groups, uniting communities in the Horn of Africa in a sense of mutual solidarity and their social cohesion. The *Wayuu normative system, applied by the Pütchipü'üi (palabrero)* element from Colombia inscribed on the RL in 2010 (UNESCO, 2010) is located in the Guajira Peninsula that straddles Colombia and Venezuela and so covers a politically unstable region that has faced conflict and may well face it again in the future.[3] This normative system is a body of principles, procedures and rites that govern conduct within the community applied by the local moral authorities, the Pütchipü'üi or palabreros (orators) who seek peaceful settlement of disputes. Also

2
Ethiopia is currently experiencing a civil war in Amhara and continued conflict in Oromia and Tigray. Somalia has been in the midst of an ongoing armed conflict for decades, primarily between the government and the militant group al-Shabaab.

3
They comprise one country (Colombia) that has faced a long internal civil conflict and another (Venezuela) that is under much political and quasi-military pressure regionally.

Xeer Ciise: Oral customary laws of Somali-Issa communities in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia (Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia) inscribed in 2024 (19.COM) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
© Ethiopian Heritage Authority (EHA), 2021

from Colombia, the *Safeguarding strategy of traditional crafts for peace building* was inscribed on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices (RGSP) in 2019 (UNESCO, 2019). It supports intergenerational knowledge transmission by bringing apprentices aged between 14 and 35 years-old together with masters; former fighters, they learn traditional craft skills and become peace-builders in this region torn by decades of civil conflict. The safeguarding strategy also improves the employment opportunities[4] of these young people exposed to the effects of armed conflict.

Water scarcity is a common source of conflict between communities and States, and is becoming increasingly so as a consequence of climate change. The ICH elements that concern traditional forms of water management and related dispute-settlement are therefore an example of conflict prevention. The *Irrigators' tribunals of the Spanish Mediterranean coast: The Council of Wise Men of the plain of Murcia and the Water Tribunal of the plain of Valencia* element from Spain was inscribed on the RL in 2009 (UNESCO, 2009). Traditional law courts for water management from the 9th to 10th centuries BCE, the two main tribunals[5] are recognized under Spanish law and settle disputes over water orally in a transparent manner. In terms of post-conflict response, we can mention the restoration by the Mali Government of Sufi mausoleums in Timbuktu (northern Mali) destroyed by the Ansar-e Din fighters, using traditional local building styles and the related skills and ICH-related know-how (Fletcher and Elgood, 2013).[6] In this case, the restoration of material cultural heritage that IHL failed to protect was made possible by the continued existence of traditional forms of knowledge held in human memories.

Multiple stakeholders, many actors

One challenge we need to address here is that ICH practice and safeguarding involves a multiplicity of actors and stakeholders. Although the main obligation-holders of the relevant legal regimes are governments, the nature and scope of these obligations with regard to ICH is not well appreciated by state actors. Moreover, since modern armed conflicts generally implicate non-state actors, both as combatants and non-combatant civilians, consideration of their respective roles is important. ICH bearers could, of course, form part of the basis of an armed conflict and become combatants themselves. However, in the view of the author, they are more likely to be victims and displaced persons, and they may also play different positive roles during and following armed conflicts: A survey report on the ICH of displaced Syrians serves as an illustrative case here (Chatelard 2017). Other significant non-state actors are NGOs and humanitarian organizations that are often active on the ground and their experience is crucial for a better understanding of this complex picture. Social institutions, such as hospitals and schools, are also potentially key actors with

4
A Traditional Crafts Policy is also in place to guide and ensure continuity in the transmission and practice of these crafts.

5
The Council of Wise Men of the Plain of Murcia and the Water Tribunal of the Plain of Valencia.

6
In September 2015, Ahmad Al Mahdi Al Faqi, known as Abu Tourab was arrested and held in custody at the ICC charged with the war crime of deliberately destroying religious or historical monuments following an investigation initiated in 2013 at the request of the Government of Mali.

Xeer Ciise: Oral customary laws of Somali-Issa communities in Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia (Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia) inscribed in 2024 (19.COM) on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. © Ethiopian Heritage Authority (EHA), 2021

their own specific roles that are often connected to intangible cultural heritage. It is fundamental that the interactions between all of these actors (and others), and the legal regimes relevant to the safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, should be part of any safeguarding strategy during armed conflict. Some of the key actors we need to take into consideration here are:

- Combatants (military forces, militias, terrorists and/or freedom fighters, other informal fighters)
- Non-combatants and civilians (who do not take part in hostilities and are not part of any armed group or fighting force)
- Social institutions (schools, hospitals, religious organizations, charities, etc.) which are generally accorded special protection under IHL
- Humanitarian actors (both local and international) which may be governmental or non-governmental
- Other non-governmental organizations and civil society actors

Concluding remarks

It is very easy to be extremely pessimistic in the face of the extreme suffering of civilians in Sudan, Gaza and other current conflicts, and the accompanying loss of ICH. However, I believe that it is incumbent on all of us who work in the community that is the 2003 Convention of UNESCO to strive to find ways to leverage ICH elements to prevent conflict, support civilian populations during conflicts and as part of a post-conflict response. As NGOs accredited to this international treaty, we have our own special position and we have a capacity to help in this. Even if each intervention may be small, it is meaningful and is worth doing.

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Résumé

La sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI) pendant les conflits armés présente un défi très différent de l'approche généralement adoptée dans le droit international humanitaire (DIH) pour la protection du patrimoine culturel en temps de guerre. Ce corpus juridique, y compris la Convention de La Haye de 1954 pour la protection des biens culturels en cas de conflit armé, s'est jusqu'à présent concentré sur le patrimoine matériel, y compris les objets culturels mobiliers.

Certaines dispositions relatives à la protection des civils non combattants et des biens civils peuvent offrir un certain degré de protection au PCI. Dans l'ensemble, toutefois, le PCI et ses porteurs ne bénéficient pas encore d'une protection suffisante au titre du DIH.

Les conflits armés sont aujourd'hui nombreux, avec 50 pays connaissant en 2024 différents niveaux de conflit dans le monde, et les ONG actives dans la sauvegarde du PCI ont un rôle à jouer dans la préservation de ce patrimoine et le soutien aux communautés concernées.

Bien que le PCI soit souvent directement affecté par les conflits, il peut également contribuer à la prévention des conflits et servir de ressource potentielle pour les communautés et les individus afin de reconstruire leur vie et leur société pendant les conflits et les déplacements, ainsi qu'après les conflits. Certains cas illustrant ce potentiel sont présentés dans cet article.

Il est par conséquent essentiel de passer de la situation actuelle, où la sauvegarde du PCI et de ses porteurs relève encore du domaine accidentel dans le cadre du DIH, à une forte exigence de sauvegarde de ce patrimoine et des communautés et individus qui le pratiquent.

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Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Wartime Ukraine

Oleksandr Butsenko
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02

02. Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Wartime Ukraine

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Abstract

Founded in 2006, by a group of activists in culture, research, and communication, the Development Centre "Democracy through Culture" (DC Demcult) has acted in the sphere of culture and social development as a think-and-do tank. After beginning of Russian aggression in 2014, the Centre started researching the impact of the war on the ICH and documenting the situation with ICH in local communities over Ukraine.

Belonging to Eastern European countries, Ukraine, located between Russia and Central European states, has been oriented historically and predominantly to the West. The new aggressive campaign of Russian Federation, a successor of Russian empire and Soviet Union in their worst forms, is directed, above all, against Ukrainian culture historically based on the principles of democracy, freedom and dignity.

It is worth mentioning some peculiarities for ICH connected with on-going situation in Ukraine. Communities founding themselves in hard situation (under striking or bombing, in blackout, shorten of communications, gas or food supply) applied to traditional knowledge and methods acquired during generations and/or developed them. They used the ICH as a means to withstand the predicament. At the same time, due to its dynamic nature, the intangible cultural heritage become "a valuable resource for communities to strengthen resilience, reduce vulnerabilities" basing on old technologies, but modified into new forms. Communities displacing in other parts of Ukraine or elsewhere unites around their manifestations of intangible heritage.

It is also worth mentioning the important role of digital tool in ICH safeguarding in emergencies. In April 2025, the exhibition "Ikanycha: pysanka of Mariupol" opened in Kyiv, offering, besides, exposition, master classes in ikanycha painting. The exhibition demonstrated how the knowledge, practical experience of bearers and preserved documentation (sketches, pictures, design) can renovate the museum collection and related with it living cultural history.

Introduction

When the NGO, Development Centre "Democracy through Culture" (DC Demcult) was accredited for advisory services by UNESCO in 2020, the organization already had a long history in identifying, documenting, transmitting and promoting living heritage, especially in areas under the armed conflict, as was the case in Luhansk and Donetsk regions, and Crimea. Founded in 2006 by a group of activists in culture, research and communication, DC Demcult has acted in the sphere of culture and social development as a "think-and-do" tank. Its aim was, and remains: to study global best practices in cultural development; introduce innovative approaches in culture, cultural heritage and local development; enhance international creative partnership and cooperation; and share information and knowledge about modern cultural achievements. DC Demcult has involved experienced researchers and managers, artists and craftsmen, journalists, and public activists in its initiatives.

After the beginning of Russian aggression in 2014, the Centre started researching the impact of the war on ICH and documenting the situation with ICH in local communities across Ukraine. In September 2019, in Severodonetsk, Luhansk region, we started to discuss the topic of "Intangible cultural heritage as a tool in peace building and resilience" with Ukrainian communities that were partially occupied and at risk of conflict development. This discussion was based on Colombia's experience in reconciliation using traditional and modern crafts. As an Eastern European country, Ukraine, located between Russia and Central European states,

Ukrainian borsch. © "Tastes of Bukovyna", Chernivtsi, Bukovyna Centre of Culture and Art

has been oriented historically and predominantly to the West. The long history of Ukraine, from the ancient Kyiv Rus' State and the medieval Cossack Republic to the modern independent state, is the history of the struggle for freedom, dignity and culture: for instance, in the 18th and 19th centuries against the chauvinistic influence of the Russian empire, and in the 20th century against the repressive Soviet regime. The new aggressive campaign of the Russian Federation, a successor of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union in their worst forms, is directed, above all, against Ukrainian culture, which is historically based on the principles of democracy, freedom and dignity. According to the data of the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications (MCSC) of Ukraine, by August 2025 over 1500 historical and cultural monuments were completely or partially destroyed, especially in Kharkiv (336), Kherson (289), Odesa (179), Donetsk (173), and Kyiv (111) regions. Thousands of copies of books about Ukrainian culture and history in Ukrainian language were seized and deliberately burnt in occupied cities, cultural and living spaces (cities and towns) were destroyed, thousands of civilians, including women and children were brutally murdered, and millions of Ukrainians were displaced to other regions of the country or abroad.

These, and other consequences of the wide-scale war unleashed by Russia against Ukraine, have demonstrated the deep impact on the viability of intangible cultural heritage, the safeguarding of which is "indivisible from the protection of the lives and well-being of its bearers" (UNESCO, 2024). Thus, the first task was to communicate with communities and individual ICH bearers to get a line on their situation, safety, environment, cultural and natural spaces, and their adaptation in new places. Through this work - meeting with people in situ, communicating with them by phone and internet - we encouraged communities to define, document and safeguard their living heritage. Before the Russian invasion in Ukraine there were 26 ICH elements inscribed on their National Register of ICH, by September 2025 this number had increased to 115. This result emerged as much from a desire within communities to preserve their feeling of belonging and identity in the face of destructive war, as from the joint, focused effort of DC Demcult, the Sector of ICH Issues of the MCSC, and the ICH Expert Council at the MCSC of Ukraine. The structure of the National Register was also changed. Previously it was a single list, now it consists of five inventories including the Inventory of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding which is, especially in emergencies, "one of the most important ICH instruments" (Eichler, 2020). The other inventories include: the Inventory of ICH, the Inventory of Good Practices, the Inventory of Indigenous Peoples' Culture, and the Inventory of Revived Traditions as Interrupted. The last is very important, especially bearing in mind the post-war reconciliation and rebuilding of Ukraine.

It is worth mentioning some peculiarities concerning ICH in the on-going situation in Ukraine. Communities finding themselves in difficult situations under strikes or

Preparation of the ritual bread of Northern Azov Greeks (Psatyr) in displacement. The element is inscribed on the Inventory of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding of the National Register of Ukraine © Iryna Sarbey, Manhush territorial community

bombing, in blackouts, with shortages of communications, gas, or food supply, have applied traditional knowledge and methods acquired over generations. ICH is used as a means to withstand their predicament. For example, in many places, including the capital city of Kyiv, during the first months of the war, people cooked the traditional dish, borscht (inscribed in 2022 on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding) on an open fire, like their ancestors, and in this way helped themselves and many others to survive. At the same time, due to its dynamic nature, intangible cultural heritage became "a valuable resource for communities to strengthen resilience, reduce vulnerabilities and help communities prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies" (Living Heritage, 2022). And borscht, in its turn, was not only recreated based on old technologies, but modified into new forms (in a can, in dry state) which could be used in any place, especially on the frontline or close-to-front territories.

As Ernesto Ottone highlights, "safeguarding intangible cultural heritage helps address the human dimension of crises, enabling their sense of identity and dignity" (Living Heritage, 2022). Communities displaced in other parts of Ukraine or elsewhere unite around their manifestations of intangible heritage. As one displaced woman said (from Avdiivka, Donetsk region, occupied in February 2024): "We have lost all, our home, our former life, we have only what links us with Avidiivka – our heritage". Among other manifestations of intangible cultural heritage from the Donetsk region there are two ICH elements from now-occupied territories inscribed on the National Register after the beginning of war: "Tradition and technologies for preparing the festive and memorial porridge of the city of Avdiivka in Donetsk region" (2022) and "Cultural customs and ways of expression related to the ritual bread of North Azovian Greeks (Psatyr)" (2025).

The porridge of Avdiivka is "the taste that preserves identity", as it says on the Facebook page of the NGO "Power of Ideas" (Sylaidei, 2024), which has initiated the project "The porridge of Avdiivka travels over Ukraine". With this project, they not only presented their ICH in different regions of Ukraine, but also encouraged displaced fellow citizens, especially the young, to learn more about local history and to feel proud of it.

Psatyr is the ritual bread of Northern Azovian Greeks prepared on the Easter eve. Now, families from the villages and settlements from Mariupol, Manhush, Volnovakha, Kalmius, Kurakhove, Vuhledar districts of Donetsk region, dispersed all over Ukraine and abroad, come together to bake jointly the Easter ritual bread. It gives them the feeling of belonging, resilience, confidence, and unification. As Iryna Sarbey, a representative of Manhush community said in our private interview, "for me, it is not simple ritual bread, it is the feeling of motherland, my family, history of my nation, high hope for the future, it is this that unites us, our living heritage".

The ritual bread of the Northern Azov Greeks, Psatyr. © Iryna Sarbey, Manhush territorial community

These are only two examples from one region which has suffered from the war. They demonstrate the potential of living heritage in emergencies to help communities to raise their spirits and cohesion. The Inventory of ICH in Need of Urgent Safeguarding of the National Register of Ukraine consists, for now, of 20 entries, most of which (19) were inscribed after the beginning of Russian aggression. The inscribed elements represent regions partially occupied or under the danger of air or ground attacks, such as Donetsk, Luhansk, Sumy, Kharkiv, and Kyiv, and regions rather remote from the front line but affected by the war, such as Lviv, Ivano-Frankivsk, Chernivtsi, and Rivne. Among the inscribed elements, the following should be mentioned: "Traditional beekeeping craft in Svatove district of Luhansk region" (2023), "The ritual of expelling vipers" (Luhansk region, 2023), "Lenten stuffed cabbages with potato, tradition of cooking and consumption" (Donetsk region, 2023), "Tradition of herbalism in Starobilsk land" (Luhansk region), "Baking wedding ducklings in the village of Richky" (Sumy region), and others. The population of the aforementioned Inventory resulted from offline and online meetings with communities after the beginning of war. The work on nominations strengthened and united communities, whilst the inscription of the National Register has become a recognition of communities' right to existence despite all calamities. The inscription and further media sharing have served as a guide for regional and central public policy development since they deal

with communities' identity, resilience and well-being.

It is also worth mentioning the important role of digital tools in ICH safeguarding in emergencies. There is one convincing example: In December 2024, the Ukrainian-Estonian multinational ICH element "Pysanka, Ukrainian tradition and art of decorating eggs" was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. It demonstrates the consolidating power of living heritage for Ukrainians inside and outside their native land. This is not only for Ukrainians, but also for other nations historically living in Ukraine (above 130 nations and 3 indigenous peoples before the Russian war), particularly Northern Azovian Greeks, Urums and Roumeans, resettled from Crimea since 1779 and residing in Mariupol area. They borrowed the tradition of decorating eggs (pysanky) from local residents in the late 19th century and created their version, with specific colours and motifs, called "ikonycha". At the beginning of 20th century, the Mariupol museum of local history and lore had a collection of about 500 ikonychas . In 2022, after the Russian full-scale aggression, the collection was lost. However, 98 cards with sketches of ornaments made by museum employers and researchers survived in digitized copies. Thus, in 2024 the idea to restore the lost collection and organize the exhibition united experts, museum employees, researchers, artists, public institutions and non-governmental organizations. These included the Ministry of Culture and Strategic Communications of Ukraine; Mariupol City Council; the Mariupol Museum of Local History and Lore; the National Centre of Folk Culture "Ivan Honchar Museum"; the Donetsk Oblast State Administration; the Development Centre "Democracy through Culture"; the Donetsk

"Ikanycha", pysanka (decorated Easter egg) of the Northern Azov Greeks.
© Yevhen Sosnovsky, Mariupol Museum of Local History and Lore

"Ikanycha", pysanka of the Northern Azov Greeks. Zoya Stashuk, well-known mistress, transmits knowledge. © Mariupol Museum of Local History and Lore

Regional Educational and Methodological Centre of Culture; the National Union of Folk-Art Masters of Ukraine; and NGO "Maria's City." During February-March 2025, the 'mistress' of egg painting (pysankarka), Zoya Stashuk, recreated pysanky of the Greek community from the 1920s and 1930s using preserved electronic cards. In April 2025, the exhibition "Ikanycha: Pysanka of Mariupol" opened in Kyiv, offering, in addition to the exposition, master classes in ikanycha painting. The exhibition demonstrated how the knowledge and practical experience of bearers, alongside preserved documentation (sketches, pictures, design) can renovate the museum collection and its related living cultural history, "maintaining digitized material on cultural practice in the course of time" (National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, 2013). The preserved digital copies show that "traditional forms have been able to survive and could arguably be transmitted to future generations" (Eichler, 2020).

In our conclusion it is worth making some observations and outlining few challenges:

1. The first and necessary step for ICH safeguarding in emergencies, especially under the war, is to communicate with bearers and communities, to learn about them and their situation, and to consider the security of their lives and well-being. Otherwise, efforts to preserve the past and calculate tangible losses in the ICH sphere would risk removing the life from the very living heritage we aim to protect.
2. Intangible cultural heritage is a very powerful resource for supporting communities in the hardest situations, as it can strengthen their resilience and self-esteem.

3. For safeguarding in emergencies to be efficient, it needs more than ever wide, participatory, and intersectoral support. In turn, this safeguarding provides strength (recognition, identity, a sense of belonging, honour, and self-respect) to all stakeholders.

Challenges:

1. The murder and kidnapping of civilians (including women and children) who are bearers or apprentices; enforced displacement; destruction of cultural and natural spaces, including living spaces, cities and villages; and the impossibility of practicing and transmitting ICH – all these and other factors affect directly ICH viability.
2. If bearers and practitioners continue practicing or try to safeguard their ICH on occupied territories – which is an integral part of the ICH on non-occupied territories of Ukraine – there is no question of "whose heritage is it". However, it becomes necessary to keep information about them secret for reasons of their safety. At the same time, it is very important to inscribe such heritage on the register, thereby recognizing and supporting its bearers.
3. It is necessary to keep in mind that the risks and threats to ICH caused by emergencies, in this case – the war – do not exclude or reduce common risks and existing threats existing to the living heritage. We have observed during last years the exploitation of the ICH by third parties in their economic, political, academic interests, appropriation and commodification of the ICH and so on. In other words, communities on preparing their safeguarding plans should consider – if not primarily – risks and threats other than caused by the war, which would come again to the fore in the postwar time.

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Résumé

Fondé en 2006 par un groupe d'activistes issus des domaines de la culture, de la recherche et de la communication, le Centre de développement *Democracy through Culture* (DC Demcult) agit dans le champ de la culture et du développement social en tant que laboratoire d'idées et d'actions (*think-and-do tank*). Dès le début de l'agression russe en 2014, le Centre a entrepris d'étudier l'impact de la guerre sur le patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI) et de documenter la situation du PCI au sein des communautés locales à travers l'Ukraine.

Située entre la Russie et les États d'Europe centrale, l'Ukraine — pays d'Europe de l'Est — s'est historiquement tournée, dans son orientation culturelle et politique, vers l'Ouest. La nouvelle campagne agressive de la Fédération de Russie, héritière de l'empire russe et de l'Union soviétique sous leurs formes les plus oppressives, vise avant tout la culture ukrainienne, fondée historiquement sur les principes de démocratie, de liberté et de dignité.

Il convient de souligner certaines spécificités du PCI dans la situation actuelle en Ukraine. Les communautés confrontées à des conditions extrêmes — sous les frappes ou les bombardements, privées d'électricité, de communication, de gaz ou de ravitaillement — ont eu recours aux savoirs traditionnels et aux méthodes transmises de génération en génération, qu'elles ont parfois fait évoluer. Elles ont utilisé le patrimoine culturel immatériel comme un moyen de résistance face à l'adversité. Dans le même temps, en raison de sa nature dynamique, le patrimoine immatériel est devenu « une ressource précieuse permettant aux communautés de renforcer leur résilience et de réduire leur vulnérabilité », en s'appuyant sur d'anciennes technologies adaptées à de nouvelles formes. Les communautés déplacées, en Ukraine ou à l'étranger, se rassemblent autour de leurs expressions de patrimoine immatériel, qui deviennent un facteur d'unité et d'identité.

Il convient également de mentionner le rôle important des outils numériques dans la sauvegarde du PCI en situation d'urgence. En avril 2025, l'exposition Ikanycha : la pysanka de Marioupol a été inaugurée à Kyiv. En plus de l'exposition, des ateliers de peinture ikanycha y étaient proposés. Cette exposition a montré comment les savoirs, l'expérience pratique des détenteurs et la documentation préservée (croquis, photographies, motifs) peuvent permettre de redonner vie à une collection muséale et à l'histoire culturelle vivante qui y est associée.

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Following the Armed Conflict

Okello Quinto
Gulu Theatre Artists

03

03. Following the Armed Conflict

Revitalizing Acoli Indigenous Culture

Okello Quinto
Gulu Theatre Artists

Abstract

The UNESCO accredited NGO Gulu Theatre Artists' main activities are to safeguard Acoli cultural heritage through several means including the performing arts of music, dance and drama.

During the armed insurgency in the northern part of Uganda, the people of the Acoli community were strongly affected by war. Traumatic impacts are left in abducted children, those who grew up in camps, and the whole population. The Acoli community suffered for over twenty years during that prolonged political war, to the extent that they were packed into people's displacement camps and Acoli land had the highest number of internally displaced people in Uganda.

Gulu Theatre Artists is using performing arts and documentation to develop tools for positive transformation within its community based and designed activities.

They are continuously conducting a massive campaign to boost the intervention of all traditional bearers and rekindle confidence and self-esteem within the entire community. There is a need to promote the belief that modern and traditional knowledge practices and methods of communication are not mutually exclusive, they are instead symbiotic and complementary. There cannot be real development in curbing the effects of armed conflict unless the two are integrated.

We would like to prove that even great ideas can be conveniently communicated to everyone in a manner that is simple, interesting, friendly, familiar, attractive and affordable through the use of songs, dance, poetry, drama and exhibitions, which are part of a rich and entertaining culture.

Introduction

Gulu Theatre Artists is a cultural development organization, founded in 1997, based in the northern part of Uganda. Its primary objectives endeavor to build pride and confidence, heal wounds and broken hearts, build unity in diversity, and foster a belief in happiness where everyone is mindful and respectful of one another, amongst others.

GUTA's main activities are to safeguard Acoli cultural heritage through several means, including the performing arts of music, dance and drama.

From the beginning, the organization has been working very closely to implement government programs and non-governmental organization activities that involve community transformation through effective mobilization and sensitization.

Above all, it is one of the accredited NGOs implementing the 2003 UNESCO convention and this has become one of the most pronounced and outstanding activities that Gulu Theatre Artists is now engaged in. This paper will share lessons learned from GUTAs work in a post war situation.

ICH and armed conflicts in the northern part of Uganda

Acoli indigenous people have protected their cultural values through their lifestyle and language; reading, writing, performing arts, oral traditions as poems, riddles, proverbs and verbs as modes of communication for peaceful and harmonious living in the

Born setting traditional hidden herbal medicine is one of the bones healing herbs categorized under knowledge about the nature and the universe. It's indigenously known as Yat pa Layak. Its demand had been paramount during the insurgency when reaching government hospital was challenged.

Promotion of knowledges skills and arts towards traditional craftsmanship for economic sustainability before and after the war.

community. But, with the overwhelming political conflict, foreign interventions and the level at which technology is conquering the world, Acoli communities are in danger of losing important cultural values which were very much cherished by their ancestors.

During the insurgency in the northern part of Uganda, the people of the Acoli community were the most affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) war and these traumatic impacts are left in abducted children, those who grew up in the camps and the whole population. The Acoli community suffered for over twenty years during that prolonged political war, to the extent that they were packed into people's displacement camps and Acoli land had the highest number of Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Uganda. During their stay in the camps, the ir way of life changed completely; there was no mutual respect between the elders and the young people, and no privacy since over ten people were packed in one hut. People lost hope in life and were just living for survival. Clan setting s and rules could not be implemented in the camps, and elders no longer had influence on the young er generations. Lines of relationships between the generations were broken until people became enemies and unfriendly to each other. This was in contradiction to the Acoli community culture.

Worst of all, many elders died in the camps leaving very few knowledgeable senior citizens who could transmit cultural messages to the younger generations. These are the very unfortunate and disadvantaged generations who grew up in a conflict zone for two decades, during which the age-long wisdom of educating through pleasure was abandoned. They have forcefully abandoned the tested practices that kept all the stored information alive. Our method of education - where everybody was a teacher to everybody else, anywhere and at any time during appropriate activities - was not only abandoned but also branded evil and primitive.

We now mistakenly believe that learning only takes place under specific, isolated conditions: when you pay money and study in a classroom, separated from the community. This learning often happens in front of a trained teacher who presents abstract theories and foreign cases, using examples far removed from the Acoli reality.

The main challenges regarding how ICH is affected

Traditionally, Northern Ugandan culture does not allow the violation of decent dressing code, unnecessary drunkenness by youths and mothers, premature marriage, domestic violence in a family, segregation and throwing orphans out of the family, and the selling of customary land - to mention just a few. This traditional culture encourages total harmony in the society, protects cultural identity and promotes collective living on the communal land.

This, however, changed after people stayed in the camps for over 15 years. They no longer want to share land with relatives - for instance nephews, nieces, girls and other distant relatives - which is a very important cultural element. These people are not allowed to share the land of their grandfathers after they return from the camps, widows are denied access to the land of their late husbands, lands which were given in the past in good faith are wanted back, and people are now choosing to sell the land due to the large income it can generate.

These changes have increased the dimension of land disputes in the region - spreading like wildfire - and are compromising the cultural beliefs of the Acoli who went before. People are being left without land, many are being jailed, and brothers are killing themselves because of land disputes. People are committing adultery, and youths are engaged in sexual activities from an early age, funeral services are less authentic and so forth. Unless something is done to address these problems, the situation will continue to worsen, and the community shall continue taking this wrong direction, hence misleading the young ones. These challenges have resulted in a new war amongst the educated and non-educated populations.

Oral tradition
Oral culture/ traditional are messages or testimonies transmitted orally from one generation to the other. It is the transmission of cultural materials through vocal utterance. And that is what folktales is all about. In other word this was one of the tools for enforcing discipline in a society.

Gulu University vice chancellor receiving storytelling book to enhance indigenous cultural heritage at a higher level of learning and also building good relationship with the community around the school.

The results are so catastrophic that the majority of the population, who were traumatized and not lucky enough to go to school, have put down their tools. Their confidence is completely shattered; they have been made to believe that since they are not educated they are incapable of, and irrelevant to, the process of solving any problems. They are therefore waiting for the so called 'learned ones' to come and magically solve all the ir human problems.

On the other hand, the so-called 'learned', which form the minority, have no practical solutions due to lack of comprehensive knowledge (both informal and formal knowledge) to deal with our development al problems. They do, however, despise traditional methods and rely only on modern methods of information dissemination, such as reading, writing, radio, television, telephone, computers and workshops. This methodology is not in line with the traditions of the majority of the communities concerned.

The results of this are, in many cases, total apathy. There is no effective communication between the two classes (those who believe in modern life, which has diluted the origins of tradition, and the traditional believers). This has led to the two classes being very antagonistic rather than complementary within society.

Gulu Theatre Artists Intervention

In response to the 2003 UNESCO convention implementation measures and a comprehensive set of research results, GUTA has recommended music, dance, and

drama (MDD) as the best communication media which cuts across all mankind regardless of sex, color, literacy rate, any form of impairment, and age group. It is a mechanism which brings together all forms of humanity.

It is therefore the desire and commitment of everyone to use MDD and other cultural practices in order to rekindle the candle of hope. We must stimulate a new declaration among the population to wake up and face human challenges with a concrete belief that we can, and must, be part of the solution to our own problems. And this can only be achieved if the active young generations work in consultation with the knowledgeable and elderly people, and with both fully involved in creating awareness.

With the respected cultural background of Gulu Theatre Artists, the organization is engaging communities, institutions such as universities, cultural groups and secondary schools in the promotion of the 2003 UNESCO convention. GUTA participated in the production and publication of both the traditional food and storytelling books initiated by the accredited NGOs, and internationally launched from Bogota in Colombia and Kasane in Botswana respectively.

Gulu Theatre Artists donated copies of the #HeritageAlive/Living Heritage Series publications on storytelling and on traditional food to the Gulu University and other learning institutions as part of its engagements and contribution to strengthen ing institutions in the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. The stories of the Acoli community, formulated into storytelling as a practice to enhance harmony and unity in a post-war community, shall continue supporting the university and other institutions, not only in the department of conflict resolution management but also in empowering other students in different fields of study to better understand the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.

Many more cultural institutions are still demanding access to the Traditional Court of Justice and Reconciliation Mechanism book, which is part of the documentation produced by Gulu Theatre Artists. This book is being used practically all over the Acoli

Cultural Performances full of both arts and scientific skills to ensure coordination of all parts of bodies' movement to express the inner feeling.

The power of traditional songs and dances in education and cultural revitalization catergorized under cultural practices to instill disipline and harmony amoung community members.

community to address fatal cases and rebuild broken relationship s caused by such incidences.

Excitingly, the secondary schools who benefited have developed strong relationships with GUTA after the folktales festivals, to the extent that other experts are occasionally invited to schools for cultural related lectures.

History has revealed that the Acoli of northern Uganda have had a long-standing tradition of cultural values probably dating back over several centuries of use, passed from one generation to another and enjoyed by the community. These include oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of intangible cultural heritage (folk tales, proverbs, riddles, nursery rhymes, legends myths, epic songs and poems, charms, prayers, chants, songs, dramatic performances and so on), and performing arts like music, dance, drama etc. Taking Acoli folk tales as one of the examples of intangible cultural heritage, their recitation has formed an integral part of their daily lives. Most of the works, rites and festivals were performed to the accompaniment of melodious story oratories, which are punctuated with music and body movement.

So, based on these historical facts, Gulu Theatre Artists ' outreach is full of theatrical performances to attract all walks of life. This approach engages the community as well as groups and individuals. Special arrangements are always made to meet with individuals with specific skills, techniques and knowledge related to a threatened element on the verge of extinction. For example, it is noted that folktales had reached a stage of stagnation and had almost become forgotten relics.

Therefore, GUTA is looking at their role in society and then reviving them through placing an emphasis on oral literature in primary schools, the collection of folktales in written books (documentation of folk-tales that we have), creating awareness and organizing folk tale recitation festivals.

How ICH has played a role as a tool in a challenging situation

Africans of all generations have survived on the knowledge that is stored in and disseminated through songs, dance, poems, rituals, proverbs, visual arts and wise sayings. Even the technology of the blacksmith, the clinical procedures of the doctors, food production and storage techniques, healthy marriages, midwifery, childbearing and rearing, communication with supernatural beings, environmental protection and many others were all preserved by, and disseminated through, the performing arts and rituals.

Thus, Gulu Theatre Artists is using performing arts and documentation to develop tools for positive transformation within its community based and designed activities.

Gulu Theatre Artists is continuously conducting a massive campaign to boost the intervention of all traditional bearers and rekindle confidence and self-esteem within the entire community. There is a need to promote the belief that modern and traditional knowledge practices and methods of communication are not mutually exclusive, they are instead symbiotic and complementary. There cannot be real development in curbing the effects of armed conflict unless the two are integrated.

Traditional believers who form the majority group are on the move daring to communicate to the supper-natural being toward restoration of hope after the war with all the required rituals. Some of these rituals support traditional worship aim at diverse productivities and health related rituals.

We would like to prove that even great ideas can be conveniently communicated to everyone in a manner that is simple, interesting, friendly, familiar, attractive and affordable through the use of songs, dance, poetry, drama and exhibitions, which all are part of a rich and entertaining culture.

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Résumé

L'ONG *Gulu Theatre Artists*, accréditée par l'UNESCO, a pour activité principale la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel Acoli par différents moyens, notamment les arts du spectacle tels que la musique, la danse et le théâtre.

Pendant l'insurrection armée dans le nord de l'Ouganda, la population Acoli a été fortement affectée par la guerre. Les impacts traumatiques touchent les enfants enlevés, ceux ayant grandi dans les camps, ainsi que l'ensemble de la population. La communauté Acoli a souffert pendant plus de vingt ans de ce conflit politique, au point d'être massivement regroupée dans des camps de personnes déplacées. Le territoire Acoli a ainsi accueilli le plus grand nombre de personnes déplacées à l'intérieur du pays en Ouganda.

Gulu Theatre Artists utilise les arts du spectacle et la documentation comme outils de transformation positive au sein de ses activités conçues et mises en œuvre pour la communauté.

L'ONG mène de manière continue une vaste campagne pour encourager l'intervention de tous les détenteurs traditionnels afin de raviver la confiance et l'estime de soi au sein de toute la communauté. Il est nécessaire de promouvoir la conviction selon laquelle les savoirs et pratiques modernes et traditionnels ainsi que les méthodes de communication ne sont pas mutuellement exclusifs, mais symboliques et complémentaires. Il ne peut y avoir de véritable développement tant que ces deux dimensions ne sont pas intégrées pour réduire l'impact des conflits armés sur le PCI.

Nous souhaitons démontrer que même de grandes idées peuvent être communiquées à tous de manière simple, intéressante, conviviale, familière, attractive et accessible, grâce à l'utilisation du chant, de la danse, de la poésie, du théâtre et des expositions, qui font tous partie d'une culture riche et divertissante.

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Borderland Craftspeople

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04

04. Borderland Craftspeople

Between Survival and Adaptation

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection of conflict, displacement, and intangible cultural heritage (ICH) through the experiences of craftspeople living along the Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Based on research conducted by the Aigine Cultural Research Center in Batken province, it examines how recurring border clashes in 2019, 2021, and particularly 2022 disrupted not only livelihoods but also fragile systems of intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge. Artisans in the border villages of Aksai, Koktash, and Karabak—already marginalized by poverty and geographic isolation—were among the most severely affected, losing homes, workshops, and inherited tools that embodied both practical and symbolic value.

The study situates crafts such as quilting, embroidery, felt-making, carpet weaving, and ornamentation within the broader cultural, social, and spiritual fabric of Batken. These practices are more than economic activities: they serve as markers of identity, vehicles of resilience, and anchors of continuity in the face of disruption. The loss of inherited materials and endangered traditions like pestek and supara illustrates the cultural bereavement caused by conflict. Yet, the research also documents how artisans, particularly women, adapted to new realities—crafting in temporary shelters, improvising with limited resources, and transforming their work into a means of survival and emotional strength.

Displacement, while traumatic, also fostered unexpected opportunities for learning and exchange. Relocated artisans encountered new techniques, integrated them into their practice, and created hybrid forms that enriched local traditions. Crafting thus became both a coping mechanism and a bridge across communities. The establishment of a Carpet-Making Center in Aksai in 2024 exemplifies how safeguarding initiatives can respond to post-conflict needs, providing income,

restoring community identity, and ensuring intergenerational transmission.

The article argues that safeguarding ICH in conflict-affected settings must go beyond documentation to include community-centered recovery frameworks. Batken's case demonstrates that restoring a broken loom or teaching embroidery is not simply heritage preservation—it is an act of rebuilding trust, resilience, and cultural continuity. Ultimately, the resilience of borderland craftspeople highlights the crucial role of ICH in peacebuilding and recovery in fragile regions.

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union left behind a complex legacy for Central Asia, particularly in the form of unresolved border issues that continue to affect relationships between neighboring countries. One of the most sensitive and affected areas is the Kyrgyz-Tajik border, where overlapping territorial claims have, at times, led to tension and violence. These conflicts have not only disrupted everyday life, but also placed additional strain on the cultural and social fabric of communities living along the border.

In Kyrgyzstan's southernmost province of Batken, residents have long lived in close proximity to their Tajik neighbors. This region, though often characterized by economic hardship and geographical isolation, has nurtured a rich heritage of traditional crafts and community practices. However, the clashes in 2019, 2021, and most severely in 2022, resulted in loss of life, displacement, and damage to homes and workshops. For artisans in particular, these events meant the loss of not only their physical tools and spaces but also the disruption of intergenerational knowledge that is vital to the continuation of their craft.

Carpet weaving is one of the most widespread traditional crafts in the Batken region. © Aigine CRC

Despite these challenges, many craftspeople have shown remarkable strength and creativity in adapting to new realities. Crafting has remained a meaningful practice—one that helps people stay connected to their identity and traditions, even in the face of uncertainty. For some, these traditions became a source of emotional resilience and a means of maintaining cultural continuity in new environments.

This article, based on research by the Aigine Cultural Research Center, explores how traditional craftsmanship in Batken has been impacted

Handicraft traditions Batken region: термечилик (rope braiding). © Aigine CRC

by border-related conflict and how communities are working to safeguard their intangible cultural heritage in response. The article will follow a structure where we start with the historical background, and then move from to the fieldwork that has been carried out, and finally the safeguarding measures that have been carried out. It offers insights into the ways ICH can serve both as a source of stability in times of disruption and as a foundation for recovery and renewal in the aftermath of a crisis.

The Aigine Cultural Research Center, based in Bishkek, is an independent NGO (Aigine CRC, 2025) that focuses on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in Kyrgyzstan. Since its founding, Aigine has worked to bridge traditional knowledge systems with contemporary research and policy-making. The organization employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates ethnography, oral history, community participation, and cultural mapping.

Historical and Cultural Context

Modern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while sharing Soviet-era political structures and influences, differ linguistically and culturally. Kyrgyz is a Turkic language, while Tajik stems from Persian roots. Despite these differences, decades of co-existence have shaped overlapping cultural identities in border regions. These shared histories are reflected in food, music, dress, and especially in crafts (Doroshenko, 2024), which

have long served as a common ground for mutual understanding and exchange.

However, unresolved Soviet-era demarcation issues have created deep-seated tensions, particularly in the Batken region. This area has historically been a site of interaction and exchange between Kyrgyz and Tajik communities, with local economies relying on shared access to land, water, and markets (Human Rights Watch, 2025). In the absence of clearly defined and mutually accepted borders, competition over natural resources has repeatedly led to inter-ethnic clashes and militarized confrontations.

Border Conflicts and Their Impact

Major border clashes between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan erupted in 2019, 2021, and 2022. These conflicts were rooted in competing claims over land and water, but they quickly escalated into violent confrontations involving both civilians and armed forces. The 2022 violence was particularly destructive: dozens were killed, hundreds injured, and tens of thousands displaced (Human Rights Watch, 2023; RRF, 2022). Villages were burned, homes demolished, and livelihoods destroyed. Among the displaced were traditional artisans who lost not only their homes but also the tools, raw materials, and inherited knowledge critical for practicing their crafts.

Crafting communities that had once thrived on cross-border trade found themselves cut off from both their sources of material and their client bases. This breakdown of trade and exchange had a devastating effect on the economy and the transmission of traditional knowledge. Crafts that had previously symbolized continuity and resilience were now endangered by loss, trauma, and displacement.

A tentative resolution came in March 2025 when the two governments signed an agreement to demarcate the border, providing hope for long-term peace (Reuters, 2025; Xinhua, 2025). However, the scars left by the conflict continue to affect the communities, particularly in terms of cultural continuity and economic resilience. For craftspeople who have lost generational workshops and inherited materials, rebuilding is not just about economic recovery but also about restoring community identity and intergenerational trust.

Traditional Crafts in Batken: A Rich Yet Fragile Heritage

Since January 2025, Aigine has been carrying out a comprehensive inventory of traditional crafts across all seven regions of the country, with support from the International Information and Networking Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (ICHCAP). The aim is not only to document crafts but also to understand their roles in social, economic, and spiritual life.

During fieldwork in Batken province, the research team discovered a strong correlation between traditional craftsmanship, community resilience, and displacement caused by conflict. This finding led to a specialized study focusing on craftspeople in three conflict-affected border villages: Aksai, Koktash, and Karabak. These communities were among the hardest hit during the 2022 conflict and serve as representative sites for understanding broader regional trends.

Batken is Kyrgyzstan's poorest and most remote province, yet it boasts a rich heritage of traditional crafts. These include:

куракчылык (quilting)
оймочулук (Kyrgyz ornamentation)
саймачылык (embroidery)
кийизчилик (felt making)
килемчилик (carpet weaving)
термечилик (rope braiding)

Supara — tanned hide for food preparation, one of the most endangered traditional crafts. © Aigine CRC

Carpet weaving in Batken region. © Aigine CRC

Each of these crafts reflects a specific facet of Kyrgyz traditional life and carries with it distinct symbols, techniques, and community values. For example, ornamentation patterns often reflect spiritual beliefs, cosmologies, and tribal affiliations. Quilting and embroidery are key practices in the preparation of sep (dowry) and are central to women's identity in many regional households.

These crafts are often passed down through generations and play a central role in family life. However, their continuity depends on the uninterrupted transmission of skills, access to materials, and stable living conditions. With the outbreak of violence, these fragile chains of transmission were brutally interrupted.

Research Methodology

Aigine's fieldwork involved semi-structured interviews with twelve artisans, ten of whom were women aged between 42 and 67. The research aimed to understand how conflict had disrupted their craft practice, the ways in which they adapted, and the significance of these practices in maintaining cultural identity. A standardized set of seventeen interview questions guided the conversations, ensuring consistency while allowing for personal narratives to emerge.

The interviews were supplemented by observations, photo and video documentation, and mapping of damaged or destroyed workshops. This multimodal approach allowed the team to gain a deeper understanding of both the tangible and intangible losses experienced by the craftspeople.

Carpet-Making Center in Aksai, Batken region. © Aigine CRC

Conflict as Disruption: Loss and Adaptation

The 2022 conflict had a profound impact on artisans. Many lost not only their homes but also their workshops and inherited tools. More devastating was the loss of inherited materials—items passed down from mothers and grandmothers that held not just practical but symbolic value. These losses created a profound sense of cultural bereavement.

Some crafts, such as the making of *pestek* (decorative sheepskin mats) and *supara* (tanned hides used for food preparation), were already endangered and are now at greater risk of disappearing entirely. Without concerted efforts to document and revive these traditions, their extinction may become inevitable.

Yet, amidst the hardship, artisans demonstrated resilience. Some women continued their craftwork while living in temporary shelters, using minimal tools and improvised materials. This act of creation served both as a coping mechanism and a way to reclaim a sense of normalcy and identity. In many ways, the continuation of craft practices became an act of cultural resistance.

Craftsmanship as a Source of Stability and Empowerment

Interestingly, displacement also became a context for learning and exchange. Artisans relocated to different villages often encountered new styles and techniques. In several cases, they adopted these into their own practice, thereby enriching their skills. Crafting thus became not only a means of survival but also a bridge between cultures and generations (Making Futures Journal, 2024).

Furthermore, traditional crafts offered a source of income during times of uncertainty. Women who had lost their farms or market stalls found that their crafting skills could be monetized, particularly through local and NGO-supported initiatives. In

this way, ICH not only preserved identity but also supported livelihoods.

Craft gatherings and informal apprenticeships continued even under challenging conditions, highlighting the importance of community-based transmission. Older women often became teachers not only of craft but of resilience, modeling perseverance and cultural continuity for younger generations.

Safeguarding Efforts in a Post-Conflict Setting

In 2024, a significant step toward recovery was made when a Carpet-Making Center was established in Aksai. Supported by both international donors and local institutions, the center now employs 40 women artisans. It serves not just as a workspace but as a community hub for training, sharing, and rebuilding. Through this initiative, craftsmanship is reaffirmed as a vital tool for post-conflict recovery, economic resilience, and psychological well-being.

This center exemplifies a practical safeguarding measure that responds directly to the needs of a conflict-affected community. It offers lessons for similar contexts where ICH is under threat. The center has also become a platform for intergenerational learning, where master artisans mentor young women, ensuring the survival of unique techniques.

Broader Implications and Lessons Learned

The Batken case reflects broader global patterns where border conflicts disrupt not only lives but also cultural ecosystems. In this region, the destruction of workshops severed long-standing trade relationships between Kyrgyz and Tajik artisans. These interactions had previously facilitated the exchange of raw materials and shared motifs, enriching both traditions.

The loss of craftsmanship thus goes beyond economic implications. It entails the fragmentation of knowledge systems, weakening of social ties, and erosion of cultural identity. These losses are often irreversible unless urgent safeguarding measures are implemented.

Aigine's research underscores the importance of adaptive frameworks that integrate displaced artisans into recovery programs. Documentation of endangered crafts, reconnection of fragmented trade networks, and community-based safeguarding strategies must become priorities in post-conflict planning.

The project also highlighted the importance of working closely with community leaders and tradition bearers. Their insights ensured that safeguarding efforts were culturally appropriate and community-owned, increasing their chances of long-term success.

Conclusion

Craftsmanship in Batken, as elsewhere, is not just a set of skills but a way of life—deeply embedded in social, economic, and spiritual domains. Conflicts, especially those affecting border communities, place this heritage at immense risk. Yet, the resilience of artisans and the support of safeguarding institutions offer a pathway to not only preserve but revitalize intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

What emerges from Batken is a powerful testament to the strength and agency of local communities. Despite facing displacement, trauma, and loss, artisans continued to weave, stitch, and shape cultural memory through their hands. Their ability to adapt traditional knowledge to unfamiliar environments, to learn from each other, and to transform crafting into both a livelihood and a coping strategy underscores the irreplaceable role of ICH in community recovery.

The lessons from Batken serve as a call to action for governments, NGOs, and international bodies: in times of conflict, cultural heritage must not be an afterthought but a cornerstone of recovery and peacebuilding. Safeguarding efforts should be community-centered, flexible, and long-term. They must recognize that restoring a broken loom or teaching a child to embroider is not only about heritage—it is about rebuilding trust, resilience, and future possibilities.

Moreover, Batken's story illustrates how traditional crafts can foster intercultural dialogue, even in contexts of ethnic and political tension. The shared motifs and mutual techniques exchanged historically between Kyrgyz and Tajik artisans are reminders that culture can connect across borders where politics divide.

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Résumé

Cet article explore l'intersection entre conflit, déplacement et patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI) à travers l'expérience des artisans vivant le long de la frontière kirghizo-tadjik. Basée sur des recherches menées par le Aigine Cultural Research Center dans la province de Batken, l'étude examine comment les affrontements frontaliers récurrents en 2019, 2021 et surtout en 2022 ont perturbé non seulement les moyens de subsistance, mais aussi les systèmes fragiles de transmission intergénérationnelle des savoirs traditionnels. Les artisans des villages frontaliers d'Aksai, Koktash et Karabak — déjà marginalisés par la pauvreté et l'isolement géographique — ont été parmi les plus durement touchés, perdant leurs maisons, leurs ateliers et leurs outils hérités, porteurs à la fois de valeur pratique et symbolique.

L'étude situe des pratiques artisanales telles que le quilting, la broderie, le feutrage, le tissage de tapis et l'ornementation dans le tissu culturel, social et spirituel plus large de Batken. Ces pratiques dépassent le cadre d'activités économiques : elles constituent des marqueurs d'identité, des vecteurs de résilience et des piliers de continuité face aux perturbations. La perte de matériaux hérités et de traditions menacées comme le pestek et le supara illustre le deuil culturel causé par le conflit. Cependant, la recherche documente également la manière dont les artisans, et en particulier les femmes, se sont adaptés aux nouvelles réalités : travaillant dans des abris temporaires, improvisant avec des ressources limitées et transformant leur art en moyen de survie et de renforcement émotionnel.

Le déplacement, bien que traumatique, a également favorisé des opportunités inattendues d'apprentissage et d'échange. Les artisans relocalisés ont découvert de nouvelles techniques, les ont intégrées à leur pratique et ont créé des formes hybrides enrichissant les traditions locales. L'artisanat est ainsi devenu à la fois un mécanisme d'adaptation et un pont entre communautés. La création d'un Centre de tissage de tapis à Aksai en 2024 illustre comment les initiatives de sauvegarde peuvent répondre aux besoins post-conflit, en fournissant des revenus, en restaurant l'identité communautaire et en assurant la transmission intergénérationnelle.

L'article soutient que la sauvegarde du PCI dans les contextes affectés par les conflits doit dépasser la simple documentation pour inclure des stratégies de reconstruction centrées sur les communautés. Le cas de Batken démontre que réparer un métier à tisser ou enseigner la broderie ne relève pas seulement de la préservation du patrimoine : c'est un acte de reconstruction de la confiance, de la résilience et de la continuité culturelle. En définitive, la résilience des artisans des régions frontalières souligne le rôle crucial du PCI dans la consolidation de la paix et la reconstruction dans les régions fragiles.

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Tatreez, Stitching Our Heritage into a Future

Sara Green
Art for Refugees in Transition

05

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Art for Refugees in Transition

Abstract

As the number of people displaced from their homes due to conflict and natural disasters continues to grow worldwide, we must ask ourselves and others, how is the world reacting to these growing numbers, to the people looking for a new home, a new beginning? How do those people hold on to their identity, communal and individual, while creating a new life? How do we offer assistance and support for this process? How do we help them empower themselves?

For those experiencing relocation and reconstruction that follows war and natural disasters, basic needs such as food, water, safety, shelter, medicine, and education are immediate priorities. Yet the importance of culture is often overlooked in the process of relocation and reconstruction. When communities are in danger of losing traditional customs, they risk losing pieces of their history and their culture. Perpetuating traditions through practice enriches daily life and enables the community to invest in their cultural experiences, making them available for future generations. The young demonstrate respect for elders while earning respect in turn, as together they reclaim the roots of their identity and community. Their cultural heritage is given a rebirth as it will continue to be handed down through the generations.

Art for Refugees in Transition (A.R.T.) helps rebuild individual and community identity for refugees worldwide. Drawing upon the indigenous art forms of each community, A.R.T.'s programs are designed to enable the elders of a given cultural heritage to educate and incorporate the younger generation in their own traditions. By developing self-sustaining curricula and training programs, A.R.T. engages children and adults in visual, performing, and creative arts drawn from their own cultures.

In 2022, A.R.T. implemented intergenerational cultural programs for Palestinian refugees living in the Dheisheh refugee camp located in the West Bank, Palestine. A.R.T.

began programs engaging the elders and the youth within the community in cultural activities, including embroidery and storytelling, as well as psychosocial support.

Introduction

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ART was conceived in 1999, as a response to the ongoing turmoil in the Balkans. Refugees fleeing the raging warfare were flooding into safe towns. As A.R.T.'s founder, I founded A.R.T. whilst studying for my MBA at Columbia University, with the idea of applying business model skills to the world's refugee populations. Every child loves to sing and dance, to play and feel free, yet I saw fear and hopelessness in the faces of children who'd had their childhoods stolen away. My belief was that lost refugee children could reconnect to childhood and to their sense of hope and personal identity by reconnecting with their unique ethnic expressions.

In 2001, I went to Kosovo to work with these children who were carrying the heavy memories of brutality, death, and destruction. In 2003, after several years of research and development, A.R.T.'s initial program was launched in two Burmese refugee camps in Thailand. Since then, A.R.T. has worked with refugee communities in Colombia, Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Tajikistan, and Palestine.[2]

As the number of people displaced from their homes due to conflict and natural disasters continues to grow worldwide, we must ask ourselves and others, how is the world reacting to these growing numbers, to the people looking for a new home, a new beginning? How do those people hold on to their identity, communal and individual, while creating a new life? How do we offer assistance and support for this process? How do we help them empower themselves?

We are living in a time of intense volatility in international relations, with modern warfare creating a fragile, harrowing landscape marked by acute human suffering. We must redouble our efforts to search for peace and find long-lasting solutions for refugees and others forced to flee their homes. Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees[3]

1 Artforrefugees.org (2020). Home Page. [online] Available at: https://www.artforrefugees.org / [Accessed 25 Aug. 2025].

2 Artforrefugees.org, (2020). About. [online] Available at https://www.artforrefugees.org/about [Accessed 25 Aug. 2025].

3 UNHCR.org, (2025). Press Releases. [online] Available at: https://www.unhcr.org/us/news/press-releases/number-people-uprooted-war-shocking-decade-high-levels-unhcr#:~:text=According%20to%20UNHCR's%20annual%20Global,forced%20to%20flee%20their%20homes [Accessed 10 Aug. 2025]

By April 2025, more than 122 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations.[4] For those experiencing the relocation and reconstruction that follows war and natural disasters, basic needs, such as food, water, safety, shelter, medicine, and education are immediate priorities. Yet, the importance of culture is often overlooked in the process of relocation and reconstruction. When communities are in danger of losing traditional customs, they risk losing pieces of their history and their culture. Perpetuating traditions, their intangible culture heritages (ICH), through practice enriches their daily lives and enables each community to invest in its own cultural experiences, making them available for future generations. The young demonstrate respect for elders while earning respect in turn, as together they reclaim the roots of their identity and community. Their cultural heritage is given a rebirth as it will continue to be handed down through the generations.

After working with these communities for the past 22 years, I have seen firsthand the effects of displacement and the trauma that follows. Intangible cultural heritage offers displaced communities a thread of symbolic continuity within the fractures of displacement. Through practices such as storytelling, craft, music, and oral history, these communities weave memories of loss and endurance into shared narratives. In doing so, they translate trauma into forms of expression that help to restore dignity, and a sense of collective self.

4 Unrefugees.org, (2025). Refugee Facts [online] Available at https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/ [Accessed Apr. 2025].

Working with Palestinian refugees

In 2022, A.R.T. implemented intergenerational cultural programs for Palestinian refugees living in the Dheisheh refugee camp located in the West Bank, Palestine. A.R.T. began programs engaging the elders and the youth within the community in cultural activities, including embroidery and storytelling, as well as psychosocial support.

In setting up our programs, A.R.T. works directly with the community. In this case, a local community center along with our country director, who was born in the camp. It was important to work with the community itself in building the program, as they are the holders of their own heritage, within which they are able to find ways to rebuild their community and identity.

Boys learning Tatreez, A.R.T.'s embroidery program, Dheisheh refugee camp, West Bank, Palestine, January 2023 © Fadwa Abbad

A.R.T.'s Tatreez program in Dheisheh refugee camp, West Bank, Palesting, January 2023 © Fadwa Abbad

The Dheisheh refugee camp was established in 1949 by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to accommodate the more than 3,000 Palestinian refugees who fled or were expelled from their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. As of 2023, it was recorded that the camp now houses close to 20,000 residents.[5]

The Dheisheh refugee camp is not an open field of UNHCR blue and white tents, or of used storage containers repurposed as housing for the displaced. Dheisheh is a city. There are concrete buildings, paved streets, stores, and schools. The camp's streets are narrow and barely wide enough for a car. Homes are small and built upward to accommodate the growing population. Privacy is scarce, but community is paramount. Children grow up knowing everyone, their neighbors are like extended family. And while the residents go about their daily lives, they are still refugees. They are still living in a refugee camp with limited rights.

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Unraw.org (2023). Dheisheh Camp [online] Available at https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/west-bank/dheisheh-camp [Accessed 10 Aug. 2025].

Mother teacher her son Tatreez, A.R.T.'s embroidery program, Dheisheh refugee camp, West Bank, Palestine, January 2023 © Fadwa Abbad

One of A.R.T.'s programs focuses on the teaching and preservation of tatreez, a Palestinian embroidery technique. This technique is traditionally passed down from grandmothers and mothers to their daughters while telling stories over a cup of tea. A.R.T.'s program helps to preserve the technique, while also perpetuating the stories and history which are an integral part of Palestinian cultural heritage.

By embracing tatreez, Palestinians are not only preserving their history, but also making a statement about their ongoing connection to their homeland and their commitment to cultural survival. Tatreez has been practiced in Palestinian communities for

centuries and serves to both preserve and celebrate Palestinian culture. It is an important symbol for Palestinian cultural heritage as mothers and grandmothers pass on personal collections of tatreez together with the stories and folklore to their daughters; every tatreez pattern has a meaning and story for its wearer and those who can read it.

Examples of Tatreez patterns, A.R.T.'s embroidery program, Dheisheh refugee camp, West Bank, Palestine, January 2023 © Fadwa Abbad

While there are a few tatreez programs running in the Dheisheh refugee camp, none are preserving the tradition of passing this practice down through the generations, and many of the young girls do not even know how to hold a needle. By engaging all generations of the community, the program will help to teach the youth the value of holding this tradition, which they too will then be able to pass on to the next generation.

A.R.T.'s Country Director, Fadwa Abbad, engaged the community to organize and build the program. "When we first told the women about the project, their response was very warm and enthusiastic. Many of them felt proud that their embroidery skills would be recognized and shared, and they saw the project as a way to keep alive what they had inherited from their mothers and grandmothers. Some expressed that it was more than just stitching — it was a connection to their history and identity," Fadwa explains. Women with experience and expertise in tatreez eagerly joined the program and offered their services to teach the youth their craft. After the materials were collected and assembled, Fadwa gathered the women and the youth and explained the program. The women began to share stories of their heritage, how they are translated into the designs in tatreez, and what it means to them to not only continue to practice this craft and its meaning, but also to share it with a younger generation.

Women discussing Tatreez patterns and designs, A.R.T.'s embroidery program, Dheisheh refugee camp, West Bank, Palestine, January 2023 © Fadwa Abbad

Tatreez is a craft traditionally practiced by women, so it was a surprise when boys in the camp joined the program. At first, Fadwa said, "they were hesitant, since tatreez is often seen as something for girls and women. But once they understood the cultural meaning behind it, they became curious and wanted to join.

They enjoyed it as a creative activity, and their participation also challenged the idea that tatreez is only for women, showing that it is truly part of everyone's heritage." As the program grew, she said, "dozens of women, youth, and children took part. The sessions were always full, with an atmosphere of learning, sharing, healing, and community." Culture and heritage bring comfort which leads to resilience. For the women, the program gave them a safe place to gather, to talk, to share stories, experiences, and to find joy.

Tatreez embroidery is more than just a craft – it's a symbol of resilience, heritage, and identity. It reflects the history of Palestine, the struggles of its people, and the endurance of a culture that continues to thrive despite external challenges. For the community in Dheisheh, creativity is a way to assert presence and let the world know that "we are here, and we have a voice."

Tatreez was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2021.

Tatreez reflects the beauty of our land – its flowers, hills, and skies – and by preserving it we keep our homeland alive within us. – female participant in A.R.T.'s program, Dheisheh refugee camp, West Bank, Palestine.

Résumé

Alors que le nombre de personnes déplacées en raison de conflits et de catastrophes naturelles continue de croître dans le monde, nous devons nous interroger, nous-mêmes autant que les autres : comment le monde réagit-il à ces chiffres en augmentation, à ces personnes en quête d'un nouveau foyer, d'un nouveau départ ? Comment ces personnes parviennent-elles à préserver leur identité, tant collective qu'individuelle, tout en construisant une nouvelle vie ? Comment pouvons-nous offrir

aide et soutien dans ce processus ? Comment les aidons-nous à se donner les moyens d'agir par elles-mêmes ?

Pour celles et ceux qui vivent une relocalisation et la reconstruction qui suit une guerre ou une catastrophe naturelle, les besoins fondamentaux — nourriture, eau, sécurité, abri, médicaments et éducation — constituent des priorités immédiates. Pourtant, l'importance de la culture est souvent négligée dans le processus de relocalisation et de reconstruction. Lorsque les communautés risquent de perdre leurs traditions, ce sont également des fragments de leur histoire et de leur culture qui sont mis en danger. La perpétuation des traditions par la pratique enrichit la vie quotidienne et permet à la communauté d'investir dans ses expériences culturelles, afin de les transmettre aux générations futures. Les jeunes font preuve de respect envers les aînés tout en gagnant à leur tour leur respect, tandis qu'ensemble ils retrouvent les racines de leur identité et de leur communauté. Leur patrimoine culturel renaît ainsi, continuant à être transmis de génération en génération.

Art for Refugees in Transition (A.R.T.) aide à reconstruire l'identité individuelle et communautaire des réfugiés dans le monde entier. S'appuyant sur les formes d'art indigènes propres à chaque communauté, les programmes d'A.R.T. sont conçus pour permettre aux aînés d'un patrimoine culturel donné d'éduquer et d'intégrer la jeune génération à leurs propres traditions. En développant des curricula et des programmes de formation autonomes, A.R.T. implique enfants et adultes dans les arts visuels, les arts du spectacle et les arts créatifs issus de leurs propres cultures.

En 2022, A.R.T. a mis en place des programmes culturels intergénérationnels pour les réfugiés palestiniens vivant dans le camp de Dheisheh, situé en Cisjordanie, Palestine. A.R.T. a commencé à organiser des activités culturelles impliquant à la fois les aînés et les jeunes de la communauté, incluant la broderie, le conte, ainsi qu'un soutien psychosocial.

Sara Green is the Founder and Executive Director, Art for Refugees in Transition, A.R.T. Chairperson for the UNESCO ICHNGO Conflict and Displacement Working Group.

When culinary traditions build bridges in armed conflict

Charlotte Courtois
Konstelacio (France)

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06

06. When culinary traditions build bridges in armed conflict

The case of Lebanon

Leila Sahli
El Hassil Cooperative

Abstract

Konstelacio is a France-based NGO dedicated to promoting intercultural dialogue through projects focused on intangible cultural heritage worldwide. Since its founding in 2011, it has designed and implemented programs in 16 countries, reaching over 5500 children and teenagers. In Konstelacio's approach, ICH is not only something to be safeguarded; it is also a tool to foster curiosity, wonder and communication across cultures.

One of the NGO's core principles is ensuring equal access to culture, engaging young people with and without vulnerabilities, including those with disabilities, from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, or living in countries facing all types of crises.

Its previous project Lyra, on traditional music, was for example offered to children in a private school in India, as well as in a children's hospital in France and an orphanage in Tunisia, making sure not to stigmatize the children involved but also showing that culture and heritage are everywhere and equally valuable.

Its mission is not specifically to safeguard or promote ICH in the context of armed conflict. However, the project mentioned in this article was held during the events commonly referred to as "Thawra" in Lebanon. This country has furthermore been undergoing armed conflicts on-and-off for many years. This article hence reflects on how the project was adapted and the impact it had in this specific context.

The pupils meeting the partner chef, Youssef Akiki, 2022
© Konstelacio

Project Ursino, using culinary traditions to understand cultural diversity

Over many years of fieldwork across different countries, Konstelacio observed that culinary traditions are a powerful way to instill pride and bring children together, regardless of their cultural background. While children and teenagers were always interested in ICH, they showed particular excitement when they started discussing their traditional dishes.

Project Ursino was hence created to guide them in collecting these recipes in their communities and in encouraging their elders to share their memories and knowledge of this culinary heritage. Together with local chefs and historians, they then investigate the multiple origins of the recipes as well as their ingredients. The ultimate goal of Ursino is to allow these teenagers to discover for themselves that the richness of our heritage has always been the result of dialogue with other cultures and that culture is a continually evolving process.

The project is planned to expand to nine countries. It has been implemented in 5 different countries so far: France, Italy, Lebanon, Morocco and Colombia. These countries were chosen to showcase a broad diversity of culinary heritage and to show the links between countries across the globe due to many different causes (migration, colonization, commercial routes, wars…). In Lebanon, the project was held in 2019 and 2022, in collaboration with École des Trois Docteurs (ETD).

The Lebanese Context at the time of the project

Clara is recording a video on a traditional Lebanese dish, 2022
© Konstelacio

Since its formation, Lebanon has endured numerous conflicts, most notably a Civil War from 1975 to 1990. In the following two decades, Lebanon's financial and economic situation deteriorated profoundly. The full extent of the crisis became evident in 2019 when mass protests erupted across Lebanon. The protests continued until March 2020, when COVID-19 lockdowns led to their suspension. However, violent groups infiltrated the movement, attempting to divert it from its original objectives. On August 4, 2020, a catastrophic explosion at the Beirut port devastated large parts of the city, further exposing the depth of Lebanon's political, social, and economic crisis and heavily impacting the school. Renovations of the premises are still in process and the school community (parents, teachers and school) has not yet recovered from the financial crisis.

Introducing Ecole des Trois Docteurs and why it agreed to participate in Project Ursino

Ecole des Trois Docteurs is a Christian Orthodox School affiliated to the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Beirut. It was founded in 1835, near Saint George Cathedral, in the city center of the Capital and was known then as "the big school", as it was the biggest educational institution of Beirut, and most importantly, the first one to be founded in the city. In addition to Arabic, the school taught French, English, Turkish and Greek; all the languages needed to communicate at that time.

Throughout its history the school has suffered from the wars and crises that have shaken the city of Beirut and had to be relocated several times. It has always strived to give education a more holistic meaning, by adding the care for the human, social, cultural and spiritual development of the learners to the academic concerns. It adopts an inclusive educational approach that respects the uniqueness of each learner, and welcomes learners from various religious and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as around 20% of learners who face learning difficulties or have special needs, and who are smoothly integrated in school life.

The objectives of Ursino align with the school's educational goal, by offering the learners an opportunity to be introduced to a variety of local and international culinary traditions through their interaction with the specialists involved. This

process allowed them to focus on what is common among the different regions and communities in Lebanon and on how each community interprets or names the same dishes differently. They also had the chance to discover how certain ingredients and recipes arrived in Lebanon throughout history.

How did the school initially perceive the project?

Nayla Khoury Daoun (NKD): It is important for us, as a school that values citizenship and emphasizes the acceptance of others, the respect for religious, cultural and intellectual differences, and the preservation of others' rights, in the challenging Lebanese context, to offer our learners the opportunity to see the richness and value of these differences. 18 religious communities co-exist in Lebanon and are often very jealous of their specificities and defiant of each other's beliefs.

Being able to do so in collaboration with an NGO which shares the same values and was able to provide us with an access to other cultures in a more authentic way, and from a perspective that we wouldn't necessarily find in an Internet search or a book was definitely a plus. But, more importantly, it was an opportunity for us to shed light on the cultural richness of Lebanon, an aspect that is often occulted by the news related to the political and security situation. It opened the door to initiating discussions among learners from different socio-economic and religious backgrounds

Charlotte and one of the pupils working on food history research, 2022
© Konstelacio

Young women gifting flowers to the military during the Thawra, 2019 © Charlotte Courtois

around topics that allowed them to recognize these differences and name them in a safe environment: exchanging around the recipes prepared for a religious occasion for example could help discuss more sensitive issues related to these feasts and foster a better understanding of each other's faith.

Ursino at Ecole des Trois Docteurs

Charlotte Courtois (CC): On the 15th of October of 2019, I set foot in Beirut to launch the three-week process of Project Ursino. I was later joined by two more volunteers. I led the first workshop, presenting the program and inviting students to begin collecting traditional recipes and conducting interviews with their families.

Only two days later, the events known as the Thawra began, causing the entire country, including schools, to shut down. Project Ursino had to be put on hold. During this unstable period, Konstelacio and ETD invited students and their families to come back to the school amid the protests to participate in Ursino's public collection of recipes. Many did so, showing great interest in the activity, collecting a total of 23 traditional recipes. After this moment of exchange, the national situation became too uncertain, and the project was paused again.

Due to the 2020 explosion and the health crisis, we had to wait 2.5 years before returning to Lebanon in 2022 to complete the project with the same students who

had been patiently waiting. Their engagement was remarkable. They showed much enthusiasm to start working on the project again, being very involved in the research but also in producing professional videos and helping us discover as much of their culinary traditions as we could. Somehow, the previous complications seemed to strengthen our bond and heighten their eagerness to participate in the project and to share their heritage with the world.

In most countries where the project had been implemented, students seemed surprised to find out that their most emblematic recipes were not entirely native of their territory. In Lebanon, students seemed to find the information normal. Lebanon being an openly culturally diverse country, having undergone many waves of migrations (immigration as well as emigration) probably was a key element in this commonly-accepted knowledge. However, the pupils showed much curiosity to discover the exact origins of the main ingredients. They were also very enthusiastic about sharing their culture with the world, including the diversity of cultural

The pupils gathered for Ursino in the midst of the Thawra, 2019 © Simon Guyomard

communities and influences within their country.

The videos they created have been viewed to date more than 400 times worldwide. Konstelacio's goal is to enhance their visibility, along with the other countries' videos, to allow teachers around the world to use the students' work as educational tools.

Leading project Ursino at Ecole des Trois Docteurs, 2019 © Simon Guyomard

What was the impact of Ursino?

NKD: The learners who participated in the project still remember Ursino and follow Konstelacio's work on social media, 3 and 6 years after it was led in Lebanon. When interviewed in 2025 for this article, Mattéa Maghzal, one of the participants of the project, expressed that she felt proud to share the Lebanese culture through our culinary traditions, especially that Lebanese people love to cook and eat. She said that this process helped her know our culture better, feel how cultures around the world are linked to one another and grasp that food and cuisine are a universal language that creates bonds between people. Kira Mubarak, another participant, mentioned that it was important to showcase the richness of Lebanese cuisine and to help others discover it, especially in difficult circumstances. She added that our attachment to our traditions and culture is a form of resilience that confirms that we are deep-rooted in our land and that projects like Ursino help us consolidate our belonging to our nation.

CC: From Konstelacio's perspective, this project is a success. It enabled teenagers to take pride in their heritage. It also encouraged them to reach out to their elders as well as experts such as historians and chefs. The Lebanese phase of Ursino, just as in other countries and maybe even more so due to its challenging political and security situation, showed again how intangible cultural heritage can help foster intercultural and intergenerational dialogue.

Lebanon today and why such projects are important to this country?

Between October 2023 and the ceasefire of 27 November 2024, cross-border hostilities between Israel, Lebanese and Palestinian armed groups significantly escalated and were characterized by numerous daily Israeli air strikes on Lebanese territory; strikes that have continued on-and-off after the ceasefire.

The pupils in 2019 © Simon Guyomard

This situation is related to the long-running conflict between Lebanon and Israel and the deeply complex struggle rooted in regional politics and sectarian tensions that undermine the country. In order to better understand the context, it is important to note that Lebanon does not recognize Israel and considers it an enemy state. Israeli citizens, or anyone with Israeli stamps or visas in their passport, are prohibited from entering Lebanon.

These struggles go beyond the conflict with Israel and are omnipresent in the lives of children and young people. For decades now, Lebanon has continuously been in a form of conflict, both internal and external. Most of the parents are struggling to survive and often count on the support of their community (whether religious group, political party…). This has created internal dissensions in Lebanese society. Being born in such a context is not easy to manage for children and young people.

NKD: As educators, we believe that we have a major role in helping these generations to build the Lebanese society of the future on more solid and coherent grounds.

This is where projects like Ursino play a role in providing a means to write our History and our Story, and to see our nation from a more holistic perspective. It is a long process that requires, first, that each one of us Lebanese reconcile with our past and our history and engage in a process of building the future together. It is a very long and complex process, that we must undertake one step at a time.

Both Konstelacio and Ecole des Trois Docteurs wish to extend their heartfelt thanks to Chef Youssef Akiki and historian Mabelle Chedid for their invaluable participation, patience and availability.

Collecting traditional recipes in the first phase of project Ursino, 2019 © Simon Guyomard

Conclusion

Both Kontelacio and Ecole des Trois Docteurs are convinced that protecting and sharing intangible cultural heritage is crucial, especially in times of armed conflict. Yet, it is equally fundamental to consider it as a way to prevent and resolve conflict. Intangible cultural heritage, whether through culinary traditions as is the case here, or through music, crafts, sports or languages, holds remarkable power. It reminds children and adults, young people and elders, that we have more in common than it may seem, and that human beings should be seen first as individuals, not merely as part of a group with political or religious views.

Using intangible cultural heritage as a tool to create bonds within countries and with the rest of the world, as well as to foster self and mutual understanding, is an incredibly powerful way to help our communities understand the importance of its safeguarding.

If teenagers from a country with as tempestuous history as Lebanon can grasp the value of what unites us through intangible cultural heritage, then we should all strive to remind the world of its value and power.

Résumé

Konstelacio est une ONG basée en France dont la mission est de promouvoir le dialogue interculturel à travers des projets centrés sur le PCI à travers le monde. Fondée en 2011, elle a depuis conçu et mis en œuvre des programmes dans 16 pays, touchant plus de 5500 enfants et adolescents. L'un de ces programmes

s'appelle *Ursino*. Son objectif, à travers l'exploration des traditions culinaires, est d'enseigner aux préadolescents que nos cultures ont toujours été façonnées par des rencontres interculturelles.

Cet article s'intéresse plus particulièrement à une phase spécifique du projet Ursino, menée au Liban en 2019 et en 2022. Les jeunes impliqués dans le projet Ursino avaient 13 à 14 ans lorsqu'il a débuté.

Le Liban a traversé de nombreux conflits, notamment une guerre civile de 1975 à 1990. Dans les deux décennies suivantes, la situation économique du pays s'est profondément dégradée. L'ampleur de la crise est devenue évidente en 2019, lorsque des manifestations massives ont éclaté dans tout le Liban. Elles se sont poursuivies jusqu'en mars 2020, date à laquelle les confinements liés au COVID-19 ont entraîné leur suspension. Des groupes violents ont infiltré le mouvement, tentant de le détourner de ses objectifs initiaux. Le 4 août 2020, une explosion catastrophique au port de Beyrouth a dévasté une grande partie de la ville, révélant encore davantage la profondeur de la crise politique, sociale et économique du Liban.

Entre octobre 2023 et le cessez-le-feu du 27 novembre 2024, les hostilités transfrontalières entre Israël, les groupes armés libanais et palestiniens, dont le Hezbollah, se sont fortement intensifiées et se sont caractérisées par de nombreuses frappes aériennes israéliennes quotidiennes sur le territoire libanais, frappes qui ont ponctuellement continué après le cessez-le-feu.

Cet article est coécrit par Charlotte Courtois, fondatrice de Konstelacio et directrice du projet Ursino, et Nayla Khoury Daoun, ancienne directrice de l'École des Trois Docteurs où les ateliers ont eu lieu. Elles croisent l'analyse des intentions de Konstelacio, les observations de l'école et des entretiens menés avec certains élèves 3 et 6 ans après les ateliers, afin d'explorer l'impact à long terme qu'Ursino a eu sur leur perception du patrimoine culturel immatériel et sur leur relation au monde dans un contexte profondément déstabilisé.

Plutôt que de se concentrer uniquement sur la sauvegarde du PCI en temps de conflit armé, cet article explore comment la documentation, l'analyse et la valorisation du PCI peuvent constituer un outil puissant pour soutenir les populations — en particulier les jeunes — dans des situations de conflit armé.

Charlotte Courtois is the founder and president of NGO Konstelacio (France)

Nayla Khoury Daoun is the former principal of Ecole des Trois Docteurs (Lebanon)

Resilient Communities

Mariia Levchenko
The Berghof Foundation

07

07. Resilient Communities

Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Connecting Factor in Times of Challenged Social Cohesion in Ukraine

Mariia Levchenko
The Berghof Foundation

Abstract

The Berghof Foundation, Germany's largest peacebuilding organization, has worked since 1971 to prevent violence and transform conflict through dialogue, mediation, and negotiation support. Rooted in its Cold War origins and its founder's opposition to militarism, Berghof has evolved from addressing East-West tensions to internal and identity-based conflicts worldwide. Its integrated approach combines practice, learning, and research, ensuring interventions are community-driven and informed by rigorous analysis.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has revealed the centrality of cultural identity in modern warfare. Since 2014, and especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022, the Russian Federation has targeted Ukrainian statehood and identity through historical revisionism, suppression of the Ukrainian language, and the systematic destruction of cultural heritage. UNESCO has verified extensive damage to cultural sites, while Ukrainian books have been burned, museums looted, and schools forced to adopt Russian curricula. Many observers describe this as cultural genocide aimed at erasing Ukraine as a distinct cultural entity.

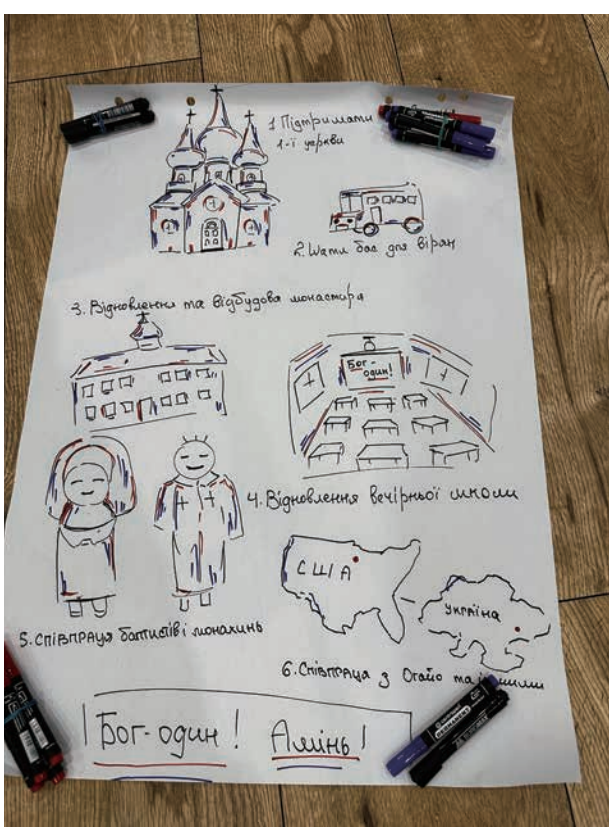
This article showcases how dialogue and mediation efforts can connect with the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). It highlights that safeguarding ICH can be indirectly supported through multi-partial peace efforts, in particular mediation and dialogue facilitation. By drawing on experiences from practice, it adds to current debates by showing that cultural identity and traditions are not peripheral but central elements of resilience and social cohesion in times of war. Safeguarding

ICH is understood not as a reference to "Western" values, but as the preservation of Ukrainian cultural identity, directly targeted by Russian aggression. Protecting and revitalizing traditions, rituals, and collective memory thus becomes an essential part of peacebuilding, ensuring communities maintain a sense of belonging and continuity even under attack.

The Berghof Foundation: A Legacy of Transforming Conflict

The Berghof Foundation is an independent, non-governmental, and non-profit organization established in Germany in 1971. For over fifty years, its mission has been to support efforts to prevent political and social violence and to achieve sustainable peace through conflict transformation (Berghof Foundation n.d.a). This approach involves supporting various actors and processes that seek to convert violent, destructive conflicts into nonviolent social and political exchanges, recognizing that the most durable peace is one that is owned by the people experiencing the conflict themselves.

The Organization's institutional DNA was forged in a specific historical context. Established by Professor Dr. Georg Zundel during the height of the Cold War, it was initially dedicated to supporting critical analysis of the arms race and reducing East-West tensions. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent wars in the former Yugoslavia, including its engagement in reconciliation and "dealing with the past" initiatives in Bosnia and the Western Balkans, the Foundation adapted its focus, using dialogue as a tool for addressing intra-state and ethno-political conflicts, demonstrating an institutional capacity to evolve with the changing landscape of violence (Berghof Foundation n.d.b). This organizational history, steeped in the necessity of "dealing with the past" and questioning manipulated historical narratives, provides the Foundation with a unique practical experience and methodological depth to address conflicts through dialogue. Building on this legacy, the Foundation today applies its conflict transformation approach to support inclusive dialogue and social cohesion in Ukraine, where narratives of the past remain central to community relations and national identity.



Group visualisation of community-led initiatives to safeguard intangible cultural heritage, including the restoration of churches and monasteries, revival of evening schools, and cooperation between Ukrainian and international partners, 2025 © Mariia Levchenko / Berghof Foundation & STAN

The Battlefield of Identity

The Russian aggression against Ukraine, which began in February 2014 with Russia's annexation of Crimea and the incitement of conflict in the Donbas region, escalated into a full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022. From its outset, this war has been explicitly framed by the Russian Federation as a conflict over history and identity (Wall Street Journal 2022). Official rhetoric and essays have systematically denied the existence of a distinct Ukrainian culture, language, and statehood, promoting a narrative that Ukrainians are "one people" with Russians (Shultz and Jasparro 2022).

This assault on identity is being waged through the systematic destruction of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage (ICH). The physical destruction is staggering; as of April 2025, UNESCO had verified damage to 485 cultural sites, including 149 religious sites, 257 buildings of historical or artistic interest, 34 museums, and 33 monuments (UNESCO 2025; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands 2024). This physical destruction is inextricably linked to an attack on Ukraine's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The assault on the Ukrainian language, which has a documented history of suppression spanning centuries, continues with ferocity in

Participants of the workshop on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, jointly implemented by the Berghof Foundation and STAN in Ivano-Frankivsk, 2025 © Mariia Levchenko / Berghof Foundation & STAN

occupied territories through the banning of Ukrainian in schools, the public burning of Ukrainian books, and the imposition of Russian-language curricula (The Times 2022). Simultaneously, Russia is actively rewriting history in occupied zones by looting museums of their most precious artifacts, such as the Scythian gold collection from Melitopol, and replacing Ukrainian historical narratives with Russian propaganda (Soloviova 2025). These actions have been interpreted by Ukrainian and international observers as a unified strategy of identity erasure (Shydlovskyi et al. 2023).

The Main Challenge: The Paradox of Aggression and the Rise of Cultural Resilience

Participants present their group project "Horytsvit" during a session on women's cultural leadership and the preservation of traditional values in post-war Ukraine, 2025 © Mariia Levchenko / Berghof Foundation & STAN

The primary challenge facing the safeguarding of ICH in Ukraine is the profound societal disruption caused by the war. Mass internal and external displacement has fragmented communities, severing people from their cultural roots, practices, and the very landscapes that give their traditions meaning. The bearers of ICH, elders - artisans, storytellers, and community leaders - are killed, displaced, or deeply traumatized, placing the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge at severe risk (Kostin 2024). Furthermore, the destruction of cultural spaces such as community centers, theaters, churches, and libraries eliminates the physical infrastructure where ICH is traditionally practiced, shared, and celebrated.

Yet, within this challenging context, a powerful paradox has emerged. The more the Russian Federation attempts to erase Ukrainian culture, the more consciously and fiercely Ukrainians have embraced it as a tool for survival, resistance, and unity (Odarchenko 2025). In the face of the destruction of formal, state-protected heritage, communities have turned to what can be termed "everyday heritage" as a vital source of resilience (Sapuppo 2024). This phenomenon, where ICH is actively mobilized for community survival, aligns with theoretical frameworks of cultural resilience that define heritage not as a static object, but as an active, community-based process of meaning-making in times of crisis (Larsen and Logan 2018). ICH, being embodied in people, becomes the most sustainable form of heritage. It is what

people can carry with them when they are forced to flee, providing a crucial anchor of identity and continuity amidst profound loss, and one that they may be able to continue to practise, albeit under restrictive conditions.

This activation of everyday ICH manifests in numerous ways:

1. Traditional practices like cooking shared meals, storytelling, and observing spiritual rituals have become critical mechanisms for displaced communities to navigate collective trauma, maintain a sense of normalcy, and sustain vital social bonds ("Ukrainian Folk Culinary Traditions" 2024).
2. Music, dance, and traditional crafts have become powerful outlets for processing trauma and asserting resilience (Kalenichenko 2025).
3. Traditional folklore has been claimed as a tool of non-violent resistance. Similarly, everyday objects have been imbued with extraordinary symbolic power. A simple ceramic rooster jug, which miraculously survived the bombing of an apartment building in Borodianka, became a national talisman embodying Ukrainian endurance and the unbreakable spirit of its people (Naidenko 2022). The jug itself is a traditional Ukrainian household object known as a rooster-shaped jug, widely produced in the early twentieth century and often associated with hospitality and domestic comfort, which adds symbolic depth to its survival.

An Integrated Approach: How the Berghof Foundation Safeguards Heritage for Peace

Facilitators lead a discussion on how creative dialogue and collective storytelling can support the safeguarding of local traditions and intangible cultural heritage, 2025 © Mariia Levchenko / Berghof Foundation & STAN

The Berghof Foundation's work in Ukraine builds on dialogue facilitation as its primary mandate, while acknowledging that issues of ICH often surface as part of community-driven conversations. These conversations usually take place within local communities affected by displacement and trauma, but also involve local authorities, dialogue practitioners, and civil society actors who participate in Berghof-supported dialogue spaces and storytelling rooms. In these cases, ICH becomes a theme that communities link to resilience, healing, and peace. Berghof's role is to provide the processes and safe spaces where such connections can be explored and developed further.

This approach recognizes that, in an identity war, culture is not a separate sector but the very medium through which conflict is experienced and, ultimately, can be transformed. Rather than implementing cultural

Participants' artwork illustrating personal and collective interpretations of cultural identity, heritage, and community resilience, displayed during the final session, 2025 © Mariia Levchenko / Berghof Foundation & STAN

preservation projects, Berghof integrates community discussions on ICH into broader peacebuilding domains such as environmental peacebuilding, transitional justice, and psychosocial support through facilitated dialogue.

This integrated model can be understood through Berghof's areas of intervention:

1) Healing Land, Healing People: Environmental Peacebuilding

The war has inflicted catastrophic environmental damage on Ukraine, from widespread pollution to the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam. In the dialogue process facilitated by Berghof, communities have linked environmental recovery to cultural meaning and resilience. Such initiatives brought together environmental scientists, peacebuilding practitioners, and local communities to develop shared strategies for recovery. Traditional ecological knowledge and the cultural significance of landscapes often arise naturally in these conversations, showing how ICH can support both environmental recovery and community healing (Levchenko 2024). For example, projects that engage military veterans in conservation activities serve the dual purpose of ecological recovery and therapeutic rehabilitation for those affected by conflict trauma.

Final group photo marking the conclusion of the cultural heritage workshop in Ivano-Frankivsk, celebrating traditional Ukrainian embroidery and collective learning, 2025 © Mariia Levchenko / Berghof Foundation & STAN

2) Documenting for Justice and Memory: Transitional Justice and Oral History

Recognizing that justice is a prerequisite for sustainable peace, the Berghof Foundation collaborates with partners such as "The Reckoning Project: Ukraine Testifies" to support the systematic collection of oral testimonies of war crimes (The Reckoning Project n.d.). Here, oral history is understood as part of ICH because it is transmitted person to person, typically by elders, bearers, or eyewitnesses in communal settings, and often follows recognizable narrative forms of traditional storytelling and Berghof's contribution lies in creating trauma-sensitive spaces and networks where these narratives can be gathered, preserved, and valued. For accountability-focused documentation beyond community use, initiatives such as The Reckoning Project collect witness testimonies under legal standards, using trained journalists and lawyers, applying Do No Harm and the Berkeley Protocol, and preserving evidence in secure databases, which is complementary to but distinct from community oral history practice

Traditional "motanka" dolls created during the cultural heritage session, symbolising women's resilience, protection, and continuity of Ukrainian intangible traditions, 2025 © Mariia Levchenko / Berghof Foundation & STAN

3) Social Cohesion Project: Integrating ICH into Berghof's approach

In the face of cultural targeting and societal rupture, Berghof's work with local partners has shown that communities themselves often bring ICH into dialogue as a stabilizing resource. Within Berghof's collaboration with STAN, a local Ukrainian organization based in Ivano-Frankivsk, we began working in 2024 under the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a project focused on strengthening social cohesion in wartime. From the outset, cultural heritage was not introduced as a separate or predefined activity but rather surfaced in dialogue when participants themselves highlighted it as a source of resilience.

The project included one key cultural component: a collective session in which participants created traditional Ukrainian Motanka dolls. This dialogue/cultural session focused on highly sensitive and contested questions such as how peace should be understood in wartime, the role of identity in shaping belonging and exclusion, and the future of language and cultural expression in Ukraine. In this conversation, participants often turned to traditions, rituals, and shared memories as reference points, demonstrating that ICH functioned not only as cultural preservation but also as a framework for imagining community cohesion under conditions of war. This practice, deeply rooted in Ukrainian folk tradition, became much more than a craft exercise. As participants shaped their dolls by hand, without needles as tradition prescribes, and shared stories about similar practices from their childhood or home regions, a sense of familiarity and solidarity took root. Accompanied by traditional Ukrainian songs sung together during the session, the activity created a quiet space of comfort and recognition. Rather than formal documentation or artistic production, the focus of Berghof's facilitation was on providing space for participants to articulate how war had disrupted their cultural practices, and how these practices might quietly support social repair. In this way, safeguarding ICH was understood not as an organizational objective, but as a relational, community-driven process that emerged from dialogue.

What We Have Learned: ICH as a Foundational Strategy for Sustainable Peace

The Berghof Foundation's work in Ukraine has yielded critical lessons that have profound implications for the future of peacebuilding, both in Ukraine and in other identity-based conflicts globally. These experiences are catalyzing an evolution in the field, challenging traditional models and demanding a more central role for cultural heritage in strategies for sustainable peace.

The most crucial lesson is that ICH often proves to be a central community resource for survival, resilience, and social cohesion in times of conflict, serving as a connecting factor in times of disruption. When people's identity is attacked, their living cultural practices, such as language, stories, rituals, and arts become essential tools for asserting identity, maintaining social bonds, and healing from collective trauma. By providing a safe space and a medium through which this trauma can be confronted, dialogue processes allow communities to articulate and reframe their experiences, turning cultural expression into a shared act of meaning-making and recovery. Dialogue and mediation processes can create the enabling environment where such practices are expressed, valued, and revitalized, without Berghof itself prescribing or directing cultural content.

The surviving Borodyanka rooster stands on a kitchen cabinet amid the ruins of a bombed apartment building near Kyiv. This image has become a national symbol of Ukrainian resilience and the endurance of everyday culture under destruction. It reminds us that safeguarding intangible heritage also means preserving the spirit, memory, and identity of communities in times of war, 2025 © Yelyzaveta Servatynska / Suspilne News

Second, the experience in Ukraine has powerfully reinforced a core Berghof principle: the primacy of local ownership and agency. The war has demonstrated the necessity for international organizations to listen to and be led by local actors, supporting the issues they themselves prioritize, rather than defining them externally. This means abandoning prescriptive, one-size-fits-all solutions in favor of flexible, responsive approaches that reflect the needs articulated by Ukrainian civil society.

Third, the effectiveness of the interventions detailed previously confirms the need for a deeply integrated, interdisciplinary approach. Silos between humanitarian aid, peacebuilding, and cultural preservation must be broken down. When communities themselves connect cultural practices to justice, environment, or social healing, it reveals how interlinked these issues are, and Berghof's role is to facilitate the processes that allow these linkages to emerge and strengthen.

Ultimately, the lessons from Ukraine have global applicability. They provide a compelling, evidence-based model for how to approach other conflicts where identity is contested. The experience suggests that ICH should be recognized as a cornerstone of community resilience when raised by local actors, and that international organizations such as Berghof best support it by facilitating inclusive dialogue and safe processes, rather than by defining cultural priorities on behalf of communities. At the same time, Berghof must continuously navigate political sensitivities around national narratives, representation, and ownership of cultural identity, ensuring that facilitation remains impartial and that dialogue spaces are protected from politicization.

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Résumé

La Berghof Foundation, la plus grande organisation allemande de consolidation de la paix, œuvre depuis 1971 pour prévenir la violence et transformer les conflits par le dialogue, la médiation et le soutien à la négociation. Ancrée dans ses origines de Guerre froide et dans l'opposition de son fondateur au militarisme, la Berghof Foundation est passée de la gestion des tensions Est-Ouest à l'intervention dans les conflits intra-étatiques et identitaires à l'échelle mondiale. Son approche intégrée combine pratique, apprentissage et recherche, garantissant que les interventions sont centrées sur les communautés et informées par une analyse rigoureuse.

L'agression de la Russie contre l'Ukraine a révélé la centralité de l'identité culturelle dans la guerre moderne. Depuis 2014, et en particulier après l'invasion à grande échelle de 2022, la Fédération de Russie a ciblé la souveraineté et l'identité ukrainiennes à travers le révisionnisme historique, la suppression de la langue ukrainienne et la destruction systématique du patrimoine culturel. L'UNESCO a constaté d'importants dommages aux sites culturels, tandis que des livres ukrainiens ont été brûlés, des musées pillés et des écoles contraintes d'adopter des programmes russes. De nombreux observateurs qualifient ces actions de génocide culturel visant à effacer l'Ukraine en tant qu'entité culturelle distincte.

Cet article montre comment les efforts de dialogue et de médiation peuvent s'articuler avec la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI). Il souligne que la protection du PCI peut être soutenue indirectement par des initiatives de paix multipartites, en particulier la médiation et l'animation du dialogue. S'appuyant sur des expériences pratiques, il contribue aux débats actuels en démontrant que l'identité culturelle et les traditions ne sont pas des éléments périphériques, mais au contraire centraux pour la résilience et la cohésion sociale en temps de guerre. La sauvegarde du PCI n'est pas comprise ici comme un référent de valeurs « occidentales », mais comme la préservation de l'identité culturelle ukrainienne, directement ciblée

par l'agression russe. Protéger et revitaliser les traditions, les rituels et la mémoire collective devient ainsi un élément essentiel de la consolidation de la paix, permettant aux communautés de maintenir un sentiment d'appartenance et de continuité même sous attaque.

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Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Hub for Resilience

Adel Moussa
Nubian Heritage Society

08

08. Intangible Cultural Heritage as a Hub for Resilience

Adel Moussa
Nubian Heritage Society

Abstract

The Nubian Heritage Society, an Egypt-based NGO, is dedicated to documenting and revitalizing Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in Nubia, focusing on the effects of displacement. This paper analyses the impact of 'slow-onset displacement'—stemming from the construction of the High Dam in the 1960s and subsequent environmental changes—which has led to the gradual disintegration of cultural practices. In response, the Society launched a community-based documentation initiative, "Digitizing Nubian Heritage," in 2006. This analysis demonstrates that ICH serves not merely as a collective memory but as a pivotal tool for resilience and identity reconstruction among displaced generations. This experience underscores the necessity of recognizing non-violent, slow-onset disruptions as genuine threats to cultural continuity.

Introduction

The Nubian Heritage Society is an Egypt-based non-governmental organization dedicated to documenting and revitalizing intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in historically rich yet marginalized communities, with a special focus on Upper Egypt and Nubia. The Society's founding in 1980 was not a coincidence, but rather a local response to raise awareness of the danger of the "extinction and attempted erasure" that threatened Nubian heritage after nearly 17 years of forced displacement. Since its inception, the Society has worked closely with the "living bearers of heritage"—

including storytellers, craftspeople, and folk artists—to root national belonging and encourage collective responsibility for heritage.

While the context is not classified as a conventional armed conflict, the forced displacement resulting from the construction of the High Dam in the 1960s, followed by the more recent effects of climate change, water scarcity, and infrastructure development, has led to the gradual erosion and fragmentation of ICH practices among Nubian communities. Generations have been severed from their ancestral lands, disrupting seasonal rituals, oral storytelling, and musical traditions.

In response, our organization launched a community-based documentation initiative in 2006 entitled "Digitizing Nubian Heritage." The program includes audio-visual recordings with elderly heritage bearers, intergenerational storytelling workshops, and the training of local youth in documentation and archiving techniques. We also collaborated with cultural institutions and centers to record and preserve Nubian heritage.

We have found that intangible heritage serves not only as a collective memory but also as a tool for healing and identity reconstruction. In storytelling sessions, displaced elders reclaim a sense of belonging and cultural pride, while younger generations gain awareness of their history and resilience. By resilience, we refer specifically to the community's capacity for cultural and social continuity—the ability to maintain and adapt their distinct cultural identity despite severe, long-term disruptions.

A woman from a village in West Aswan making a basket from palm fronds, 2019 © Adel Moussa

The *Nuba Noor* troupe of the Nubian Heritage Society performing in Cairo, 2024 © Adel Moussa

This experience has taught us the importance of adopting flexible, community-led approaches to safeguarding ICH under complex displacement conditions. It has also highlighted the need to recognize slow-onset, non-violent disruptions as real threats to cultural continuity.

The Renewed Dimensions of Intangible Cultural Heritage

Intangible cultural heritage represents one of the fundamental pillars for understanding collective identity and preserving the living memory of people, which goes beyond mere rituals or artistic forms to become a holistic system of values, knowledge, and adaptation methods. This heritage is not a static entity; rather, it is a global wealth of traditions and practices passed down through generations and adapted over time, which strengthens a sense of identity and continuity. Its importance increases, in particular, when societies face major shocks, whether they are wars, natural disasters, forced displacement, or environmental change, as it transforms into a living mechanism for resilience and adaptation.

Intergenerational Displacement: A History of Development-Related Forced Migration

Nubian displacement was not a single, sudden event, but a cumulative process of historical shocks that began with the construction of the Aswan Dam in 1902,

which caused the flooding of ten Nubian villages and the displacement of their inhabitants. This was followed by two successive heightenings of the dam in 1912 and 1933, which led to the flooding of other villages and caused additional waves of displacement. This series of displacements culminated with the decision to build the High Dam in the 1960s. This caused the complete submersion of Nubian villages under the waters of Lake Nasser, and led to the largest displacement of about 50,000 people, or 18,000 families from 45 villages to purpose-built 'resettlement' communities in southern Egypt, primarily around Kom Ombo, about 50 kilometers north of the city of Aswan. In addition to those that were either uprooted in the colonial era or had already migrated to other parts of Egypt, approximately 50,000 Nubians from some 45 villages were resettled away from the river Nile.

Although this displacement was described at the time as a pioneering act aimed at development, it was not armed or the result of military conflict. Nevertheless, the displacement process left profound social, psychological, and cultural effects on thousands of Nubians. Some families refused forced migration and chose to remain on the shores of the lake despite the hardship and suffering they endured. This cumulative experience of displacement made the Nubians feel that they were victims of a process that led to the prosperity of Egypt and the drowning of their original homeland.

Slow-Onset Displacement as a Threat to Identity

Understanding the Nubian experience as a case of slow-onset displacement opens a new horizon in the study of migration and heritage. This displacement was not the

The author conducting a storytelling workshop for children in underprivileged areas of the capital, 2020 © Adel Moussa

The author delivering a lecture on traditional costumes during a special event at UNESCO Cairo Office, 2023 © Adel Moussa

result of a sudden disaster or war, but rather of long-term development projects and environmental changes. Slow-onset displacement refers to forced migration caused by gradually accelerating factors—such as long-term infrastructure construction (like the High Dam), climate change effects, and water scarcity—as opposed to rapid events like conflicts or sudden disasters. This type of non-violent disruption is often neglected in international literature that focuses more on displacement resulting from conflicts or sudden natural disasters. However, its impact is no less dangerous, as it causes the disintegration of social ties and the gradual erosion of cultural fabric, representing a real threat to the sustainability of cultural practices. The recognition of slow-onset displacement as a growing global phenomenon is of great importance, as international reports confirm that millions of people are displaced annually due to slow-onset disasters, like drought, and that these cases do not receive sufficient coverage.

This analysis of the Nubian experience highlights the need to pay greater attention to cases that do not receive the same level of media coverage or international support as issues of armed conflict, despite the profound impact they have on cultural identity. Understanding displacement from an environmental and developmental perspective broadens the scope of responsibility to include not only conflicts, but also development policies and the effects of climate change.

The Social and Cultural Impacts of Displacement

This displacement led to profound social and cultural effects, perhaps the most prominent of which is the cultural gap between generations. The older generations who lived in their original homeland found it very difficult to adapt to the new environment and felt alienated and nostalgic. In contrast, the new generation, who were born in the resettlement areas or the areas they migrated to in various Egyptian

governorates, did not feel the same longing for old Nubia, which created a challenge in the transmission of heritage and community ties.

Today, the Nubian language faces real challenges that threaten it with extinction, despite its historical role in achieving victory during the October War. This role involved using the language as an unbreakable cipher by the Egyptian military during radio communication, ensuring that Israeli intelligence could not understand or intercept the military plans. As a result of the displacement, the use of the language has become less common among young people, especially with the phenomenon of bilingualism, which leads them to speak Arabic in their daily lives. The absence of the natural environment that nurtured oral narration and Nubian music led to the gradual erosion of these heritage forms.

Despite the disintegration of social ties and the challenges of cultural extinction, the Nubians did not give up. On the contrary, this sense of loss led to an incentive to build national awareness and strengthen a sense of belonging through holding on to heritage. The popular Nubian narrative about displacement carries elements of sadness and loss, but it also contains images of cohesion and creativity, which allows the community to re-formulate its own narrative away from official narratives. This transformation from a state of victimhood to a state of agency is the essence of cultural resistance. Heritage in this context is not seen as merely a memory of the past, but a vital tool for building generations and a powerful weapon for building collective identity and strengthening resilience in the face of present challenges.

Historical Phase	Geographic Impact	Social and Cultural Impact
Aswan Dam construction 1902	Flooding of ten Nubian villages.	Displacement of residents and loss of land.
Dam heightening 1912 & 1933	Flooding of eight villages, then ten additional villages.	Repeated waves of displacement, beginning of the erosion of social ties.
High Dam construction 1964	Flooding of all old Nubian villages.	Largest displacement of about 18,000 families, disintegration of social ties, appearance of a cultural gap between generations.

The Nubian Heritage Society: A Model for Community Preservation

Foundation and Goals: A Local Response to the Challenge of Extinction

The Society recognizes that heritage is not an abstract entity, but a tributary to sustainable development. One of its main goals is to transform its tangible and

intangible elements into economic resources, and this is evident through its focus on documenting Nubian handicrafts and promoting them through art exhibitions. It also seeks to achieve sustainable development by training local young people to document their heritage, which directly links heritage to economic aspects and ensures its sustainability. This innovative model reflects a deep awareness that heritage preservation cannot be done in isolation from meeting the basic needs of the community and creating new economic opportunities.

Preservation and Digitization Projects: A Bridge Between Memory and Technology

One of the society's most prominent achievements is the Digitization of Nubian Heritage initiative, which was launched in 2006. The initiative not only aimed to collect audio and video recordings of storytellers and elders, but also to train Nubian young people in fieldwork and digital archiving techniques. As part of this work, we established a local advisory council of Nubian elders to review the collected material, ensuring its accuracy and cultural sensitivity. These efforts led to the creation of a comprehensive database and the launch of the Society's official website, which now hosts heritage information and curated photo collections. Parallel to the digital work, we organized training workshops on traditional crafts, mounted exhibitions, and took part in festivals dedicated to Nubian cuisine. We also established a music and dance troupe to perform Nubian songs and traditional dances, which participated in numerous cultural events and served as a vibrant platform for intergenerational transmission. In addition, we gave lectures and awareness sessions, particularly after the Society was registered with UNESCO, where we began to introduce the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage to local

The author leading a folk storytelling workshop in schools, 2023 © Adel Moussa

The *Nuba Noor* troupe before their performance at the Food Day event, 2024
© Adel Moussa

communities. For us, this Convention represented a source of hope, as it explicitly recognizes the central role of community participation in heritage documentation and safeguarding.

Heritage as a Tool for Healing and Rebuilding Identity

The Society's activities reveal a deep therapeutic and educational role for intangible cultural heritage. In the oral storytelling sessions it organizes, the elders find an outlet to express the feelings of sadness and loss they suffered from the loss of their land. In return, the young people learn about the stories of resilience and adaptation that their grandparents lived through, which gives them a sense of pride and belonging. This represents a kind of "collective healing" from the shock of displacement.

Although the official narrative may present displacement as a developmental achievement, the popular Nubian narrative reformulates the experience from the community's own perspective. This gives the Nubians a powerful tool for cultural resistance and helps them confront attempts at erasure. This confirms that heritage functions as a dynamic resource, enabling the community to renew its collective identity and to face contemporary challenges with resilience. Through the stories, songs, and crafts of their ancestors, heritage becomes a source of self-legitimacy and identity in the face of others' narratives, and transforms a marginalized community into an active community that possesses its own narrative, thereby enhancing its ability to be resilient and cohesive.

The Chairman of the Nubian Heritage Society giving a lecture as part of the Society's monthly lecture series, 2022 © Adel Moussa

The Nubian Experience in Light of the 2003 UNESCO Convention

The experience of the Nubian Heritage Society shows a great alignment with the principles of the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. This convention emphasized the necessity of involving local communities as the main actors in protecting their heritage which is the essence of the Society's work, as it relies on decentralized community initiatives and gives young people and women an active role in documentation and transmission.

The convention also calls for "safeguarding through documentation, research, and promotion of heritage" (UNESCO 2003, Article 2.3). The Society's work in archiving and digitization is in complete alignment with these mechanisms. The convention also allows States parties to submit a request for international assistance in urgent cases. The Society's work in documenting its heritage, instead of letting it disappear, is a step toward obtaining international recognition. This recognition gives the Nubian community a global platform to highlight its identity and cause, strengthens the sense of dignity and belonging of its members, and confirms that preserving heritage is a collective responsibility that transcends national borders. This alignment between local initiatives and international frameworks gives the Nubian experience global legitimacy and leads to it being considered a model that can be studied and applied in other similar contexts.

Nubian Heritage Society Goal	2003 UNESCO Convention Principle	Explanation/Alignment
Spreading awareness of the importance of heritage	Article 1 (c): Awareness-raising about the importance of intangible cultural heritage.	Holding monthly seminars and cultural events for all segments of society.
Sustainable development through youth training	Article 2 (3): Safeguarding includes transmission through formal and non-formal education.	Training youth to collect and document heritage using digital means.
Creating a cultural archive	Article 2 (3): Safeguarding includes identifying and documenting heritage.	Launching the "Digitization of Nubian Heritage" initiative to collect video and audio recordings.
Promoting community care for heritage	Article 15: Participation of communities and groups concerned in safeguarding heritage.	Relies on decentralized community initiatives and involves youth and women.

Challenges and Prospects: Protecting Nubian Heritage in the Future

Present Challenges: From Language to Institutional Support

Despite the successes it has achieved, challenges remain. The most prominent of these are limited financial resources and weak official institutional support, which hinders the continuity of projects. The pressures of globalization and market culture also place heritage practices in a fierce confrontation with modern lifestyles. The declining fluency of the Nubian language among the new generations remains a prominent challenge, as it is a language that is transmitted orally, which makes it more susceptible to extinction in the absence of daily practice.

These challenges are exacerbated by the ongoing debate over the "dilemma of return" to old Nubia and its impact on youth identity. There is a difference in attitudes between generations, as elders demand to return out of nostalgia, while some young people who grew up in New Nubia see that educational and job opportunities there are better. This division reflects a difference in the perception of identity - is it linked to

the geographical land or the new social reality? The future of Nubian identity lies not only in a geographical return, but in the community's ability to maintain its cohesion and cultural values wherever it may be. This proves that the role of the Nubian Heritage Society goes beyond mere nostalgia for the past to focus on building an identity capable of adapting to the challenges of the present.

Main Challenge	Impact on Heritage	Strategic Recommendation
Declining fluency in the Nubian language	Loss of oral memory, stories, and songs associated with the language.	Incorporating the language into local curricula, providing training courses, and using technology to teach it.
Limited resources and institutional support	Lack of project continuity and the society's weak ability to expand.	Providing sustainable legal and financial support for civil society organizations, and involving them in official development plans.
Pressures of globalization and modern lifestyles	Marginalization of heritage practices in favor of the dominant culture.	Transforming heritage into economic materials (handicrafts), and using social media to attract youth.
The dilemma of returning to old Nubia	Division in the perception of identity between generations, a feeling of frustration among some youth.	Promoting dialogue between generations, and focusing heritage activities on building identity in its current environment, not linking it to geography alone.

Young girls training to cook traditional dishes during the Food Day event, 2024 © Adel Moussa

Strategic Recommendations for Sustainable Preservation

Based on the above analysis, this article provides a set of strategic recommendations aimed at enhancing the preservation of Nubian heritage in the future:

- At the official and policy level: Governments and international organizations must recognize the concept of "slow-onset displacement" resulting from development and climate change and include it in their strategies. They should also provide sustainable legal, administrative, and financial support for civil society organizations that play a vital role in heritage preservation.
- At the community and cultural level: Technology should be used more widely to digitize heritage and publish content online and on social media to attract younger generations. It is also recommended to organize more workshops that bring together elders and youth to transfer knowledge and experiences directly. Creating living spaces to practice and transmit heritage is more effective than mere archiving.

Nubia as a Global Model for Cultural Resilience

The experience of Nubia and the Nubian Heritage Society provides a rich model for understanding intangible cultural heritage in the context of major transformations. It proves that the loss of land does not necessarily mean the loss of identity. It shows that living heritage is a tool for healing, rebuilding identity, and achieving social resilience in the face of slow-onset displacement. The experience also reveals that climate change is not just an environmental or economic issue, but also a cultural issue that touches the very core of collective memory.

The Nubian experience calls on researchers and policymakers to study similar cases in other contexts that face similar threats, and to rethink the relationship between development, the environment, and heritage. Protecting intangible heritage is not just archiving the past, but an investment in human capacity for adaptation and creativity, and a vital necessity to ensure the continuity of identity in a constantly changing world. This experience confirms that living heritage should be understood as a dynamic resource; constantly evolving and offering societies the means to adapt to changing realities.

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Résumé

La *Nubian Heritage Society*, une ONG basée en Égypte, se consacre à la documentation et à la revitalisation du patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI) en Nubie, en mettant l'accent sur les effets du déplacement. Cet article analyse l'impact du « déplacement à évolution lente » — résultant de la construction du Haut Barrage dans les années 1960 et des changements environnementaux qui ont suivi — et qui a conduit à la désintégration progressive de pratiques culturelles.

En réponse, la Society a lancé en 2006 une initiative communautaire de documentation intitulée « Numériser le patrimoine nubien » (*Digitizing Nubian Heritage*).

L'analyse montre que le PCI ne constitue pas seulement une mémoire collective, mais un outil essentiel de résilience et de reconstruction identitaire pour les générations déplacées. Cette expérience souligne la nécessité de reconnaître les perturbations non violentes et à évolution lente comme de véritables menaces pour la continuité culturelle.

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Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Military

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09

09. Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Military

New Partnerships in Uncertain Times

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Abstract

In 2024, Wrocław, Poland, hosted the first-ever conference and workshop that brought military forces, heritage specialists, NGOs and government officials together to examine the role of armed forces in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) in diverse military activities. This article reflects critically on the outcomes of that gathering, situating them in the framework of UNESCO's 2020 Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding ICH in Emergencies and the 2022 and 2025 MONDIACULT documents. While the Polish case offers fresh pathways for cooperation in times of global tensions and anxieties, it also reveals enduring ethical, operational, and legal challenges. For NGOs working in fragile or conflict-affected states, careful engagement with the military may now be unavoidable. But such engagement must be ethically principled, transparent, community-centred, and guarded against instrumentalization.

Introduction

In early September 2024, Wrocław's military International Centre for Training and Research on Cultural Heritage in Danger convened the first-ever conference and workshop on *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Military Activities*. It was co-organized with the Polish Ministry of Defence and the UNESCO Chair on ICH

Official opening of the conference and a workshop by the Secretary of the 2003 Convention, Mrs Fumiko Ohinata, 4th September, 2024 © Staff Sgt. Rafał Łebkowski

in Public and Global Governance at the University of Warsaw, and supported by several partnering institutions: National Institute of Museums, National Institute of Cultural Heritage, Polish Blue Shield Committee, Polish Naval Academy, Museum of Papermaking in Duszniki-Zdrój, and Ethnographic Museum in Wrocław.

The event brought together a rare mix of voices: Polish military officers and reservists, policy-makers, museum professionals, and local cultural authorities, together with Polish, Ukrainian and international NGO representatives. The event focused on exchanging experiences, analyzing and discussing aspects of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, both in general and in military-specific contexts. The discussions addressed methods and strategies to ensure respect for the intangible heritage of diverse communities, groups, and individuals by the armed forces during military operations and in peacetime. The conference also provided an opportunity to explore ways to raise public awareness of the importance of intangible cultural heritage and to define the role and responsibilities of the armed forces in this area. Over 100 participants from both civilian and military sectors attended the event. My introductory lecture was titled "From El Condor Pasa to Ukrainian Borscht: The Genealogy of Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and Its Significance for Civil-Military Cooperation".

Over two days, panels addressed ICH in crisis situations, the nature of military

traditions as living heritage, case-studies on ICH safeguarding challenges from conflict zones (Ukraine, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan) and culminated in four workshop groups tasked with diagnosing the state of civil-military cooperation in the field of ICH and recommending actionable measures to enhance it.

The urgency of the meeting was not abstract. The Russian aggression on Ukraine has repeatedly shown that intangible practices – such as Ukrainian borscht culture, inscribed into the Urgent Safeguarding List in July 2022, but also traditional art of decorating eggs (*pysanka*), inscribed into the Representative List of ICH of Humanity in 2024, or Safeguarding programme of kobza and wheel lyre tradition, inscribed in 2024 into the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices – are markers of identity and resilience when armed conflict results in massive killing and attacks on civilian population, its displacement, suppression, and attempts to erasure its independent status.

At the same time, the event allowed for discussion of diverse roles of armed forces: militaries are increasingly present not just as protectors or destroyers of culture, but could also be institutional bearers of intangible heritage themselves – through their tradition-based ceremonies, honors, flags, banners, and rituals. The results of this meeting shall be first contextualised through the lenses of normative documents that address the role of armed forces for safeguarding ICH.

Panel *Intangible cultural heritage in crisis situations – the context of war in Ukraine*, moderated by dr hab. Marta Szuniewicz-Stępień, Professor at the Polish Naval Academy, featured dr Oksana Humeniuk from the NGO "Around Us. UA" from Ukraine, Dr Janusz Radwański from the Folk Culture Museum in Kolbuszowa and Marek Lemiesz from the National Heritage Institute, 5th September 2024 © Staff Sgt. Rafał Łebkowski

Hanna Schreiber and Wojciech Bal, Director of the Department of Education, Culture and Heritage in the Ministry of Defense discuss the results of the workshop conducted with the metaplan method, 5th September 2024 © Staff Sgt. Rafał Łebkowski

UNESCO's Operational Principles and Modalities (2020) and armed forces

The *Operational Principles and Modalities for Safeguarding ICH in Emergencies* were adopted by the 8th General Assembly of States Parties to the 2003 UNESCO Convention in 2020. The document is explicitly designed to guide States Parties and other stakeholders — including national and international actors — on how to safeguard ICH amidst armed conflict, natural disasters, and human-induced crisis. It frames emergencies as diverse in scale and type, acknowledges that different stakeholders will have different capacities, and names *armed forces* among those who have an important role to play. Key provisions relevant to military involvement include Principle 5 and Modality 3 in the phase of "response":

Principle 5.: National and international stakeholders involved in emergency management – including disaster preparedness and relief specialists, humanitarian actors, non-governmental organizations and armed forces – have an important role to play in safeguarding affected intangible cultural heritage and supporting concerned communities to draw on this heritage in preparing for and responding to emergencies. (UNESCO 2020).

Modality 3: Share information within and between affected States Parties and other stakeholders, particularly humanitarian actors, relevant non-governmental organizations and/or armed forces, to determine the nature and extent of the disruption to intangible cultural heritage and the scope for engaging it in mitigation.

Discussion in one of the working groups on intangible heritage in civil-military cooperation, 5th September 2024 © Staff Sgt. Rafał Łebkowski

This is also to ensure that relief operations take full account of the existing intangible cultural heritage and contribute to its safeguarding.

However, because of the framework nature of the document, it is thin on concrete operational prescriptions in the heat of conflict: how command structures interface with living heritage safeguarding obligations; how military necessity might conflict with safeguarding ICH; what oversight and accountability mechanisms are needed when military operations either endanger or support viability of intangible heritage. These matters have to be worked out according to other international, but most of all national regulations, military doctrines and armed forces rules of engagement.

MONDIACULT 2022 Declaration

In September 2022, UNESCO's *World Conference on Cultural Policies and Sustainable Development* (MONDIACULT 2022) adopted a *Declaration for Culture* in Mexico City. The Declaration affirmed culture as a global public good and committed to integrating culture into sustainable development goals, peacebuilding efforts, and public policy across sectors. It condemned "actions that target culture in the context of armed conflicts and the use of cultural properties or its surroundings for military purposes" (par.14), expressed concerns about "the impact of contemporary challenges associated with the global landscape, as well as multiple, protracted and multidimensional crises", including the dramatic consequences of armed conflicts (2nd recital in the preamble), reaffirmed "the imperative of protecting and promoting

human rights and cultural diversity, in view of the increasing threats to culture and its use for purposes which are likely to expose it to destruction or damage in the context of armed conflicts" (5th recital in the preamble).

Calling for culture to be embedded into different policy frameworks and public governance — not isolated under culture ministries only, but transversal through climate, education, disaster risk reduction, and conflict response – the MONDIACULT Declaration provides political legitimacy for cross-sectoral policy. An expanded idea of "public good" allows for living heritage to be integrated in civil defence mechanisms, emergency preparedness, and even military training or response, so long as cultural rights and community participation are respected. This requires however active efforts and plans on the country level.

Insights from the Wrocław meeting: what emerged

The conference in Wrocław provided concrete examples of the relevance of these normative frameworks. First of all, from the Ukrainian testimonies (NGO "Around Us.UA"), and experiences of the Museum of Folk Culture in Kolbuszowa, located two hours from the Polish-Ukrainian border, to discussions of heritage suppression, the war illustrated how ICH becomes a frontline of identity. Loss isn't only material – the loss is of transmission (e.g. because of constant targeting of the civilian population and resulting displacement), or of status (a tradition becomes suppressed and stigmatised under Russian occupation), or communal safety and confidence. The matter of Russian cultural imperialism and new methods for inventorying losses of cultural heritage within the framework of the Ukrainian Heritage Rescue Project 2022-2024, were discussed.

Secondly, among the recurring themes were low awareness of the 2003 Convention and its content, insufficient educational channels reaching groups other than the "usual suspects", lack of concrete legal infrastructure specific to ICH in emergencies, under-resourced regional/provincial heritage staff. Poland, for example, does not yet have a legal act dedicated to ICH safeguarding, and existing amendments in the law on museums or on archives, are of additive nature: by adding "and intangible heritage" to tangible heritage.

Thirdly, the workshop groups found no standardized procedures or communication channels for preserving ICH during emergencies between military and civilian bodies. Military actors are usually not trained on ICH, cultural ministries are not frequent parts of emergency drills and strategic documents do not mention intangible heritage in operational planning. However, as noted in the keynote lecture, the topic of local customs and traditions that shall be respected is already rooted in NATO training under the term of "cultural awareness". NATO doctrine on CIMIC

– civil-military cooperation (as of June 2025) – directly involves it, when pointing to a "comprehensive approach": "Applying a comprehensive approach requires commanders, their headquarters, and forces to understand friendly, neutral, adverse, and potentially hostile non-military actors' motivations, culture, and principles. To promote unity of purpose, they have to invest in building trust and relationships with friendly and neutral non-military actors based on cultural awareness, attempting to find common goals, being transparent, open, and consistent with their communication" (Section 2. CIMIC principles).

Comparable civil–military cooperation concepts exist beyond NATO and its member states, although in many countries under different names, structures and purposes. This cooperation is also required by the Article 7(2) of the 1954 Hague Convention which states: "The High Contracting Parties undertake to plan or establish in peace-time, within their armed forces, services or specialist personnel whose purpose will be to secure respect for cultural property "*…and to co-operate with the civilian authorities responsible for safeguarding it*" (UNESCO 1954). To address this matter, on the 16th of May 2025, the first UNESCO Civil-Military Alliance Forum was established. The Forum is aimed at being a platform for various stakeholders to explore good practices in civil-military cooperation at the international and national levels, share knowledge on advanced technologies, and advocate for the establishment of specialized military units for the protection of cultural property. However, it does not speak about intangible heritage. This demonstrates that while NATO currently provides the most formalised framework, the idea of structured relations between armed forces and civilian actors is a global practice, though with varying degrees of focus on cultural or heritage dimensions, and (as of now) not referring directly to the 2003 Convention. Therefore, there is a need to explore existing terminology to demonstrate the relevance and actual presence of ICH.

Fourthly, Polish officers and scholars insisted that many practices internal to the armed forces – ceremonies around the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, rituals of flags and banners, knowledge, skills, symbols tied to unit identity – are themselves intangible heritage. They are not yet formally inventoried as such, but they are inter-generationally transmitted and matter deeply for morale, identity, discipline in the army, and for public memory. The recognition of the elements of ICH among military traditions could provide a good ground for rooting the concept of ICH and raising awareness about it in the armed forces, and finally result in its better safeguarding during armed conflict. Only by being aware of the meaning and value of our own identity-based traditions, are we ready to understand the meaning and value of the traditions of others. This interrelationship between cultural awareness as an indispensable starting point for cross-cultural awareness is well developed in the literature on the role of culture and cultural education in military structures and operations.

Concrete recommendations discussed among the Wrocław meeting participants were twofold: general recommendations for all sectors and specific ones for civil-military cooperation. Broad policy reform, inter-ministerial coordination, legal adaptation, broader education, ICH digitisation, and support for "last bearers" of traditions were mentioned as those of a general character. In the civil-military domain, key actions recommended include embedding living heritage in military training, creating more comprehensive heritage liaison roles, compiling risk inventories with safeguarding measures and plans for emergencies, developing manuals for operational planners, and integrating living heritage considerations into strategic documents, such as national security strategy.

What tensions and risks must NGOs take into account?

While the Polish case shows promising openings, several tensions emerge that NGOs working in ICH must not ignore. Frameworks like the ICH Convention and its Operational Directives, Ethical Principles for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO 2015), Operational Principles and Modalities and MONDIACULT Declaration insist on community primacy: those who live traditions, carry them forward, decide what matters. Military organisations are inherently hierarchical, and security logic privileges command, obedience, and centralised control. NGOs must ensure mechanisms for obtaining free, prior, informed consent from communities for any actions, advocate transparent decision-making, and real

Group picture of all participants of the first conference and a workshop on intangible cultural heritage in military activities, International Centre for Training and Research on Cultural Heritage in Danger. Wrocław, 4-5th September 2024 © Staff Sgt. Rafał Łebkowski

Presenting the results of a workshop conducted with metaplan method by the representatives of the one of the working groups, 5th September 2024 © Staff Sgt. Rafał Łebkowski

community control over how their heritage is safeguarded in civil-military cooperation.

Militaries may also see living heritage primarily as symbolic capital: valuable for legitimation, morale, recruiting support, or winning "hearts and minds." While that is not always negative, it can lead to selective recognition or even suppression of traditions that seem uncomfortable or challenge military unity or state authority. NGOs need to guard against ICH being instrumentalised in ways that silence dissent or marginalize minority traditions, even in the army. The example discussed by military personnel was the religious diversity within the Polish Armed Forces, including Muslim Orthodox, Jewish and other faiths, and challenges related to their visibility and acknowledgement vis-a-vis the dominant Catholic denomination.

The existing operational frameworks assign roles but not rights and obligations: they ask for information sharing, access to inventories, but offer little or no enforcement for ICH safeguarding in situations of armed conflict – as is in the Polish case right now. When hostilities occur, state parties' obligations under ICH law will intersect and sometimes conflict with international humanitarian law (IHL), military necessity, and security doctrines, because states are often unclear about how to fulfil ICH obligations during hostilities or occupation. NGOs and other ICH partners must press for clearer legal norms and for oversight mechanisms to ensure military compliance with living heritage protection in emergencies.

It was also acknowledged that, even where good will for cooperation is present, resources are often not. Heritage staff, regional offices, and funding are weak. Sustained transmission of ICH requires long time frames while military deployments or emergencies are episodic. Without ongoing training, legal structures, educational programmes, NGOs' and states' efforts risk being symbolic or simply ignored.

Recommendations and implications for NGOs: what can we do?

Drawing from Wrocław's workshop findings, and the wider policy texts, I would like to suggest some key options for NGO actions in this field.

1. We need advocacy for legal frameworks

Push for national laws or procedural regulations that explicitly integrate safeguarding of intangible heritage into emergency legislation, civil protection policy, military doctrine and national security strategies. Where such laws already exist, ensure they include procedures to handle intangible heritage, such as: inventories, risk mapping, and heritage liaison points (that would cover not only cultural property, as is usually the case, but also living heritage) in military command structures.

2. We need civil-military cooperation, mutual understanding and awareness

NGOs can partner with cultural ministries, military academies and heritage institutions to provide training and materials that explain the ICH Convention, the Operational Principles in Emergencies, and the importance of living heritage safeguarding in conflict settings. Awareness raising and training should reach and connect, if possible, all actors including representatives of armed forces, local communities, policy-makers and NGOs, as important cultural brokers.

3. We need to engage in creating dedicated safeguarding measures for emergencies

Map at the national and regional level the ICH elements that are most vulnerable in emergencies, incorporating community input to create concrete plans and procedures that will effectively safeguard ICH during an emergency. Ensure that there are mechanisms to track the impacts of military operations on intangible heritage, to report threats and to enable cooperation. Advocate that military operations respect not only physical safety but also the cultural rights of communities.

4. We need to support sustained collaboration before conflict hits

Identify pilot projects where civil-military cooperation over ICH can be tried in non-crisis settings (joint training, emergency preparedness planning with living heritage components). These help to build trust, clarify roles, and reveal unforeseen issues. Collaboration should ideally be further institutionalised (not ad hoc), so expectations, responsibilities and resources are stable.

5. We need to be aware of ethical boundaries

We need clarity on what NGOs will and will not do. NGOs should define, in writing, their 'red lines', for example: refusing cooperation if military operations violate cultural rights, or if cooperation leads to abuse for the sake of propaganda or cultural misappropriation. We must be guardians of commitment to community consultation, transparency and the avoidance of exploitation of living heritage for political or military purposes. The Ethical Principles for Safeguarding ICH (2015) must guide our actions.

Connecting to global momentum

The Wrocław case does not stand alone. Across the world, stakeholders increasingly view culture as an axis of social resilience, peace, security and human rights. The framing of culture as a global public good in the MONDIACULT documents of 2022 and 2025, and their emphasis on transversal policy towards culture, cultural rights and heritage in crisis, give international legitimacy to those pushing for civil-military cooperation in ICH safeguarding. The MONDIACULT Declaration and the MONDIACULT Outcome Document 2025 can serve as a resource in advocacy: when States commit at the multilateral level to integrate culture into disaster risk reduction, security and sustainable development, NGOs can point to those commitments when pressing for national policies, budget allocations, and involvement in civil-military cooperation mechanisms that also take living heritage into account.

Keynote lecture by Hanna Schreiber, *From El Condor Pasa to Ukrainian Borscht. Genealogy of the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* and *its relevance for civil-military cooperation*, 4th September 2024. © Staff Sgt. Rafał Łebkowski

The Operational Principles of 2020 similarly provide normative content: they speak of armed forces and others as possible stakeholders; they stress community primacy, call for risk assessment and preparedness, and demand information sharing. However, both MONDIACULT documents and the Operational Principles leave much under-specified. The Polish first meeting, then, is valuable as an early exemplar and the identified matters are instructive. For NGOs, the path forward is neither to romanticise nor to demonise militaries. Rather, it is to build ethical, operational, legally aware partnerships that place communities and their traditions at the centre, that resist instrumentalization, insist on accountability, prepare and rehearse before crisis; and that draw on policy frameworks like the 2020 Operational Principles and the MONDIACULT documents for legitimacy and leverage.

Practical takeaway:
Why and how to engage as an NGO in cooperation with the military

Why?
In emergencies, the military is often among the first responders: securing territory, facilitating displacement logistics, coordinating relief, and safeguarding communities under threat. For many communities, intangible heritage offers vital anchors in times of stress and tension — for their mental health, dignity, communal memory and social cohesion. NGOs engaged in living heritage work need to recognize that, without cooperation with those who control security and logistics, many living heritage elements become impossible to safeguard or to employ as a tool of community resilience. Cooperation offers the chance to have living heritage included in emergency planning, to minimise negative impacts of armed conflicts, and to foster community resilience with dignity. NGOs should not hide in an "ivory tower" ignoring the practicalities of emergencies that include armed forces.

How?
Start with defining common ground and an invitation for cooperation to relevant units and/or military training centres: build trust and shared awareness through establishing channels for dialogue, training, and joint workshops well before crisis or conflict hits. Reflect on the potential of establishing cultural or heritage liaison focal points or advisors within military structures, and get acquainted with the "military language" and specifics. Insist on community primacy and discuss developing practical tools: "living heritage-emergency checklists" for military operations and safeguarding measures dedicated to ICH in emergencies. Remember that armed forces are usually well and continuously trained and find ways of integrating the topic of living heritage into their training programmes, possibly through the topic of civil-military cooperation and cultural awareness. Remain aware of ethical risks but also open for dialogue and mutual understanding.

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Résumé

En 2024, Wrocław, en Pologne, a accueilli la toute première conférence-atelier réunissant forces armées, spécialistes du patrimoine, ONG et représentants gouvernementaux afin d'examiner le rôle des forces armées dans la sauvegarde du patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI) au cours de diverses activités militaires.

Cet article propose une réflexion critique sur les résultats de cette rencontre, en les situant dans le cadre des *Principes et modalités opérationnels pour la sauvegarde du PCI en situation d'urgence* de l'UNESCO (2020) et de la Déclaration MONDIACULT (2022). Si le cas polonais ouvre de nouvelles voies de coopération en période de tensions et d'incertitudes mondiales, il révèle également des défis éthiques, opérationnels et juridiques persistants.

Pour les ONG intervenant dans des États fragiles ou affectés par des conflits, un engagement prudent avec les forces armées peut désormais s'avérer inévitable. Toutefois, un tel engagement doit être fondé sur des principes clairs, être transparent, centré sur les communautés et protégé de toute instrumentalisation.

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Bridging Division Through Living Heritage: Reflections on Korea's Shared Intangible Cultural Ties

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10. Bridging Division Through Living Heritage: Reflections on Korea's Shared Intangible Cultural Ties

Exploring Cultural Continuity and Peacebuilding Across the Korean Peninsula

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In memory of my great-grandparents, who spent their final years in Abai Village while waiting to return to their home in the North.

Abstract

This paper explores how shared intangible cultural heritage (ICH) can support peacebuilding on the Korean Peninsula, where political division persists despite enduring cultural ties. Using examples such as Arirang and Sokcho Saja Noreum, it examines how displaced communities preserve and reinterpret traditions as living forms of memory and identity. The paper introduces "intangible institutions"—community-led, flexible structures that foster dialogue through cultural participation. As the war generation fades, sustaining this shared heritage becomes a collective responsibility. Through memory, creativity, and participation, ICH becomes a vessel for transforming division into dialogue and cultivating a lived culture of peace.

Memory, Loss, and Cultural Continuity

The power of intangible cultural heritage is deeply personal. Some of my relatives lived in the North and were never reunited with our family in the South until their deaths. Their stories, shared quietly around the dinner table, were filled with longing and resignation. They spoke of childhood homes they would never return to, family members they would never meet again, and places that could only be visited in memory. In those moments, I began to understand how culture—our songs, gestures, and rituals—can outlive even the deepest political borders. These expressions are not


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merely remnants of the past; they are living threads that continue to connect people across decades of division.

When the Korean War broke out in 1950, it tore through the peninsula with unimaginable devastation. More than three million people lost their lives, and roughly ten million families were separated by the war's end (NARA n.d.). Entire generations grew up on one side of the border without ever knowing their relatives on the other. Now, over seventy years later, many of those who witnessed the war firsthand are fading. In fact, the memories they carried are increasingly transmitted less through direct storytelling and more through cultural practice—through intangible cultural heritage (ICH) that continues to embody their memories and shared humanity. Thus, ICH stands not as a relic of tradition but as a living reminder of who we are—persisting even when the tides of history tried to wash that memory away.

On June 13, 2000, South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il greet each other in Pyongyang during the first inter-Korean summit—their historic meeting marking the first official exchange between the two Koreas since the end of the Korean War © Korea Herald

Culture as a Bridge in Divided Times

One of the most striking examples of cultural exchange between the two Koreas occurred during the celebration of the first Inter-Korean Summit in 2000, when the Pyongyang Circus Troupe visited Gangwon-do in South Korea (KBS World 2018). The performance took place in a region where many displaced families reside, giving the event an emotional resonance far beyond spectacle. While South Korean media often frame such encounters as instruments of state-level diplomacy, they also reveal something more fundamental: shared cultural expressions can momentarily collapse the psychological distance between two societies accustomed to viewing each other through suspicion. A single acrobatic gesture or familiar melody can achieve what political language often cannot—a reminder of an enduring sense of shared belonging.

Arirang exemplifies this shared emotional vocabulary. Often described as Korea's "unofficial national anthem," Arirang is not a single song but a constellation of regional variants connected by themes of longing, resilience, and quiet hope. Emerging from communal singing traditions of the late Joseon period, the song was historically performed during labor, seasonal rituals, and community gatherings, providing an expressive space through which people processed hardship and affirmed solidarity (KHA 2021).

In South Korea, regional variations such as Jeongseon, Jindo, and Miryang Arirang highlight local participation and diversity. In North Korea, by contrast, large-

Left **Shaping the lion mask mold - The basic form of the saja (lion) mask is first modeled in clay, creating a mold that defines the overall volume and facial features © Korea Heritage Service**

Right **Building the mask frame with hanji - Layers of hanji (traditional Korean paper) are carefully pasted over the clay mold to create a thick, sturdy shell that will become the main frame of the mask © Korea Heritage Service**

scale staged versions emphasize collective discipline and national pride, especially during mass games and state festivals. Despite these divergent ideological uses, the melody's emotional core remains strikingly similar across the peninsula (IHU 2011). North Korea's grand Arirang performances—especially between 1998 and 2008 during the Geumgangsan Tourism Project—were gradually adapted to be more sensitive to South Korean audiences. Meanwhile, in South Korea, Arirang became the subject of a modern musical celebrating resilience and unity (Leem, Song & Lee 2018). During the 2002 World Cup, the North and South Korean teams marched under a single "unification flag" as Arirang played, echoing across a global stage (Green 2002). Both North and South claim Arirang as part of their national identity, but its essence lies not in possession but in participation—a melody threaded through the voices that refuse to forget.

The song's dual inscription on the UNESCO Representative List—South Korea in 2012 and North Korea in 2014—underscores the unusual situation in which two distinct political systems formally recognize the same cultural root (UNESCO 2012; UNESCO 2014). Arirang endures not because it is fixed, but because it continues to be reinterpreted and sung across generations. In this sense, Arirang demonstrates how intangible heritage can hold together the fragments of a divided history.

From Stage to Street: Heritage in Practice

The shared spirit of intangible heritage—grounded in a participatory ethos—also lives in community-based traditions like Sokcho Saja Noreum, designated as Gangwon-do Intangible Cultural Heritage No. 31. Rooted in the Bukcheong region of present-day North Korea, Saja Noreum is a lion-mask folk drama traditionally performed during the first full moon of the lunar year to dispel misfortune and bless the community.

After the Korean War, displaced families from Hamgyeong-do carried the practice south to Sokcho, where it was reconstructed within one of the largest concentrations

of Bukcheong-origin refugees (KHS n.d.; NRICH 2022). What distinguishes this tradition is how it serves not merely as performance but as collective memory and identity-work for the displaced community. Over time, the name evolved from Bukcheong Saja Noreum to Sokcho Bukcheong Saja Noreum and finally to Sokcho Saja Noreum, reflecting a gradual shift from homeland memory to local belonging (Bae 2018).

The ritual itself begins with a pair of masked lions accompanied by flutes and pungmul percussion, moving through homes and alleyways in a dynamic procession that includes acrobatic dances, mock combat, and ritual blessings. In Sokcho, the ritual has taken on heightened significance as a "living archive" of heritage, continually re-created rather than simply preserved. New generations learn mask-making, performance techniques, and tour-rituals through local schools and a dedicated preservation society, ensuring that the practice remains rooted in community agency and intergenerational transmission (Abai Village n.d.; Sorak News 2021). Through this ongoing renewal, Sokcho Saja Noreum demonstrates how intangible heritage migrates, adapts, and endures—safeguarding not only a cultural form but also diasporic memory, belonging, and the emotional landscape of exile.

In the narrow alleys of Abai Village, perched along Sokcho's coastline, the legacy of displacement and resilience is etched into each peeling wooden house and salt-sprayed rooftop. On the memorial stone brought from Myeongcheon, Hamgyeong Province, the inscription reads: "It grieves me that I cannot go though I long to; it grieves me that you cannot come though you wish to." Once carved into the Manghyangbi—the Monument in Honor of Korean War Refugees—this brief verse speaks plainly of exile and yearning (Abai Village n.d.).

Crafting the movable jaw from plywood - A separate lower jaw is cut and shaped from thin plywood, designed to move independently and enhance the lion's expressive motion © Korea Heritage Service

After the Korean War, thousands of refugees from the North—mainly from Hamgyeong-do Province—settled here near the Armistice Line, believing they would soon return home once the war ended. Yet the war has never officially concluded, and what began as a temporary settlement became a lasting community. The very name Abai comes from the Hamgyeong dialect, meaning a kindly old man, a word that carries both affection and nostalgia (Yoon 2024). Over time, this small coastal settlement transformed into a living archive of northern-origin culture, preserving dialects, recipes, rituals, and stories that might otherwise have disappeared.

Today, Abai Village stands at the intersection of memory and everyday life. Each autumn, the streets come alive with the rhythmic drums and roaring lions of

the Saja Noreum performed by descendants of displaced families. For both residents and visitors, Abai Village becomes a spatial metaphor for intangible heritage itself: culture carried through movement and memory, taking root in new soil, nurturing identity, and offering hope in the wake of separation. Local associations and cultural centers such as the Sokcho Saja Noreum Preservation Society play a quiet but powerful role in keeping these traditions alive. They do not simply "preserve" performances; they cultivate belonging. Each gesture, costume, and rhythm becomes a conversation between generations—a reminder that intangible heritage is not a monument but a movement, continuously renewed through participation (UNESCO 2003).

Reimagining the Role of Communities and NGOs

For heritage to function as a meaningful tool of peacebuilding, it requires active participation from communities, NGOs, and local cultural institutions. While high-level diplomacy—such as the Inter-Korean Summit—often garners international attention, sustainable peace grows through everyday collaboration (Jeong 2021). NGOs in South Korea have quietly supported displaced communities, organized cultural workshops in border regions, and documented the oral histories of divided families. Although these efforts rarely make headlines, they contribute to the emotional and relational infrastructure necessary for reconciliation.

Finishing with multicolored thread fringes - Finally, fringes made from osaek-sil (five-coloured threads) are attached around the mask, completing the lion's mane and adding vibrancy to the overall design © Korea Heritage Service

A traditional folk illustration portraying Bukcheong Saja Noreum. The figure guiding the lion by a rope reflects the dance's ritual origins, in which performers led the lion through villages to chase away misfortune and bring communal blessings © Korea Heritage Service

As Lederach (2006) reminds us, lasting peace is not the product of a single event but a continuous process—one built through relationships, imagination, and creativity. The work of peace is less about the resolution of issues and more about the restoration of relationships. In this context, intangible cultural heritage—performed, sung, danced, and shared—offers precisely the kind of relational space where new forms of understanding can emerge.

When heritage becomes participatory, it transforms the idea of peace from a policy goal into a lived practice. A shared festival, community reenactment, or transborder cultural workshop can help heal historical trauma not by erasing difference, but by recognizing and reimagining it. In this way, heritage becomes both a mirror and a bridge—a reflection of pain, and a path beyond it.

Intangible Institutions: Cultural Imagination as a Framework for Peace

Building on the role of NGOs and communities in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, we can imagine a broader framework where heritage becomes a lived practice of peace rather than a preservation task (UNESCO 2010). In contexts where "reunification" carries a heavy ideological weight, participation often speaks more effectively than rhetoric. As explored in my earlier research (Park 2019), cultural intervention functions not as propaganda but as participatory transformation—a premise that continues to guide this work. Because these forms of participation create sustained interpersonal contact, shared cultural experiences, and locally driven

This contemporary depiction of Bukcheong Saja Noreum performed in Sokcho's Abai Village reflects the continuity of the tradition, showcasing the same characteristic costumes and performer arrangement found in historical representations of the dance, as seen in Images 9 and 10. © Eom Gyeong-seon

cooperation, they generate the kinds of social relationships that formal diplomacy alone cannot produce.

To continue developing these forms of social connection, NGOs and communities must function as intangible institutions—flexible, practice-based structures grounded in collaboration rather than state agendas. Their relative independence enables them to facilitate dialogue in ways that formal political actors often cannot, when supported by thoughtful, community-responsive approaches. Through continuous programming, documentation, education, and community engagement, these organizations help maintain relationships, transmit cultural knowledge, and create practical channels for cooperation. Over time, such sustained efforts build the social conditions necessary for mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence in contexts affected by prolonged armed conflict, including the Korean Peninsula.

A Shared Responsibility for the Future

As regional tensions rise and the first generation of war survivors fades, what remains are the cultural traces they carried—songs like Arirang and rituals like Saja Noreum—vessels of memory shaped by survival and displacement. The responsibility for sustaining and reactivating this shared heritage now rests with us. Engaging with

Fourth-grade elementary school students applaud as they watch a broadcast of President Moon Jae-in arriving at Pyongyang Sunan Airport, where North Korean leader Kim Jong-un receives him during the third inter-Korean summit in 2018 © Yonhap News

heritage means participating in history as co-creators, not observers. When communities, NGOs, and cultural workers collaborate, intangible heritage becomes a medium through which empathy and understanding can grow.

Heritage is ultimately about continuity. It invites us to imagine peace not as a distant political endpoint but as an ongoing cultural practice. Each shared performance, collaborative project, and collective memory offers a chance to repair what was fractured. In this sense, the work of peace is fundamentally cultural—rooted in empathy, participation, and memory.

At this critical juncture, we hold the power to shape the future. By mobilizing heritage as a living, participatory, shared practice grounded in imagination and care, we can transform division into dialogue, absence into presence, and separation into reconciliation. Heritage is more than a reflection of the past—it is a conduit for empathy and hope, reminding us that peace is not a distant dream; it is something we can practice, together, through culture.

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Résumé

Cet article examine comment le patrimoine culturel immatériel (PCI) partagé peut contribuer à la construction de la paix sur la péninsule coréenne, où la division politique persiste malgré des liens culturels anciens. En utilisant des exemples tels qu'Arirang et Sokcho Saja Noreum, il montre comment les communautés déplacées préservent et adaptent leurs traditions en tant que formes vivantes de mémoire et d'identité.

L'article introduit la notion « d'institutions immatérielles » — des structures communautaires, souples et portées par les habitants, qui favorisent le dialogue à travers la participation culturelle.

Alors que la génération ayant vécu la guerre disparaît, la préservation de ce patrimoine partagé devient une responsabilité collective. Par la mémoire, la créativité et la participation, le PCI devient un vecteur permettant de transformer la division en dialogue et de cultiver une culture de paix vécue.

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INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND ARMED CONFLICTS

In April 2025 #HeritageAlive and the ICH NGO Forum hosted a webinar on ICH and armed conflicts. The event truly proved that this topic, unfortunately, is a very urgent one. Current conflicts in many countries - and large numbers of people who are internally and externally forced into displacement - call for immediate action. Working together with NGOs operating in the regions concerned, we collected case studies where ICH and armed conflicts were highlighted. These case studies provide several current examples of how war and other conflicts could have a huge impact on ICH and its bearers. At the same time we have witnessed how ICH could play an important and crucial role during armed conflicts. During the webinar these NGOs, from different parts of the world, shared their experience and reflections on ICH in armed conflicts.

After the webinar, the participants and the presenters expressed the need for #HeritageAlive to publish a special edition dedicated to ICH in armed conflicts. This publication is therefore based on the contributions from the webinar in April, in addition to a few added contributions from NGOs working in the regions concerned.

When we launched the call for papers for this publication it was our intention to focus solely to ICH and safeguarding experiences as we are fully aware this can be a sensitive minefield. Nevertheless, when we received the articles we understood that this was an impossible task. The NGOs who have contributed to this volume have explained the challenges and the conflicts from their point of view, and the voice of the communities concerned. The editorial board believe this is necessary in order to understand the context, whilst acknowledging that there are likely to be alternative points of view. Let us therefor underline that these articles represent the voice of the NGOs concerned and do not express any political opinions on behalf of #HeritageAlive or the ICH NGO Forum.

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