



International  
Practice  
SIG

# Intangible Heritage in Transition: UK Perspectives and Global Contexts

**ClfA International Practice group**

22 October 2025

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# What is Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)?

**ICH includes traditions, knowledge, skills, and cultural expressions passed through generations.**

As set out in the [2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage](#) and associated guidelines, ICH encompasses:

- oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage
- performing arts
- social practices, rituals and festive events
- knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- traditional craftsmanship

Communities actively define, recreate, and safeguard ICH, ensuring its relevance and continuity. UNESCO maintains a [Register of good safeguarding practices](#)

ICH is **intangible, dynamic, and adapts over time**, differing from physical cultural heritage.

Countries nominate ICH to [Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage](#)

Some countries maintain a **national** inventory



The annual Notting Hill Carnival led by members of the British Caribbean community since 1966



Up Helly Aa annual fire festival, Lerwick. Drawing on older tradition of yuletide tar barrelling. The first galley was fabricated and burned in 1889

# 2024 UK ratification of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage

## Why it matters

- Recognises living practices – music, rituals, crafts, oral lore
- Supports inclusion – diaspora, regional, endangered practices
- Builds identity and cohesion in communities

## Implications for practice

- National ICH register – community-led nominations
- Planning & policy – ICH in impact assessments and engagement
- Museums & education – support community exhibitions, challenge bias
- Skills shift – ethnography, oral history, cultural sensitivity

## Global context

- UK was late to ratify; others (Ireland, France, Japan) ahead
- UK strengths – inclusive, community-driven approach
- Challenges – avoid tokenism, secure funding, manage devolved governance



[UNESCO press release](#)  
[DCMS press release](#)  
[ICOMOS-UK Intangible Heritage Committee](#)



# ICH is a living, evolving process

## Dynamic and fluid heritage

ICH is constantly recreated by communities responding to changing environments and histories, highlighting its fluid nature.

## Adaptable preservation

Preservation efforts focus on adaptability, allowing heritage to evolve and remain relevant for contemporary needs.

## Community participation

Communities are active participants with authority in defining and transmitting their cultural expressions.

## Heritage as process

Viewing heritage as a living process supports cultural continuity, inclusivity, and evolving identities.

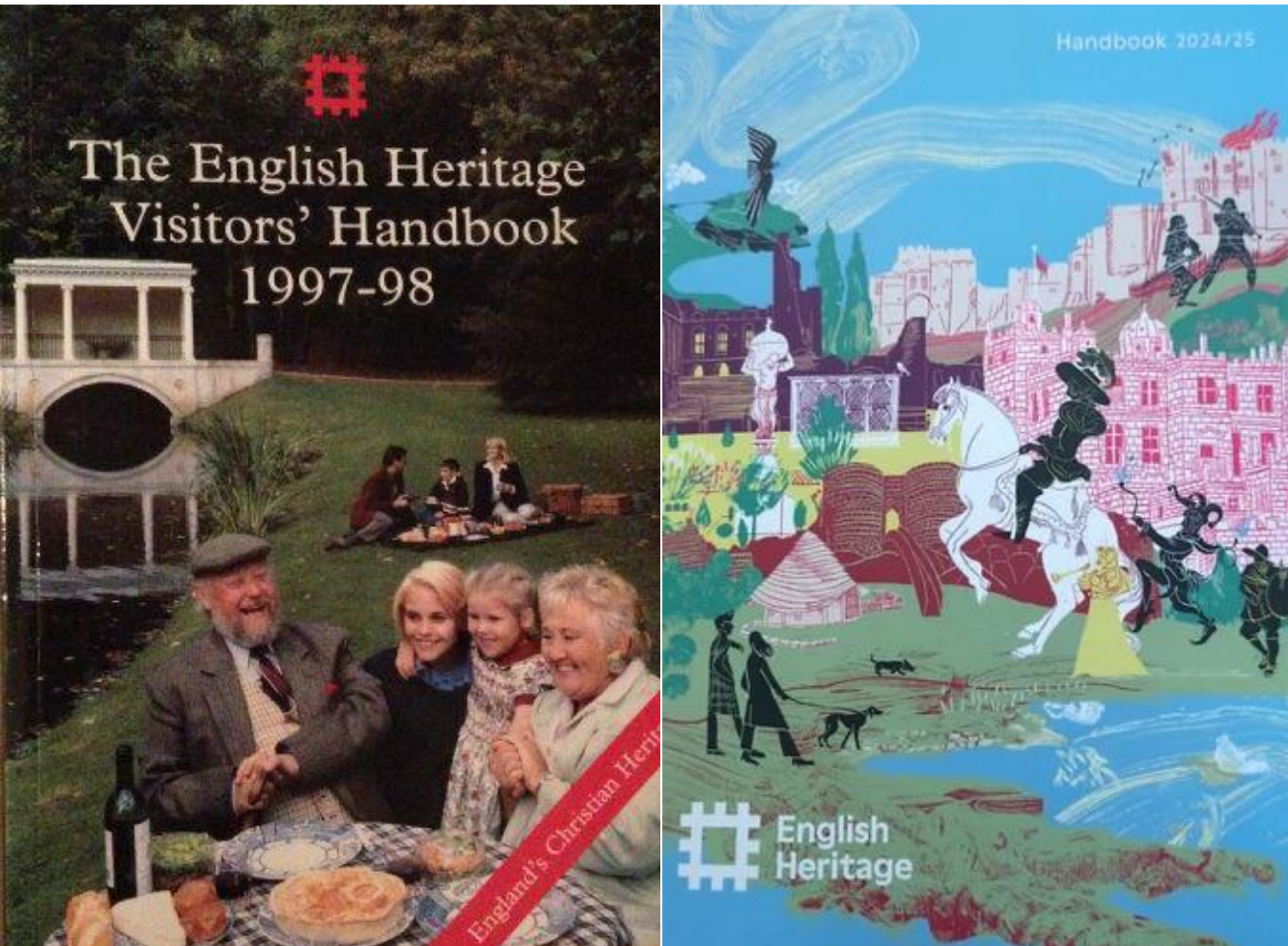


Southampton Mela Festival 2025



# Authorised Heritage Discourse

Laurajane Smith (2006) *Uses of Heritage*



## Dominant heritage paradigm

Focuses on monuments and artefacts

Marginalises living and community heritage, minority and community perspectives

Promotes expert authority, institutions, official narratives, national identity-building and elite cultural values

Reinforces dominant historical narratives

Avoids stories that are painful or contested

## Inclusive heritage approaches

Encourage inclusive, community-driven heritage practices

Values both tangible and intangible heritage for more representative practices

Regards heritage as inherently contested and dissonant

Accepts conflicting interpretations and marginalised voices

## Transforming heritage practice

Museums now adopting intersectional approaches (gender, race, class, disability)

UK's upcoming 2026 ICH inventory signals a shift toward non-material, community-led heritage



# Representation and power

## Power dynamics in representation

Representation in ICH involves power struggles between state institutions and local communities influencing heritage narratives

## Challenges of top-down control

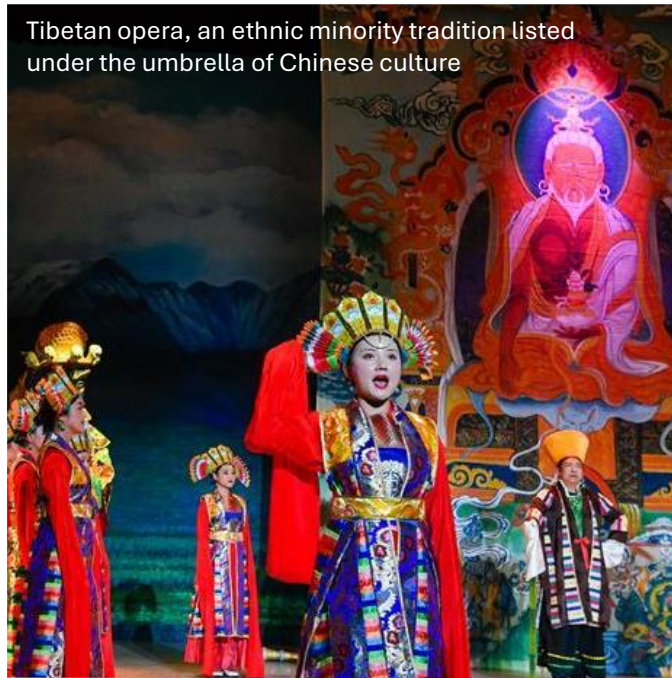
National governments often control heritage selection, excluding marginalised groups and prioritising political interests

## Empowering communities

Safeguarding processes must empower communities as key decision-makers in defining and managing their heritage

## Inclusive and democratic heritage

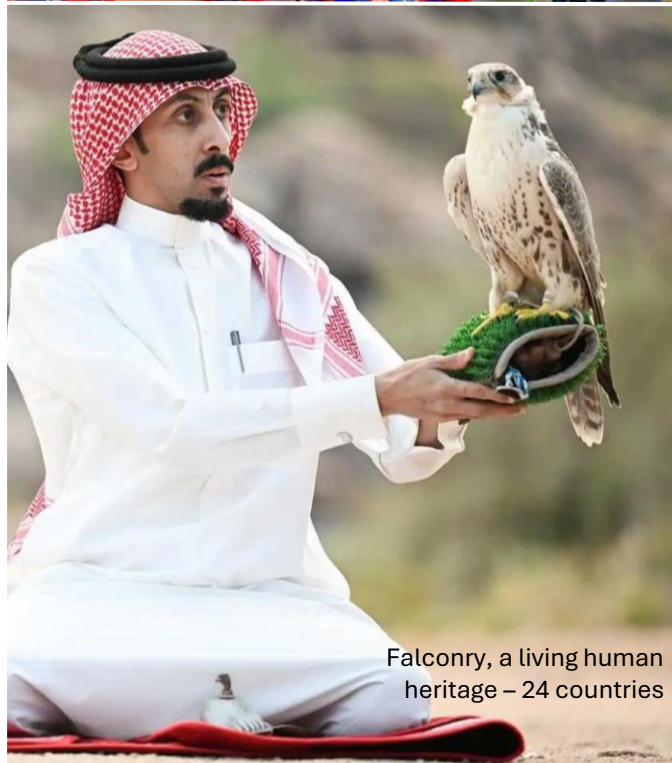
Inclusive practices promote dialogue, respect diverse perspectives, and support cultural self-determination



Tibetan opera, an ethnic minority tradition listed under the umbrella of Chinese culture



Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet, Netherlands



Falconry, a living human heritage – 24 countries



Bonfire traditions, Northern Ireland



# Authenticity and reinvention

## Challenges of authenticity

Authenticity in cultural heritage  
evolving nature

## Risks of ossification

Documentation can freeze traditional  
static museum artefacts

## Embracing cultural dynamism

Safeguarding must recognise complexity  
of cultural change

## Inclusive heritage preservation

Acknowledging contemporary adaptation  
inclusive cultural representation

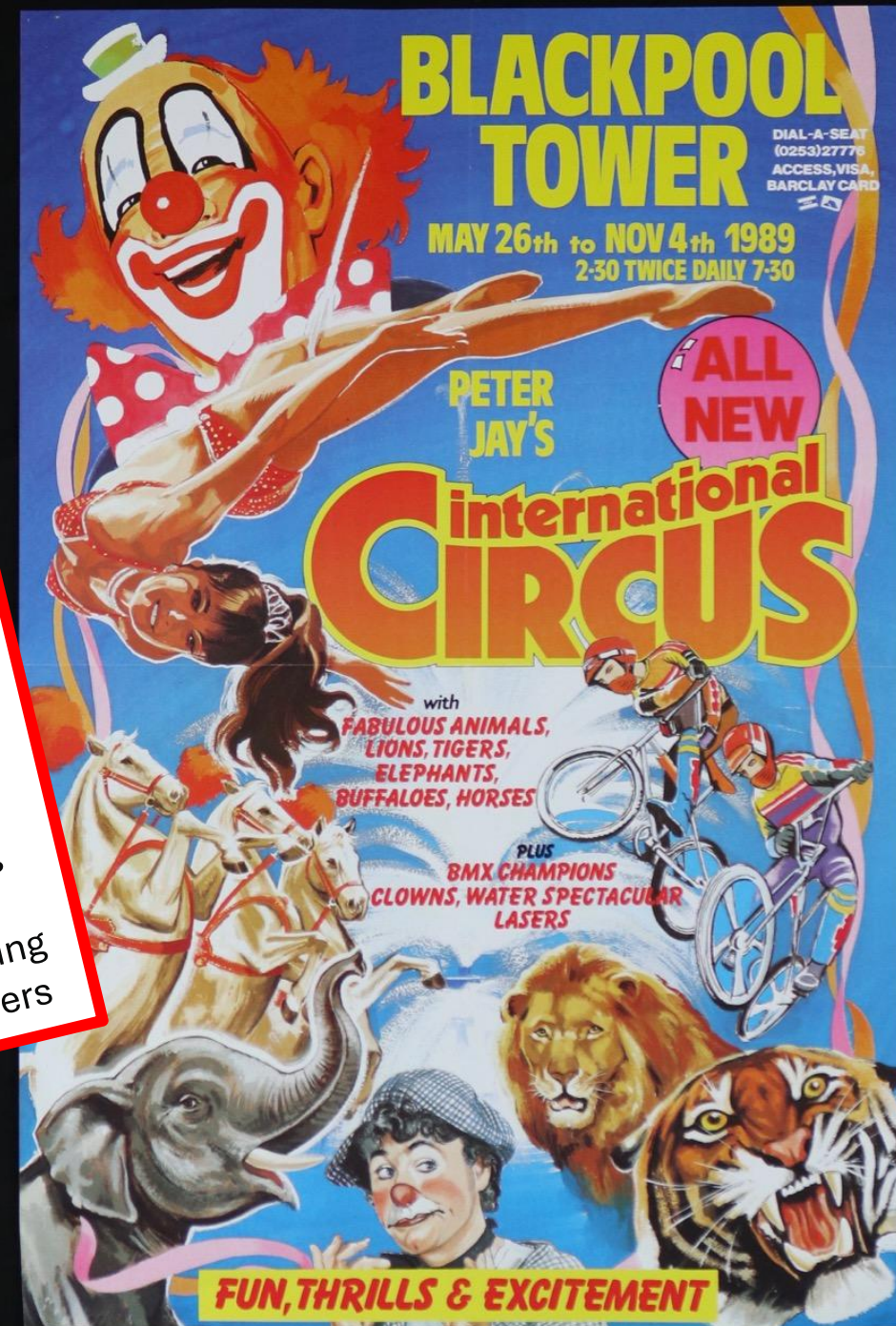
## Identifying elements of intangible cultural heritage

Coordinate ICH inventory and safeguarding to support multiple  
communities with similar living heritage

### ICH Code of ethics

UNESCO Ethical Principles for  
Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage

- Should respect **animals, nature, and the environment**
- Should respect existing, national legal frameworks and **promote positive health, well-being, and safety for themselves and others**
- Should build **peace, respect, social cohesion and inclusivity**, and avoid discrimination within their own living heritage practice(s), wider communities, and when collaborating with other living heritage practitioners





# The role of archaeologists

## Bridging material and intangible

Connecting historical artefacts and intangible heritage  
Understanding practical aspects of traditional practices, not always captured in texts or oral accounts  
Reviving and testing traditional crafts by reconstructing ancient techniques and materials

## Community engagement

Documenting local narratives and traditions  
Hands-on learning transmits skills and safeguards ICH  
Promoting inclusive and participatory heritage management

## Democratising heritage conservation

Respecting community authority  
Engaging communities, validating heritage through lived practice  
Helping to create inclusive conservation strategies reflecting diverse cultural values





# ICH in planning and development

## Challenges of ICH integration

Integrating intangible cultural heritage is challenging due to its non-physical and dynamic nature in traditional spatial planning.

## Protecting cultural spaces

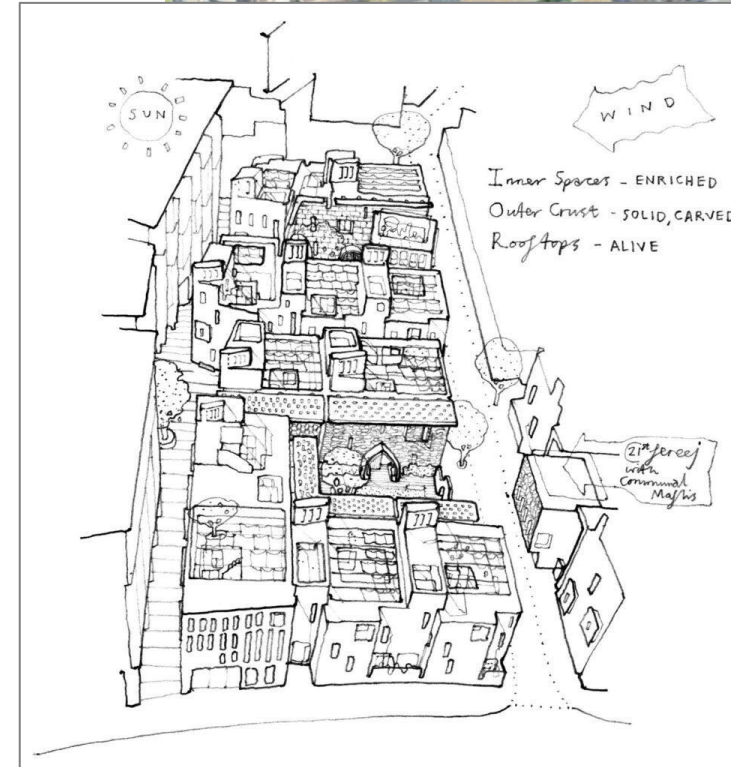
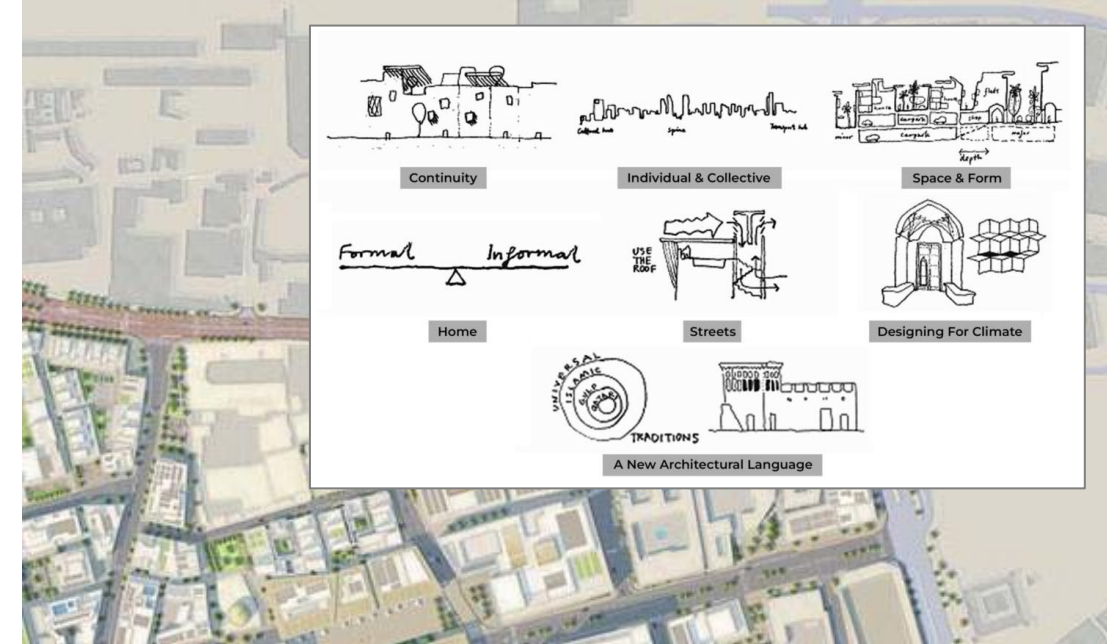
Identifying and safeguarding cultural spaces and associated objects supports environments where intangible heritage can thrive.

## Inclusive and holistic planning

Inclusive decision-making and holistic frameworks empower communities and integrate intangible values into development.

## Enhancing place identity

Recognising intangible cultural heritage enhances place identity and supports sustainable development goals.





# ICH and social offsets

## **Community-led cultural protection**

Prioritising community participation and consent to safeguard intangible cultural heritage in social offset programs

## **Integration into mitigation measures**

Including intangible heritage alongside material aspects in development mitigation to support cultural identity

## **Social justice and cultural resilience**

Recognising intangible heritage promotes social justice and strengthens the resilience of cultural communities

## **Sustainable heritage management**

Valuing intangible heritage ensures it remains a living resource, benefiting community identity and well-being





# ICH in the Global South

## Living cultural expressions

In the Global South, intangible cultural heritage includes crafts, foods, and rituals that reflect living traditions and continuity

## Dynamic heritage practices

Heritage is experienced as a dynamic process integrated into daily life, reinforcing social identity and communal bonds

## Holistic heritage management

Effective safeguarding requires holistic frameworks respecting local knowledge and supporting community-led preservation efforts

## Inclusive global understanding

Embracing Global South heritage paradigms enriches worldwide appreciation and fosters inclusive preservation strategies





# Case Study: ICH in Jordan

- Jordan ratified the convention in 2006
- First inscription in 2008
- Many of the items inscribed on the representative list of intangible heritage are multinational

- a. <sup>^</sup> Shared with Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
- b. <sup>^</sup> Shared with Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
- c. <sup>^</sup> Shared with Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Kuwait, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen.
- d. <sup>^</sup> Shared with Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates.

| Name                                                                               | Image                                                                               | Year | No.   | Description                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cultural space of the Bedu in Petra and Wadi Rum</b>                            |  | 2008 | 00122 | The cultural space in <a href="#">Petra</a> and <a href="#">Wadi Rum</a> of the <a href="#">Bedouin</a> tribes ( <a href="#">Bedul</a> , <a href="#">Ammarin</a> , and <a href="#">Sa'idiyyin</a> ). |
| <b>As-Samer in Jordan</b>                                                          |  | 2018 | 01301 | As-Samer consists of dancing and singing performed during the most important ceremonies such as the marriage ceremonies.                                                                             |
| <b>Arabic calligraphy: knowledge, skills and practices +<sup>[a]</sup></b>         |  | 2021 | 01718 | The artistic practice of writing Arabic letters and words to convey grace and beauty.                                                                                                                |
| <b>Al-Mansaf in Jordan, a festive banquet and its social and cultural meanings</b> |  | 2022 | 01849 | Mansaf (منسف) is a traditional Jordanian dish made of <a href="#">lamb</a> cooked in a sauce of fermented dried yogurt and served with rice or <a href="#">bulgur</a> .                              |
| <b>Date palm, knowledge, skills, traditions and practices +<sup>[b]</sup></b>      |  | 2022 | 01902 | The palm tree is considered to be a part of the history of the countries where it is a source for farmers, craftsmen, handicrafts owners, merchants, factory owners and food companies.              |
| <b>Henna, rituals, aesthetic and social practices +<sup>[c]</sup></b>              |  | 2024 | 02116 | A temporary tattooing practice with medicinal and aesthetic motivations. <sup>[6][7]</sup>                                                                                                           |
| <b>Arabic coffee, a symbol of generosity +<sup>[d]</sup></b>                       |  | 2024 | 02111 | Serving <i>qahwa</i> is an important part of hospitality. It is prepared in front of the guests, starting with roasting the beans. It is bitter and served without sugar.                            |





AtkinsRéalis - Baseline / Référence

Orientalism and imagology





Imagineering of a Bedouin desert kingdom

Marketed for tourism

The movie industry also supports the vision of modernity





Local democracy and  
decision making





# Case Study: ICH in Ireland – Dry Stone Construction

Ireland ratified the ICH Convention in 2015

- **Ireland's international ICH inscriptions** comprise Uilleann Piping 2017; Hurling 2018; Irish Harping 2019; Falconry (as part of a multinational nomination) 2021; Dry Stone Construction (also multinational) in 2024
- Part of a **multinational nomination** led by Ireland, including Andorra, Austria, Belgium, and Luxembourg
- **Key practitioners** include farmers, landowners, professionals, communities, rural enterprise groups, government bodies, the Dry Stone Wall Association of Ireland, and international stonecraft organisations
- Vulnerable dry stone landscapes are relatively unprotected by heritage or environmental laws
- **Indirect protection** via Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), European Landscape Convention and European Union member state “cross-compliance”
- Despite cultural value, these landscapes remain **at risk** from modern agricultural and cultural practices

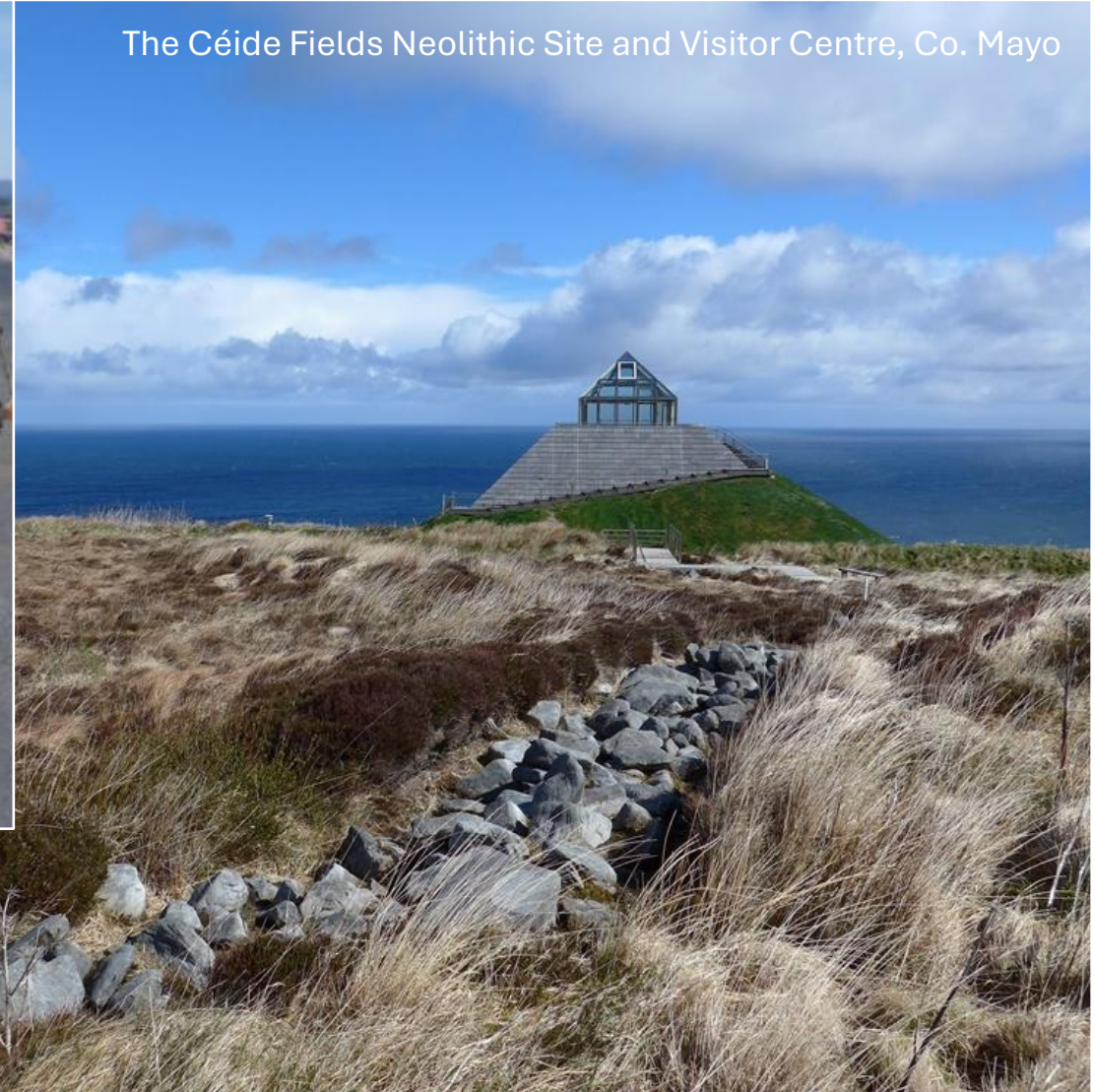




# Case Study: Ireland's Dry Stone Construction



Section of Famine Wall at Salt Hill Pier in Co. Donegal. The wall and pier were built as poverty relief work in 1846, but the wall fell into disrepair

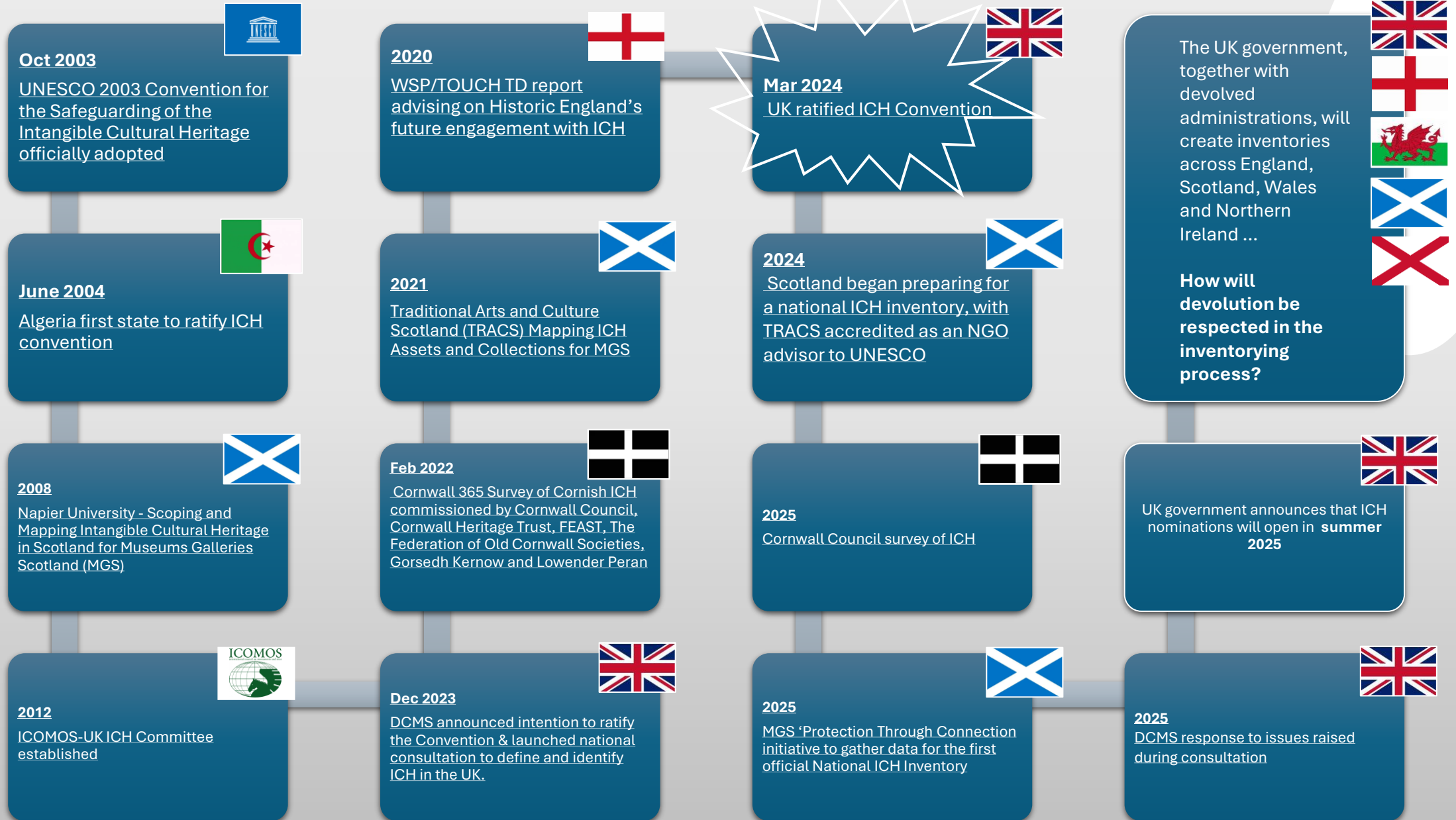


The Céide Fields Neolithic Site and Visitor Centre, Co. Mayo

- [Department of Culture, Communications and Sport Press Release](#)
- [About the DSWAI](#)
- [Ireland's National Inventory of ICH](#)
- [TII 2025 Cultural Heritage: Engaging the Public. Archaeology, Built Heritage, Landscape, Portable Heritage and Intangible Heritage GE-ARC-01035](#)



# UK ratification – some steps on a slow journey





# National inventory in the UK?

The UK's **national** ICH inventorying process may start soon.

The inventories are a domestic process which are **separate** from the lists held at UNESCO.

## Criteria for domestic inventories

- Must be **currently** practised
- Can originate from **anywhere** and be from anytime, but must include information about the history and **transmission** within the community concerned
- Must be a **living practice** and can not be a material product or object
- Must be **compatible with existing internationally agreed human rights standards**
- Must have **free, prior and informed consent** from the community.
- Any **commercial benefit** from the living heritage item, must be **for the primary benefit of the community**



Cloutie well, Munlochy, Black Isle, Scotland



Harris Tweed x Nike Dunk Low, released September 2025



# Examples of UK ICH?

## Categories

- Performing arts
- Social practices
- Nature, land, and spirituality
- Crafts
- Sports and games
- Culinary practice

|                                                | England                                                                                                                                                                                           | Scotland                                                                                                                                                                                 | Wales                                                                                                                                                                                        | Northern Ireland                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Language as a vehicle for ICH practices</b> | Regional dialects and accents, legal and ceremonial language.                                                                                                                                     | Gaelic and Scots language and oral traditions, Traveller languages Cant and Beurla Reagaird.                                                                                             | Welsh language and oral traditions, Eisteddfodau, Cerdd Dafod art of spoken word poetry.                                                                                                     | Irish language revival and education   Ulster-Scots Language and culture.                                                                                           |
| <b>Building practices</b>                      | Thatching, dry-stone walling, timber framing, brickmaking and lime mortar use, leadwork and roof tiling, plastering and pargeting, cob and clunch walling, historic joinery, traditional masonry. | Thatching (Hebridean styles), stone masonry and lime pointing, blackhouse construction techniques, traditional carpentry and joinery, dry stane dyking, traditional paints and finishes. | Welsh vernacular thatching, dry-stone walling, clom walling, slate carving and roofing, joinery, timber framing and cruck construction, stone masonry, lime mortar and limewash application. | Thatching and turf roofing, vernacular cottage construction, stone walling, traditional joinery, use of local materials.                                            |
| <b>Culinary practices</b>                      | Full English breakfast, hotpot, pikelets and crumpets, Eccles cakes, Staffordshire oatcakes.                                                                                                      | Full Scottish breakfast, scotch broth, haggis, Cullen skink, cloodie dumpling, Arbroath smokies, bridies, stovies, tablet, shortbread.                                                   | Full Welsh breakfast, cawl Welsh cakes, bara brith, laverbread, crempogau, Caerphilly cheese.                                                                                                | Ulster fry, Irish stew, yellowman, dulse, soda and potato bread, champ, fifteens, Comber potatoes, barmbrack.                                                       |
| <b>Music and instruments</b>                   | Brass bands, fiddle, melodeon and accordion, concertina, Northumbrian smallpipes, folk percussion.                                                                                                | Community music sessions in pubs, Highland bagpipes, smallpipes and border pipes, fiddle playing, clarsach (Celtic harp), accordion, tin whistle, bodhrán, tenor drum.                   | Welsh triple harp (telyn deires), pibgorn hornpipe, crwth bowed lyre, tabwrdd frame drum, fiddle playing, accordion and melodeon use.                                                        | Community music sessions in pubs, Irish harp, Lambeg drum, bodhrán, uilleann pipes, fiddle playing, flute and tin whistle, fife and drum, accordion and concertina. |



|                                             | England                                                                                                                                                                | Scotland                                                                                                                                                                            | Wales                                                                                                            | Northern Ireland                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Dance</b>                                | Morris dancing, maypole dancing, clog dancing, sword dancing, Abbots Bromley horn dance.                                                                               | Ceilidh dancing, Scottish country dancing, ladies' step dancing, highland games dance competitions.                                                                                 | Twmpathau community dance, dawnzio gwerin, clog dancing, eisteddfod dance competitions.                          | Irish step dancing, céilí traditions, set dancing, crossroads dancing, festival dance competitions.                                                                      |
| <b>Community singing</b>                    | Sea shanties and maritime songs, mummers' plays and singing, may day singing, carol singing, community choirs .                                                        | Ballad traditions, work songs and sea shanties, Burns night singing, Gaelic psalm singing, community choirs.                                                                        | Welsh male voice choir singing, eisteddfodau, plygain carol singing, folk songs and shanties, community choirs . | Irish traditional singing, Ulster-Scots musical and marching band traditions, festival singing, ceremonial singing, community choirs                                     |
| <b>Oral traditions</b>                      | Oral folk tales and legends, pantomime and theatrical folklore, seasonal customs and ritual narratives, community storytelling events, folklore collecting and revival | Gaelic and Scots traditions, mythic narratives, seasonal customs, community legends, ceilidh, folklore collecting and preservation, contemporary storytelling, role of Seanachaidh. | Mabinogion and mythic narratives, oral folk tales, Eisteddfodau and Cerdd Dafod, role of Cyfarwydd.              | Irish myth cycles and folklore, local legends, historical ballads, traditional storytelling at wakes and ceilidhs, seasonal and ritual narratives, role of the Seanchaí. |
| <b>Games and feats of strength</b>          | Folk football, historic footraces and hill runs, cricket, wrestling                                                                                                    | Highland games, shinty, wrestling, curling, ba games                                                                                                                                | Nos Galan New Year's Eve road races, Cnoc-y-Coed Wrestling, Bog-snorkelling                                      | Gaelic football and hurling, camogie, wrestling and tug-of-war, road bowls, stone lifting                                                                                |
| <b>Artisanal crafts</b>                     | Basket-weaving, blacksmithing                                                                                                                                          | Kilt-making, tartan weaving, Shetland knitting                                                                                                                                      | Slate and lovespoon carving, Welsh tapestry blankets and textiles, pewter work                                   | Linen Weaving, basketmaking                                                                                                                                              |
| <b>Festive events and seasonal customs</b>  | Carnival, well dressing ceremonies with processions, wassailing                                                                                                        | Seasonal fire festivals (e.g., Beltane, Hogmanay, Up Helly Aa), melas, galas, common ridings, guising                                                                               | St David's Day and St Dwynwen's Day, Harvest and Chapel Dinners, Mari Lwyd                                       | Wren's Day, Lammas Fair, first footing                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Knowledge of nature and the universe</b> | Traditional herbal lore and nature-based knowledge                                                                                                                     | Fishing and maritime knowledge; superstitions of fisherfolk, plant lore, harvest traditions, weather predictions                                                                    | Coracle building; traditional herbal lore and nature-based knowledge                                             | Currach building and fishing lore; traditional herbal lore and nature-based knowledge                                                                                    |



# Skills for defining ICH

## Conceptual and methodological skills

Understanding dynamic cultural practices and applying holistic frameworks integrating tangible and intangible elements is essential

## Ethnographic methods

Participant observation, interviews, and reflexivity are vital for documenting and interpreting ICH effectively

## Social and interpersonal skills

Facilitation, dialogue, and respect for community authority support effective collaboration with diverse cultural groups

## Policy and institutional navigation

Translating local practices into policy language and managing stakeholders is critical for sustainable heritage management

[UNESCO 2021 Guidance Note for Inventorying ICH](#)





# Equipping professionals

## Rethinking professional roles

Professionals must shift from material conservation to embracing social and cultural heritage dimensions

## Targeted training and education

Training in ethnographic methods, cultural sensitivity, and participatory engagement is essential for meaningful ICH work

## Supporting tools and frameworks

Digital platforms and collaborative inventories facilitate knowledge sharing and safeguard intangible cultural heritage

## Promoting reflexivity and inclusivity

Professionals become facilitators and co-authors, contributing to democratising heritage and sustaining cultural practices





# Reframing heritage practice?

## Living and evolving heritage

Heritage should be viewed as a dynamic process that evolves with cultural practices and community engagement

## Holistic heritage approaches

Recognising tangible and intangible elements together supports a more comprehensive and meaningful heritage practice

## Community empowerment

Empowering communities to define and manage their heritage fosters inclusivity, respect, and identity formation

## Professional development

Education, interdisciplinary training, and ethical frameworks are vital to equip heritage professionals for evolving roles



Community dialogue on rice cultures and cultivation, Assam, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH)



REGISTRY - INSCRIBED ELEMENTS OF ICH IN CROATIA

preparation of traditional pie cake *greblica* – Central Croatia  
priprema tradicijskog kolača *greblica* - središnja Hrvatska



# Thank you!





# ICH in the UK – some highlights

- Oct 2003 – UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was officially adopted
- June 2004 – Algeria first state to ratify convention
- 2008 – Napier University - Scoping and Mapping Intangible Cultural Heritage in Scotland for Museums Galleries Scotland (MGS)
- 2012 – ICOMOS-UK ICH Committee established
- 2020 – WSP/TOUCH TD report advising on Historic England's future engagement with ICH
- 2021 – Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS) Mapping ICH Assets and Collections for MGS
- Dec 2023 DCMS announced intention to ratify the Convention & launched national consultation to define and identify ICH in the UK.
- Mar 2024 – UK ratified ICH Convention
- 2024 – Scotland began preparing for a national ICH inventory, with TRACS accredited as an NGO advisor to UNESCO
- 2025 – MGS 'Protection Through Connection initiative to gather data for the first official National ICH Inventory
- 2025 – DCMS response to issues raised during consultation