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# Inside the mission to protect endangered culture

Unesco's 'intangible cultural heritage' list brings local traditions to the world's attention. How well does it protect them?



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Varna Marianne Nielsen's favourite drum is made from a polar bear's stomach stretched taut over a frame of seal rib bones. Today in Paris, however, she's brought a different drum with her from Greenland as polar-bear stomach doesn't travel well — it's liable to warp in the comparative humidity of France. The object she now turns over in her hands is her travel drum, made of caribou skin with a driftwood frame.

In her traditional Inuit dress, she looks dramatically out of place in this nondescript Parisian office. Intricate fringes of white, red and black beads are draped across her forehead, while her eyes, chin and fingers are dotted with tattoos. Her red blouse has a loose opening at the back that traditionally would have been used to carry a baby.

Nielsen wasn't always so invested in Greenland's traditional Inuit culture. Now 43, she spent 25 years in the country's music scene playing blues, jazz and rock, before taking an interest in the practice of drum dancing and singing, known as *qilaatersorneq* in Greenlandic, which archaeological evidence suggests dates back more than 4,500 years. Drum dancing once served many social functions. It was a court system, used for settling disagreements; a healing tool for shamans to commune with the spirit world; and used in song to teach children about hunting techniques. "It was connected to everything," Nielsen says. "Before life, in life and after life."

When the Danish colonised Greenland in the 18th century, they banned the practice, distrusting its shamanic elements. Today, it is hardly practised. Perhaps at a political function there will be one dancer as a ceremonial token. "The majority don't engage in it at all," Nielsen says. "So if I stand up and sing, there will be nobody singing along with me, because they don't know the songs." She takes a deep, steadying breath. "That is why I'm here. To revive it. To share common knowledge and individual knowledge. To stand together and support those who have lost their heritage, because this is the heritage of all Inuits."

Nielsen travelled from the Greenlandic capital of Nuuk to the concrete block in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower that houses Unesco, the United Nations agency responsible for promoting international co-operation through education, the arts, science and culture. She's banking that this vast bureaucratic organisation might be able to help save her cherished tradition from oblivion.

Most people are aware of Unesco because of the World Heritage sites it designates. Yet it also recognises what it calls "intangible cultural heritage" or, in a newer term, "living heritage". These might be dances, songs, crafts, festivals or culinary practices associated with specific communities. Unesco keeps a list of living heritage to be celebrated and protected. As well as fostering pride in a tradition, inclusion on the list can bring economic benefits associated with having a higher profile, such as tourism and local funding. Greenlandic drum dancing and singing has been listed since 2021.

This project is an enormously complex undertaking with a single, lofty, unfashionably idealistic principle at its heart: the belief that culture can truly, tangibly make the world a better place. It demands a series of dizzying balancing acts to create a programme flexible enough to encompass practices as different as beekeeping, dry stone walling, midwifery and throat singing. To corral nearly 200 states, many with competing interests, to agree on a shared set of values governing cultural work. To contend with the upheavals brought about by wars, regime changes and natural disasters. To somehow convince a roomful of representatives from 194 countries that the survival of Greenlandic drum dancing is a matter of vital international concern.

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**Nielsen is due to give a presentation** later in the afternoon. If anyone could convince you how important traditional heritage is, it's her. When asked why drum dancing matters, she refers back to pre-colonial Greenland, to a time when the Inuits were more in touch with their natural surroundings. "Today, things are imported," she says. "We have internet and access to all the cultures in the world. We know everything about everybody else, but we have forgotten ourselves." She has been trying to lobby politicians to add drum dancing into the school curriculum. But in order to be heard, she says she needs more funding and an amplification of her voice on an international stage. Since drum dancing was added to Unesco's list three years ago, she says she has seen little improvement, but it's still early days. She has come to Paris in the hope that the relationship may yet bear fruit. "I'm working on it."

When Unesco's work on living heritage is reported in the media, it is usually framed as a novelty story: French baguette gets Unesco heritage status! There is little examination of the deeper questions at play. One might ask, for example, just why so much culture is under threat. How do climate change, globalisation and regional conflict threaten local traditions to the point of extinction? Other uncomfortable questions hover in the background. Is there a somewhat colonial cast to their grand mission of protecting the culture of remote peoples, all from a cushy block in central Paris?

Answers might be found in the building's main conference hall, where today the state representatives are bickering. Every two years they hold a General Assembly to discuss living heritage. Each country has a seat marked with its name in French beneath an undulating concrete ceiling lit a deep indigo. Some representatives wear traditional dress — Chad is in a white robe and hat, the attendees from Burkina Faso are in midnight blue and fuchsia — but most are in western business casual.

> **The representative from Azerbaijan is outlining its heritage efforts but gets in a vicious jab at Armenia**

The UK ratified the Intangible Cultural Heritage convention in March, one of the last countries to do so, and is in attendance for the first time. There are also representatives from Palestine. When it was admitted as a member state in 2011, the US and Israel withdrew their financing in protest. In 2017, Trump took the US out of Unesco altogether, although the country rejoined in 2023. The US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are among the 11 countries yet to ratify the Intangible Cultural Heritage convention.

In a roundabout, formal way, a tense debate is playing out. The representative from Azerbaijan is outlining its national heritage efforts, but takes a tangent to get in a vicious jab at Armenia, which he accuses of denying Azerbaijani people the right to practise their cultural heritage in the contested Nagorno-Karabakh region, during the almost 30 years of what he calls Armenia's occupation of the territory. Shortly after it is Armenia's turn to speak, and among a flurry of pleasantries and anodyne comments about their own cultural initiatives, they make sure to hit back at Azerbaijan. The two have long had troubled relations and, by accident of alphabetical order, they sit almost beside each other, with only the beleaguered bulwark of Austria between them.

If you mention Armenia and Azerbaijan to longtime Unesco employees, they tend to smile and roll their eyes, as if to say: "Oh those two kids, they'll never get along!" There is something of an absurdist comedy to their highly bureaucratic sparring, but beneath that there is a real emotional charge. They are talking about a war-torn territory where over 100,000 lives hang in the balance. Chiara Bortolotto, an anthropologist who studies how Unesco works with living heritage, says, "From the newspapers, you might just think Unesco is this tidy UN agency, but actually inside you have these crazy fights with huge emotions and people crying."

Sometimes Unesco needs to respond decisively to deal with questions of living heritage that is endangered by war. Last year, the Palestinian ministry of culture requested assistance in building a national inventory of living heritage, which will document what is in danger of being lost in Gaza. Meanwhile, after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Unesco rushed through an emergency listing of Ukrainian borscht, saying the culture of preparing and gathering to eat the beetroot soup promotes "social integration and cohesion among all inhabitants of Ukraine". This did, however, provoke dissent from Russia, who pointed out that they, too, make borscht.

The question of ownership is a common bone of contention. Regions often share heritage across state lines — anyone who has tried Turkish coffee, Greek coffee, Arabic coffee or Armenian coffee could be forgiven for not being able to tell the difference. People often have a strong sense that their national identity is tied to their heritage, yet this heritage sometimes predates the existence of the countries themselves. Unesco takes pains to point out that if a practice is listed by a specific country, this does not mean the country *owns* it.

Lately, Unesco has been pushing for multinational listings to emphasise shared heritage. It has even coaxed countries with deep-seated antipathy to join together on a listing, as was the case with rumba dancing, listed by the two Congos, and *ssirum*, a type of traditional wrestling that was jointly inscribed by North and South Korea in 2019. The hope is that if states won't meet at the political negotiating table, perhaps they can come together, however briefly, over culture.

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**Unesco was founded in 1945** as a utopian project to improve relationships between nations after the second world war. It started out in humble beginnings, first in two adjoining apartments in London and then occupying a hotel in Paris, where delegates in suites stored their documents in the bathtubs. The current building, opened in 1958 with a design overseen by architectural luminaries such as Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, takes the shape of a three-pointed star with Brutalist flourishes. Alexander Calder, Henry Moore, Joan Miró, Alberto Giacometti, Isamu Noguchi and Pablo Picasso all made works for the space.

The World Heritage convention was established by Unesco in 1972 to protect built structures, but towards the end of the 20th century there was a feeling that its scope was limited. The focus on grand monuments was seen as Eurocentric. To redress the balance, the idea emerged, pushed forward by East Asian countries, to create a new convention for what would be called "intangible" heritage. The Intangible Cultural Heritage convention was established in 2003, and uptake was rapid.

> **Reporting this piece felt like walking into a gale-force wind of technical vocabulary and Inexplicably Capitalised Terms**

When a country joins the convention, it can submit practices for inclusion on one of three lists held by Unesco. The first recognises living heritage (last year saw the addition of opera in Italy, the preparation of ceviche in Peru, bolero music in Mexico and Cuba and ceramic arts in Uzbekistan, among others); the second is a list of practices "in need of urgent safeguarding", like endangered species; and the third is a list of techniques employed to support living heritage. Several practices have been moved from the endangered list back to the regular list, including the Lebanese folk poetry *zajal*, judged to be safe after it was introduced in schools.

Representatives of one endangered tradition are in the building today. Holikiari Enawenê, a leader of the indigenous Brazilian Enawenê-nawê tribe, sits in the conference hall with his torso bare, wearing woven reeds around his upper arms and a magnificent headdress of red and yellow feathers. His tribe had no contact with the outside world until 50 years ago. When it's his turn to talk, he shouts into the microphone deafeningly, as if unaware that it will amplify his voice. He explains that his tribe's most important ritual, the Yaokwa, a seven-month ceremony where fish and food are offered to appease their gods, was added to Unesco's endangered list in 2011. It was threatened by the expansion of Brazil's agroindustry and the construction of nine hydroelectric plants, which reduced the flow of fish into the tribe's land, meaning they no longer had enough offerings for the gods. Unesco has helped it to get funding from the Brazilian government and compensation from industries, which the tribe now uses to buy fish. The process of getting the fish out of their new storage warehouse has even become incorporated into the ceremony.

Another Enawenê-nawê leader discusses the process of learning to co-operate with Unesco and the Brazilian government: "We have learnt the language of the white and that is why we want to continue with the safeguarding plan, we want to protect ourselves." For a tribe member from remote Brazil, Unesco's jargon must be deeply impenetrable. Even for a journalist relatively comfortable with bureaucratic language, the experience of reporting this piece felt like walking into a gale-force wind of polysyllabic technical vocabulary and Inexplicably Capitalised Terms.

There are various criticisms levelled at the Intangible Cultural Heritage project. That listing a tradition could lead to its commodification or fossilisation. That African countries, for which the programme was partially created, are still under-represented on the lists. But the most common complaint of those working in the industry is aimed at the bureaucracy.

Some Unesco staff, however, believe that such bureaucracy is necessary for the project to work. "It all has to function on consensus between so many member states, which is incredibly difficult and might hinge on the precise wording of a statement," says Charlotte Joy, a social anthropologist who is non-executive director for culture at the UK National Commission for Unesco. "That padding, those pages and pages, create diplomatic space. They allow everybody to feel like they're participating." Unesco also tries to be flexible in accepting documentation however an indigenous group feels most comfortable communicating, whether that's by recording a video or, as in one case, sending a single hunting arrow as proof of consent, which Unesco accepted from a Bolivian tribe and filed away.

At the end of the first day of the General Assembly, the bureaucrats gather on the top floor for drinks. There are two celebrations to choose from: on one side, women in frothy white dresses from the Brazilian state of Bahia prepare their speciality of acarajé, deep-fried bean cakes. On the other is a display of Peruvian cuisine, with traditional dancing, ceviche and pisco sours. The diplomats hobnob while looking out over the Eiffel Tower and the Seine. Nielsen, the Greenlandic drum dancer, wanders around, looking strangely at home in the mix.

**In August on a council estate** in Borough, central London, the reedy sound of a recorder floats on the warm summer air. Inside a community centre, the weekly practice session of New Esperance, a women's Morris dancing group, is in full swing. Their pastime could become one of the first elements of UK living heritage to be listed with Unesco. Teacher Diane Moody is wearing a cornflower-blue dress, her long hair hanging loose. She's almost 70 but looks younger. When asked about the secret to her youth, she flashes a smile and says: "It's Morris."

Morris dancing is one of the UK's most prominent cultural traditions. There are written records of the dance dating back to 1448, and it has evolved over time: at last year's Brit awards, the band Wet Leg brought the contemporary group Boss Morris on stage to dance. Moody's daughter Nancy leads a dance that involves twirling in and out of square formations while waving yellow and purple handkerchiefs. She has plenty of experience, but some of the attendees are newcomers. A woman named Hattie has just moved from Australia and is more used to dancing to K-pop, but she has returned for a third session.

New Esperance is a model for how traditional culture evolves. Not just because it still makes new dances, but also as a women's group practising a dance historically limited to men. When asked why Morris matters to them, they mention enjoying the live music, the exercise, even that it's nice to feel part of something that is proudly, unproblematically English at a time when patriotism sometimes feels like a dirty word. But most of all, they talk about the sense of community and belonging. "I felt that I'd found a family," says one member.

While the UK government was slow to ratify the Intangible Cultural Heritage convention, representatives up and down the country from fields as diverse as pantomime, traditional lace-making, Cornish pasties and Notting Hill Carnival were all broadly positive about the idea of a Unesco listing. Of the dozen-odd representatives of UK traditions I spoke to, Morris dancers were the most organised and easiest to contact, while the people behind the annual Cooper's Hill Cheese-Rolling were the hardest to reach. This Gloucestershire tradition involves throwing a 10-pound wheel of cheese down a perilously steep hill, chased by 25 gung-ho racers, who inevitably start tumbling wildly downhill. Fortunately, there is a group of volunteer rugby players stationed at the bottom to catch them.

When I finally reach the event's master of ceremonies, Jem Wakeman, I ask him how long the race has been going. "They reckon it might be in the Domesday Book," he deadpans, "but I've never seen the Domesday Book, so I wouldn't know. These old English traditions, nothing's written down, is it?" He explains that the first racers chased a barrel, then a block of wood, before it finally became a wheel of cheese, barring a few years during the second world war where it went back to wood because of rationing. They do the race every year, even rolling a cheese down the hill during the Covid-19 pandemic with nobody to chase it, just to keep the tradition alive.

If you watch videos of the cheese-rolling on YouTube, you won't be surprised that there are broken bones. "This year was the first in a long, long time that we had no injuries," says Wakeman proudly, before adding: "Last year was five broken ankles." He says there have never been any broken necks or backs, and no fatalities. He has run the race himself "20-odd times", he says: "I cracked my head open, I broke my shoulder and I've never won it, either." He suspects that part of the reason so many people turn up to watch is that they want to see someone get hurt.

At times, Wakeman wonders how long they can keep the cheese-rolling going. While the local police force supports the event, he says the ambulance and fire services would prefer that it didn't happen. He hopes that the kind of international recognition Unesco offers might help to protect the tradition. "I'm a local person, and I like that we've got something decent on our doorstep," he says. "It makes Cooper's Hill something. It brings tourists to help out the local hotels, pubs and shops, which is good. It's a lovely old English tradition, and I just want it to keep going and going and going."

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