

# Intangible Heritage as a Testing Ground for a Globalizing Community



Research Agenda 2017-2020  
Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage

The image features a complex background. On the left, there are several overlapping geometric patterns: a dark blue area with light blue ovals, a purple and blue diagonal band, and a red area with white concentric squares and a white oval grid. The right side of the image is a solid light green background with a grid of white ovals. The title is centered in the upper right quadrant.

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## COLOFON

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ENGLISH SUMMARY

**RESEARCH AGENDA 2017-2020  
DUTCH CENTRE FOR  
INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

# Intangible Heritage as a testing ground for a globalizing community

**Final curtain for wild circus animals**

*Eye surgeons: ban fireworks!*

**EASTER FIRES CAUSE ENVIRONMENTAL POLLUTION!**

These newspaper headlines from recent years may be familiar. Intangible heritage is often a subject of public debate nowadays. Living traditions – often passed on from generation to generation – are suddenly being subjected to fierce criticism.

The controversies in the Netherlands relate to highly diverse questions such as ‘Is Black Peter, the companion of Saint Nicholas, an expression of racism?’ (discrimination), ‘Is it okay to expose people to the hazards of fireworks?’ (health), ‘Is it okay to use animals to entertain people?’ (animal welfare) and ‘Can the emission of high quantities of particular matter by bonfires be justified?’ (the environment).

Such controversies show that intangible heritage not only connects people, but can also cause alienation. People can strongly identify with such heritage, but it can also cause discord.

### Challenges in a globalizing society

Many controversies surrounding intangible heritage are related to our globalizing society, which has also become an extremely diverse society. Our horizon is no longer confined to our own town, city, region or country, where our long-cherished traditions are ‘normal’. In a world where people are closely connected by means of social media and the internet, where we have become more mobile than ever and where we can have 160 cultures living in one and the same city, we are holding up new mirrors to one another. How do you deal with people’s different views? With ethnic diversity? With the dark pages of our history? How can you care for the environment and prevent waste? And what about animal rights? How do you respond to what young people find culturally important, in a world where the internet and social media have created international communities? And what should we do with tourism that is growing on a global scale, turning intangible heritage into a purely commercial product, served up to consumers in easy to digest portions?

In other words: globalization is confronting us with new questions and challenges concerning intangible heritage and how it is perceived. The answers to these questions require further research.

### Why this Research Agenda?

This Research Agenda summarizes the studies that the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage is going to pursue in the next few years prompted by the main challenges that the practitioners and custodians of intangible heritage in the Netherlands, i.e. the heritage communities, are facing.

The results of our studies will first serve to give intangible heritage communities answers to these challenges. In other words: our studies will always be

translated into practical tools that enable heritage communities to take concrete action themselves.

Our studies focus on deepening knowledge and on reflection: we want to clarify the processes surrounding intangible heritage in a globalizing society.

At the same time, we would like the outcomes of our studies to be interesting for other sectors which are often faced with the same challenges. The broad social questions triggered by intangible heritage make this a testing ground for the globalizing society. Building bridges between different groups with diverse backgrounds and views is quite a challenge in such a society.

### Our main terms of reference: the 2003 UNESCO Convention

Our starting point for the research plans we are presenting in this Research Agenda is the *2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. At the time, UNESCO saw that a great deal of intangible heritage and knowledge about this heritage was being lost in a rapidly globalizing world. UNESCO wanted to promote ‘respect for cultural diversity and human creativity’. The convention was a response to ‘processes of globalization and social transformation’ that ‘create conditions for a renewed dialogue between communities’.

The convention was the answer to a global need. The Netherlands ratified the convention in 2012. It has now been ratified by 178 states. The convention has developed into the main framework for discussions about intangible heritage worldwide and is therefore also the main framework for this Research Agenda.

### What is intangible heritage?

Intangible heritage is a term that UNESCO came up with in 2003 for something that was actually universally known: the customs, traditions and rituals that we consider to be self-evident, that we cherish and that are handed down through the generations. Before 2003, they were generally referred to as ‘folk culture’ or ‘traditions’. Intangible heritage is dynamic heritage: it changes over time.

In UNESCO’s definition, intangible heritage concerns cultural expressions that ‘communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals’ recognize as part of their cultural heritage. The heritage is expressed in living practices that provide people with ‘a sense of identity and continuity’. The convention identifies five domains:

- oral traditions and expressions
- performing arts
- festive events and rituals
- knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
- traditional craftsmanship

‘Intangible’ does not mean that this form of heritage is less concrete or less real. Intangible heritage is often actually very concrete and visible. Examples from the Netherlands are annual festive events, such as the Zundert Flower Parade (‘Bloemencorso’) or the Rotterdam Summer Carnival.

### Relationship with tangible heritage

Intangible heritage cannot usually be separated from tangible heritage. Examples of tangible heritage are historic landscapes or buildings (built heritage), objects in museums or documents in archives (movable heritage). An example of intangible heritage in the Netherlands connected to a specific landscape is Meuse hedge laying (Maasheggenvlechten). Examples of intangible heritage connected to objects are carnival costumes or historic crosses or relics during religious processions.

This correlation between tangible and intangible heritage is also an important consideration for the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage. It links up with other UNESCO conventions, such as the *World Heritage Convention* (1972) and the *Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* (2005). The Dutch UNESCO Committee is an important contact for us for all conventions.

### The strength of heritage communities

The Inventaris Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland (Inventory of Intangible Heritage in the Netherlands) has mapped some 150 forms of intangible heritage since 2012. The way in which this Inventory was brought about attracted quite some attention. It is not up to experts or scientific researchers to decide what can or cannot be registered in this Inventory. It is the producers of the heritage themselves who determine this, e.g. the organizers of the Jewish Hanukkah celebration or the pottery painters in Gouda.

This close collaboration has also given the Dutch Centre an idea of who the ‘communities, groups and individuals’ are who are prepared to actively promote their intangible heritage and who would like to pass this on to future generations. UNESCO distinguishes between *practitioners* and *custodians*, people from the heritage communities who organize activities and/or undertake

management and preservation. This latter category of people is an important group for the Dutch Centre since they play an active role in caring for their intangible heritage.

Of course, the challenges for the practitioners and custodians of intangible heritage cannot be detached from the social context in which their heritage is perceived. The heritage community at large includes the people who attend their events, to whom they sell their products and the organizations that contribute to safeguarding them. Intangible heritage brings them all together. In that sense, this UNESCO Convention can be seen as one big experiment: how to involve broader groups in intangible heritage and in caring for heritage?

### The five research lines of the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage

The five research lines that the Dutch Centre will be pursuing all relate to challenges in a globalizing society:

#### 1. Controversial Intangible Heritage

How to deal with the public debate concerning intangible heritage?

#### 2. Intangible Heritage & Super Diversity

What does intangible heritage mean in a superdiverse society, e.g. in a district with more than 160 ethnicities? How can you safeguard intangible heritage in such a society?

#### 3. Intangible Heritage & Youth Cultures

How can youngsters be given a greater say in the heritage sector and how can they highlight their cultural expressions?

#### 4. Intangible & Tangible Heritage

How should you deal with challenges at the interface between tangible and intangible heritage? How can you shape cohesive safeguarding?

#### 5. Intangible Heritage & Tourism

How to deal with the commercialization of intangible heritage? How do you give substance to what UNESCO refers to as ‘sustainable tourism’?

### Our research procedure

We first assess the challenges within every research line. Reflecting on them provides us with building blocks for developing practical guidelines. We al-



ways choose a bottom-up approach for this. We try to involve the heritage bearers and heritage communities themselves as much as possible, both when formulating relevant questions and when developing relevant and useful methods.

The means we use for this include dialogue tables, expert meetings and symposiums. The dialogue tables involve heritage communities in the process. They share the challenges they experience and help look for possible solutions at these tables. The expert meetings enable us to involve heritage professionals with diverse backgrounds. Symposiums and conferences are intended for a broader target group of stakeholders and other interested parties.

### What results do we expect?

By the end of 2020, our five research lines:

- will have helped us contribute to more knowledge and a better understanding of the challenges that are relevant to the sub-domains of intangible heritage;
- will have helped us develop a tool kit or practical guidelines enabling heritage communities, as well as governments and other heritage sectors, to handle these challenges.

### Who are our partners?

When implementing the Knowledge Agenda, we collaborate intensively with several partners from the heritage, culture, tourism, education and science worlds. Being part of the Nederlands Openluchtmuseum (Dutch Open Air Museum), the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage works with other departments in the museum. Together we study the challenges of our diverse society and how to respond more effectively to them.

As regards scientific research, the Dutch Centre collaborates with scientific and research institutions. One of them is the Cultural History research group of Utrecht University. The Dutch Centre has entered into a five-year partnership with this research group to establish an Intangible Heritage Studies research resource. Two research traditions can be identified within the context of intangible heritage research. One tradition tends to focus on reflection as part of ‘critical heritage studies’, whereas the other tradition’s focus is predominantly on ‘engineering’, preparing knowledge for practical use, e.g. by heritage communities. The Intangible Heritage Studies researcher will combine these two traditions, based on the conviction that scientific research should be fueled by real-life situations and that caring for practical heritage will benefit from knowledge and reflection. A Heritage and Public History

Laboratory ([epglab.sites.uu.nl](http://epglab.sites.uu.nl)), where intangible heritage is one of the four key focuses, was set up in conjunction with colleagues from Utrecht University. This consultation platform addresses the connection between research, education and heritage and public history in practice.

The Meertens Instituut has also traditionally been an important partner, conducting research in the field of Dutch language and culture. One of the employees of the Kenniscentrum combines her job with a position at the Meertens Instituut. Research conducted by other researchers at the Meertens Instituut also contributes to expanding our in-depth knowledge of intangible heritage. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau) which studies topics of participation in and perception of heritage is another important partner for the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage.

And finally, we collaborate with The Cultural Participation Fund which provides funding for intangible heritage projects. Where the correlation between tangible and intangible heritage is concerned, we collaborate with the Cultural Heritage Agency of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. And of course, the Netherlands UNESCO Committee is an important partner for various research lines.

On the international plane, there is intensive collaboration with Flanders, with organizations such as Werkplaats immaterieel erfgoed, FARO and LECA. Through the ICH-NGO Forum, we work with organizations that are akin to the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage and have been accredited by the 2003 UNESCO Convention. The Working Group Research at the ICH-NGO Forum is an example of this. This group is coordinated by the Dutch Centre for Intangible Heritage. Another important framework is provided by the long-term international Intangible Heritage & Museums Project in which we cooperate with partners from Switzerland, Italy, Flanders and France.



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