

Time to mobilise young people in the fight to preserve cultural identity

World Heritage Day (18th April 2017)

By Dame Fiona Reynolds, Chairman of INTO



What is intangible heritage?

When I'm somewhere new I love poking around, trying to find what's special about a place and what makes it tick: Local markets with real souvenirs that reflect local skills and traditions; restaurants the locals frequent, rather than just the ones on the tourist trail.

In fact, discovering the world's living cultures has become one of the main reasons we travel for leisure, with tourists keen to experience the global variety of performing arts, oral traditions, handicrafts and cuisines.



This is our [intangible heritage](#). Highly distinctive cultural expressions that have been passed from one generation to another and that have evolved in response to their environments, giving us a sense of identity and continuity.

We delight in this intangible heritage yet today it is under threat as never before.

The forces of globalisation and cultural homogenisation, and the pressures for economic development and social progress, while understandable, leave in their wake a world that is poorer in culture and which has wiped away the traces of history and local distinctiveness.

Intangible cultural heritage under threat



And the threats are real. According to [National Geographic](#), one language dies every 14 days. Craft skills are at risk too: thousands of handlooms across India have become silent in the last few years because weavers are unable to make ends meet. In Hong Kong, there is only one business still making bamboo steamers by hand from a single piece of

bamboo. Even kimono-making is becoming a dying art in Japan.

Rituals, music, costumes and pastimes are being lost too as the world we live in becomes more globalised, more individualistic and more commercial.

And not just in far flung places. Here in the UK we are losing our intangible heritage too. And I'm not just talking about Morris Dancing or crowning a May Queen. A [UKTV survey](#) found that a mere 13% of under 25s had played conkers, hopscotch or charades.

The loss of tradition is not always a bad thing of course: society today is rightly turning away from FGM and child marriage, and living culture is just that. Living. It moves on. It's neither static nor held in aspic. But we risk losing more than we gain.

So why is intangible cultural heritage being lost?

Social change is one factor. The [Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda \(CCFU\)](#) cites a breakdown of family values coupled with apathy – or lack of support, appreciation and understanding.

Globalisation is another cause. As communities living in Africa and South America have abandoned their native languages in favour of English or another dominant language, so Western 'civilisation' has swept across developing countries.



Indeed minority ethnic communities find themselves in a situation where their very existence is threatened and where their cultures and traditions are at risk of disappearing because they are not comprehensively promoted, let alone recorded.

Mobility is a third factor, contributing to the richness in diversity of cultures in developed nations, but also causing a loss of cultural identity, a 'cultural bereavement' on the part of migrants.

Integration into the global system makes societies more outward looking, often materially better off and gives individuals opportunities their predecessors could scarcely have dreamed of. It's a shrinking world, and it is not for us to stand in the way of progress.

But if the cost is that we lose the very essence of what made places and societies function in the past, including the loss of memory and ritual, distinctive cultures, languages, music, poetry and costume, is that something we are prepared to let happen without a backward glance?

Some good news

But before we get too gloomy, there's evidence that intangible heritage is more resilient than you might think.

One of the reasons is that people love heritage. And in a way it's all intangible as what makes something 'heritage' – whether a country house, archaeological site, industrial complex, beautiful landscape, performance or handicraft – is more about the values we ascribe to it, identity and sense of place than the stuff it's made of.

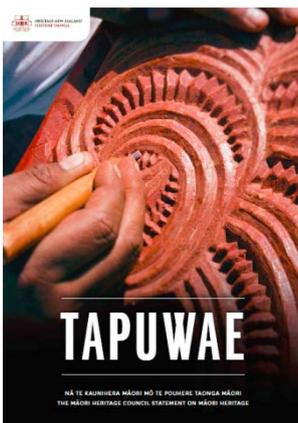
National Trusts across the world hold what might be described as the cultural memory of our countries and a commitment to help people to appreciate, enjoy and be motivated to protect it.

Every year since 1980 the [National Trust of Australia](#) has celebrated its multicultural communities in a month-long Heritage Festival. It's a similar story in Guernsey where the [National Trust](#) runs Le Viaër Marchi, an annual community gathering where people can meet, greet and share Guernsey's favourite traditions, heritage and craft skills.



The [Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development](#) has helped village communities in Nizamabad (pottery), Murbarakpur (fabric) and Hariharpur (music) to use their unique heritage skills to benefit the local economy, improve living conditions for the whole community and keep traditions alive.

Many of our Trusts are – unsurprisingly – keeping alive traditional skills associated with vernacular architecture. The [National Trust of Slovakia](#) uses a unique historic building in Bartošova Lehôtka to pass on the tradition of thatching. While on the other side of the planet, volunteers from INTO members, the [Taiwan Environmental Information Association](#) are learning practical skills from the Atolan, a local tribe of the Pisilian region, who have thousands of years' of indigenous farming knowledge to impart.



In New Zealand, the Maori Heritage Council assists the Board of Trustees of INTO members, [Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga](#), in developing and reflecting a bicultural view in the exercise of its powers and functions. And in Canada, where the Truth and Reconciliation Commission published 94 calls to action to redress the wrongs done to Indigenous Peoples by the residential school system, the [National Trust for Canada](#) has hosted round table gatherings with Traditional Knowledge Keepers and heritage advocates. These exchanges explored Indigenous perspectives on traditional lands and sacred sites, and in the process begin to build relationships and mutual understanding.

[Entebbe Declaration \(2013\)](#)

At INTO's 2013 Conference, delegates recognised that the preservation of – and freedom to express – intangible heritage is an important element of human rights, particularly with respect to minority people and the retention of oral traditions. BUT, only where they do not infringe other human rights.

Our hosts, the CCFU have worked with healers and the Ministry of Health to develop a framework that will see traditional medicine and practice, an important part of the country's heritage, harnessed, professionalised and turned to commercial gain.

A last example is the [Indonesian Heritage Trust](#) (BPPI), which runs education programmes in several cities encouraging young people to love and understand their ordinary heritage surroundings, such as handmade batik (on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage), gamelan music, wayang puppets and other traditional and contemporary crafts.

The preservation of our cultural heritage has never been more important, nor has it ever been embraced with more energy than in today's uncertain times.

[Trust Kids!](#)

But in an increasingly uncertain world, our hope lies in the hands of young people. It's vital to help them embrace the future more positively and confidently by sharing the strengths of cultural identity.



Encouraging young people to understand and preserve cultural identity in a positive way, stops it being hijacked. That is, preventing cultural identity being viewed through the prism of fake news peddlers.

In the work of all the Trusts I've mentioned, engaging young people is essential to its successful preservation and passing on. They give us hope. The youth view our global world in a positive way. Where we saw walls, they see open vistas. We need the next generation to value and care for their cultural heritage.

But understanding their cultural heritage is also vital for them. Identity helps us all to belong, to feel safe and to feel proud. Learning about our own identity helps us to better respect and tolerate each other.

Which is why we're launching a new resource on World Heritage Day (18 April) called '[Trust Kids!](#)'. Drawing on the experience of our INTO members around the world, we have created a list of 25 things young people can do to explore, celebrate, preserve and share their cultural heritage. From

drawing your family tree to finding out how your town got its name; from learning a traditional dance to eating a regional dish; discovering a local custom to interviewing an elder about community traditions!

Preserving intangible heritage requires different measures to the ones used for conserving monuments and sites – it needs to be kept alive and relevant. It must be regularly practised and learned within communities and between generations.

In a world of increasing globalisation, intolerance and fake news, we want to encourage young people to develop their own sense of cultural identity. By 'trusting kids' we can help protect and preserve our heritage – AND build greater solidarity and cultural respect amongst young people, wherever they call home.

