

ICH Resilience amid COVID-19 Pandemic



International Research Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia-Pacific Region (IRCI)

March 2023





Namhaean Byeolsin-gut, shaman ritual of the South Sea, Republic of Korea ©H. Hahm

Preface

Since December 2019, the rapid spread of COVID-19 has caused tragedies and difficulties worldwide by restricting social interaction among people. Various social measures that were put in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have severely impacted intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which is held dearly by people and typically involves social gatherings and interactions among people. An urgent investigation was needed to record and understand this challenging situation of ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic, to renew our knowledge and views on ICH, and to respond to extreme situations such as future pandemics. Against this background, IRCI undertook the project titled ‘Research on ICH Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic’ and conducted a questionnaire survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ICH during September 2021 and February 2022 as a first step to investigate the overall situation of ICH in the Asia-Pacific region. The preliminary report of the survey was published in August 2022 on the IRCI’s homepage. This booklet is another outcome of the questionnaire survey, illustrating the findings for a wider audience, with voices of the practitioners and communities of ICH collected as survey responses as well as an analysis by IRCI.

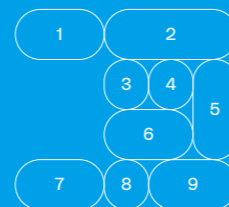
On behalf of IRCI, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all cooperating partners in Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, and the Republic of Korea, who actively undertook the collection of information from local communities and practitioners of ICH and summarised the overall situation in each country. The text of this booklet was elaborated by the IRCI, although it was based on the findings of the cooperating partners, local communities, and practitioners. I strongly hope that this booklet will reach everyone who has contributed to the survey and those who are associated with or interested in ICH, to be utilised as a reference documenting the voices from the Asia-Pacific region.

March 2023
IWAMOTO Wataru
Director-General

International Research Centre for
Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Asia Pacific Region (IRCI)

Photo captions and credits on the front cover

1. Handloom weaving, India ©R. Sethi
2. *Baul* singers, Bangladesh ©S. Zakaria
3. Collecting calendula, Kyrgyzstan ©Rural Development Funds
4. Pottery, Fiji ©E. Edwards
5. Iranian espadrille, Iran
©Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage
6. *Viviran* mask dog dance, Papua New Guinea
©N. Faik-Simet
7. *Batik* dyeing, Indonesia ©Mahirta
8. *Bii byelgee* dance, Mongolia ©S. Arslan
9. *Namhaean Byeolsin-gut*, shaman ritual of
the South Sea, Republic of Korea ©H. Hahm



ICH and COVID-19 Pandemic: Introduction of IRCI's Research

Background










In the context of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the shocking news of the cancellation of annual festivals, closure of theatres and museums, and prohibition of mass gatherings for prayers and ceremonies were reported at the initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to a complete breakdown in tourism triggered by rules restricting the movement of people, local crafts and product shops faced economic hardships, which sometimes resulted in abandoning the practice of craft-making. Gradually, people began to understand the nature of the virus and started to cope with it. There are various initiatives to continue the practice of ICH under such difficult circumstances such as efforts to modify/reform/improve their practices to suit the pandemic situation. Such changes are most likely to have affected the transmission of ICH.

Questionnaire survey by IRCI

IRCI conducted a questionnaire survey during September 2021 and February 2022 to find out the situation of ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic and its major impacts on ICH in the Asia-Pacific region. The questionnaire included questions concerning difficulties and challenges faced by ICH practitioners, changes in the practice and transmission of ICH, and the overall situation of ICH during the pandemic. A total of 145 responses were received from local communities and ICH practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region, in cooperation with researchers in nine countries, namely Bangladesh, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, and the Republic of Korea. In addition, individuals from Cambodia, Japan, Myanmar, New Zealand, Palau, and Singapore responded to the questionnaire online. Specific details of the survey and responses were published as *Research on ICH Affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Preliminary Report of the Questionnaire-Based Survey Conducted in FY 2021**.

*<https://www.irci.jp/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/09/A-Preliminary-Report-of-the-Questionnaire-Based-Survey-Conducted-in-FY-2021APC2C40.pdf>

Cooperating researchers and institutions

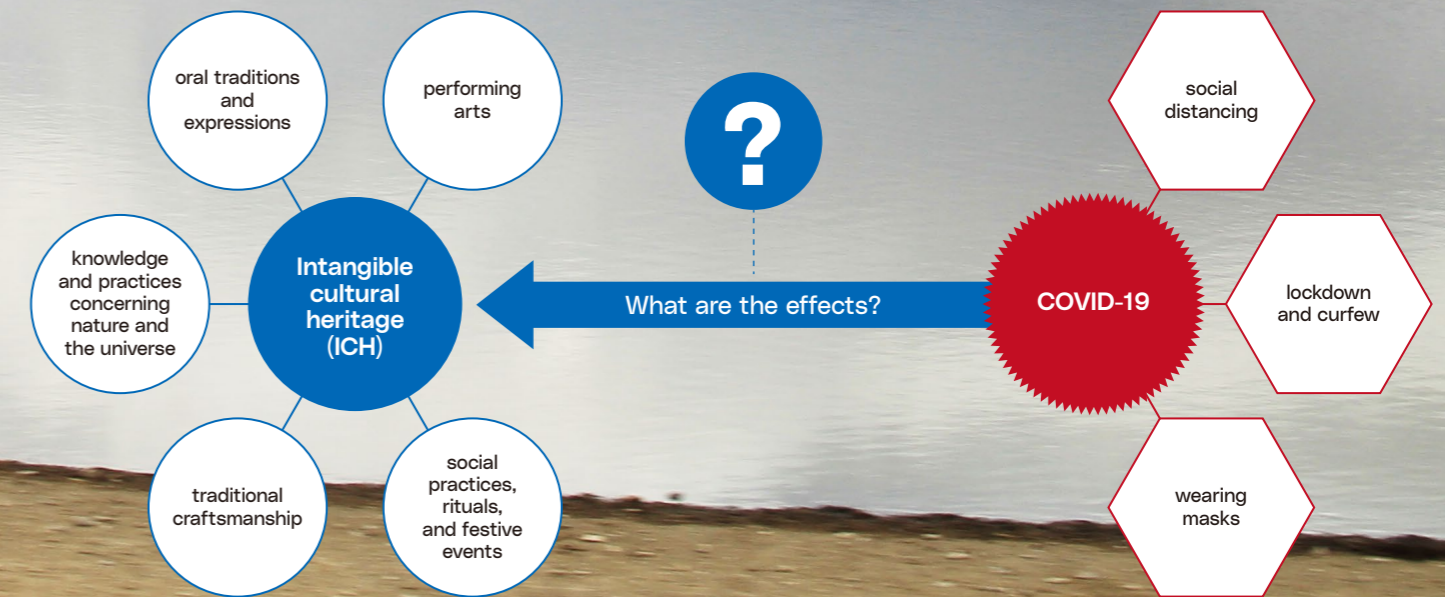
Bangladesh  Saymon Zakaria Bangla Academy	Fiji  Elizabeth Edwards UNESCO Office for the Pacific States	India  Ritu Sethi Craft Revival Craft	Indonesia  Mahirta Gadjah Mada University	Iran  Janet Blake Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage
Republic of Korea  Hanhee Hahn Center for Intangible Culture Studies	Kyrgyzstan  Kuluipa Akmatova Rural Development Fund	Mongolia  Saruul Arslan National Center for Cultural Heritage	Papua New Guinea  Naomi Faik-Simet Institute for Papua New Guinea Studies	



? How were your practice and transmission of ICH affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?

? Do you view the change/modification of your ICH during the pandemic as positive or negative?

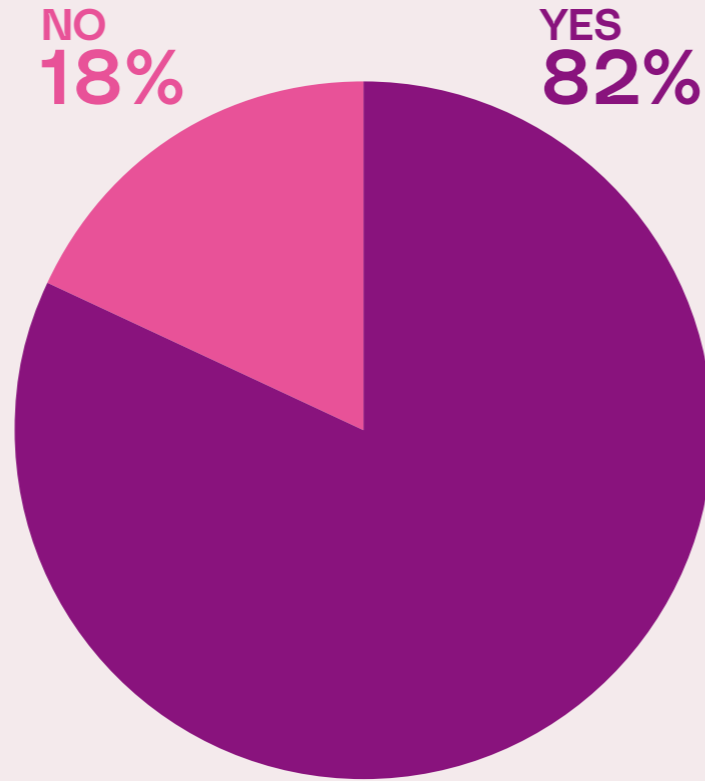
? Are there any ICH practices that were revalued, gained greater attention, or became useful or helpful during the pandemic?



Practice of ICH amid COVID-19 Pandemic

Did your practice of ICH change?
If so, how did it change?

Questions were asked whether the practice of ICH changed during the COVID-19 pandemic and, if so, how it changed. The majority of respondents indicated that their ICH practices changed, while 18% responded that there were no changes.



No changes in the practice: 18%

Practices and processes have not changed. This is because our product of wood art and carving is always connected with our style and design. This is why the number of our customers is increasing day by day. As a result, productivity is improving. (Mongolia)



Wood art and carving, Mongolia ©S. Arslan

Practice has changed: 11%

The main attraction of jinju Geommu, Korean sword dancing is the live experience of holding the sword, which is a ceremonial tool; however, protocols such as social distancing made it difficult for people to gather. During the pandemic, pre-prepared sword kits were mailed to the learners to serve the purpose of holding the sword in person. This allowed the learners to copy the movements of the dance through videos. (Republic of Korea)

Practice is continued, but fewer opportunities: 44%

Most family members were in their own households or in their own 'bubbles'. Production of pottery was reduced because there were fewer or no orders at all (Fiji)



Pottery maker, Fiji ©E. Edwards

Batik production continued since the pandemic started up until now. The number of sales was certainly lower because the number of visitors was also lower. The low sales of the products were also due to the closure of the gallery during the lockdown. (Indonesia)



Batik, traditional textile, Indonesia ©Mahirta

Practice has stopped: 15%

Under the COVID-19 lockdown, artisans suffered from a loss of their livelihoods and daily incomes due to paused logistics, which resulted in unavailability of raw materials, and fewer opportunities to sell the finished goods. Many of them had to stop production due to the uncertainty posed by markets. (India)



Handloom weaving, India ©R. Sethi

Opportunities have increased: 12%

Due to reduced social interactions, more women and girls have been encouraged to learn or improve their skills in Iranian embroidery. There have been exhibitions of the products during the lockdown. The nature of the art has been the reason for such added value and attention. (Iran)



Iranian embroidered goods and the craftswoman ©Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage

Transmission of ICH amid COVID-19 pandemic



Lacquer craftsman, Republic of Korea ©H. Hahm

Transmission activities have not changed significantly. I continue to work in the workshop. I also teach university students online. What has changed is that the frequency of my transmission activities has increased. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, we concentrated on our work only in our workshops and continued our transmission activities. However, since the pandemic, much of my activities are now online through YouTube, increasing the traffic to my Ottchil (lacquer) activities. I feel very good about the transmission activities using recorded videos, which provides more exposure to the digitally literate younger generations. (Republic of Korea, Ottchil (lacquer) craftsman)



Ottchil lacquer craft, Republic of Korea ©H. Hahm

All the family members are closely staying at home. For this reason, sharing a lot of experiences with one another happens. For example, when schools and educational institutions were closed, the school-going young generation got an opportunity to learn dhamail songs and dances. Therefore, COVID-19 has created an opportunity for learning the ICH element. (Bangladesh)



Dhamail traditional song performance, Bangladesh ©S. Zakaria

There was an increase in the use of mobile phones in capturing still photographs and videos of malagene and other ritual activities that were shared publicly on social media platforms. In this way, cultural information on certain ICH elements was made available online and accessible to everyone. While this occurred for some, other activities were put on hold as their indigenous content did not warrant them to adapt to innovations. (Papua New Guinea)



Malagene traditional dance, Papua New Guinea ©N. Faik-Simet

Safeguarding ICH amid COVID-19 pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the movement of people was restricted and most people experienced lockdowns to avoid human contact. The ICH, which involved people, communities, and countless other elements such as social gatherings, festivals, beliefs, and daily rituals that people had in common, collapsed. The questionnaire caught many voices reflecting the difficulties and challenges faced by people in the Asia-Pacific region. However, in addition to hardships, there were interesting cases of the practice and transmission of ICH, where people were trying to cope with the situation and actively adjusting their practice, for instance, using digital and online technologies, and producing masks using traditional textiles, which became extremely useful during the pandemic.

The cases reported in the questionnaire were unique and complex, influenced by various factors such as local norms and available materials and resources



Traditional espadrilles, Iran ©Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage



Coconut leaves weaving, Fiji ©E. Edwards

that were mostly local. Interestingly, some reported that ICH practices and transmission processes were enhanced in comparison with the situation before the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, traditional food was appreciated more due to the lockdown and longer time spent at home; with the cancellation of festivals and ceremonies, people focused on the transmission activities and the practice of their performances; and people also started to revive their spiritual practices to pray for the pandemic to be over.

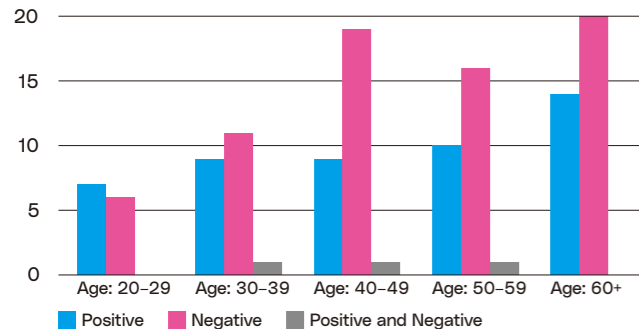
Experiences and lessons learnt during this unexpected pandemic situation were both bad and good, including attempts to hold festivals and ceremonies by modifying their traditional styles to fit social regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as by discovering strong connectivity and cooperation of people who appreciate the same ICH through online means.

These valuable findings, displaying the changing nature and resilience of ICH, should contribute to enhancing the safeguarding of ICH and knowledge to be better prepared for pandemic situations in the future.

How did ICH practitioners feel about the changes that occurred in ICH?

Communities and ICH practitioners experienced various changes in their ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as switching their apprenticeship activities to online forms and incorporating COVID-19-related cautions into their performances to raise awareness among audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reactions of the ICH practitioners and communities to the modified practice of their ICH were also diverse. In response to the question, 'Do you think the changes/modification to your ICH had a positive effect?', 60% of the survey participants indicated that the changes had a negative effect, whereas 40% perceived the changes as positive.

Respondents' perception concerning the changes in ICH by age group



Although the total number is small, positive reactions exceeded negative reactions among respondents aged between 20 and 29, who enjoy using online tools and with a growing interest to join the practice and the local ICH community. In contrast, in all age groups over 30 years, negative reactions were more pronounced, since their ICH practices were mostly put on hold and, as active ICH practitioners, they experienced difficulties in continuing with their traditional styles that they used to practice before the pandemic. Yet, it is noteworthy that some older individuals viewed the changes in ICH positively.

The respondents' positive and/or negative feelings towards the changed ICH practice come from a wide range of situations that are relatively local and personal.

The ICH practitioners and community members had to be creative to change their style of practice to continue their ICH under the COVID-19 situation. Individual cases of ICH carry their stories behind why certain changes occurred and the reason for the practitioner to feel a certain way. However, the practitioner's positive view on the changing ICH practice demonstrates the adaptability of ICH. Practitioners and communities of ICH who were able to adapt themselves and their practices to new conditions by introducing certain modifications in their ICH might have expressed various degrees of satisfaction.

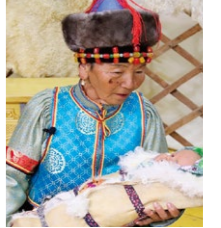
The changes or modifications of ICH were not always welcomed, especially when people assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic was over after a short period, and were reluctant to adopt new ways amid the pandemic situation. It is understandable that the younger generation, who are more accustomed to using online methods, did not find the pandemic period as hard as the older generation, as shown in the cases reported from India that young artisans considered the changes positive and progressive while the older generation found it difficult to cope with new technologies.



Positive: 40%

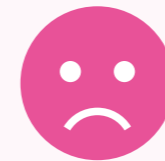
Due to restrictions on customers visiting the food centre, there were fewer opportunities to sell food. However, the introduction of food delivery platforms such as Grab Food and Food Panda helped the sales as well as delivery processes. (Singapore)

The digital environment became more popular during the pandemic, especially for the younger generation who are more exposed and used to social networks. Information on folk songs and activities were organised through online platforms. (Mongolia)



Lullaby, folk songs, Mongolia ©S. Arslan

The main changes include missing face-to-face interaction with Iranian music students while attaining new opportunities to reach beyond the usual audience with the help of online classes. (Iran)



Negative: 60%

There were no sales of salt during the pandemic, which means no business at all. Before the pandemic, tourists used to pay a fee to visit the salt-making site to see the salt-making process; however, there were no more visitors. (Fiji)



Salt maker, Fiji ©E. Edwards

The Buddhist ritual procession has been suspended for two years and I am concerned that this will make it difficult to pass on the manners and regulations. (Japan)

Pandemic as an opportunity for ICH practice

Some ICH elements were revalued, gained greater attention, and were considered useful or helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic. One reason behind this trend was the increased use of digital means, such as online performances and apprenticeship training, as well as marketing and selling products through online platforms. In addition, individuals who were not interested in their local ICH before the pandemic, especially the younger generation, were given new opportunities to be exposed to their ICH due to lockdowns and staying home.

Practices that strengthen the immune system

For preventive healthcare and immunity building during the pandemic, Ayurveda, Unani, and other types of traditional healthcare in India were highlighted.

At the beginning of the pandemic when vaccines were still being developed, medicinal herbs such as jamu and empon-empon, known and produced as herbal drinks and traditional medicines, suddenly gained popularity in Indonesia even among the young generation that had previously not favoured these types of cultural remedies.



Knowledge holders of medicinal herbs, Kyrgyzstan
©Rural Development Fund



Knowledge holders of medicinal herbs, Mongolia
©S. Arslan

Rituals and practices to support mental wellbeing

Spiritual practices, which included rituals of burning the branches of juniper for the smoke to cleanse the air, received greater attention from local communities in Kyrgyzstan.

Some pottery makers in Fiji who practised at home found it therapeutic.

Iranian music and dances were produced as video clips and released on social media to encourage the public health care staff members to fight against extreme frustration and endure the long hours of constant work.



Pottery maker, Fiji
©E. Edwards



Kutu tabu, shell cutting ceremony, Papua New Guinea
©N. Faik-Simet

Ceremonies related to the deceased

In Papua New Guinea, because of the number of deaths caused by COVID-19, kutu tabu, a ceremony to cut and distribute the shell money of the deceased, became more prominent.

Practices enhanced due to lockdowns and social restrictions

At the household level, family members had to spend long hours together. People in Iran started engaging in several activities, which could be experienced at home. These experiences included learning to cook, involvement in smaller-scale family industries and handicraft productions, and spending time playing traditional indoor riddles, puzzles, and board games.

In India, the younger generation would leave their hometowns to find jobs before the pandemic; however, due to movement restrictions, they remained home to inherit the family business of rug weaving.



Maker of *givehdoozi*, Iranian espadrilles
©Persian Garden Institute for Living Heritage



This word cloud image was generated from the answers received from the question concerning ICH elements that were revalued, gained greater attention, or became useful or helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Creativity and resilience of ICH



Baul traditional singers, Bangladesh ©S. Zakaria



Namhaean Byeolsin-gut, shaman ritual of the South Sea, Republic of Korea ©H. Hahm



Handloom weaver, India ©R. Sethi

In India, initiatives such as Creative Dignity came up with rag dolls that represented each state during the pandemic. Whenever the team visited a state, they created a doll to represent the state and narrated COVID-19 stories through the dolls. The team would also help artisans to use digital technology, creating a catalogue and putting it out in the market.

A new banking innovation, QRIS was introduced in Indonesia to send money to traditional art performers through a QR code. The QR code can be found on social media or live streaming for the audience to easily donate their money to the performers.

While international travels were restricted, spiritual practices such as tuloo, a ritual of scarification by slaughtering sheep, became popular. It was demonstrated to domestic travelers in Kyrgyzstan.

In Papua New Guinea, in the process of adjusting to the new normal way of doing things, people became more creative and economical in using available resources wisely. They became more resilient in protecting and sustaining their indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

Several Bangladeshi folk poets created new puthi poetry on COVID-19. The poems included when and where the virus started to spread and an explanation of the situation in Bangladesh from the first appearance of COVID-19 until the most recent events.



The outbreak of COVID-19 challenged humanity and ICH in various ways. The stories shared as responses to the questionnaire demonstrated the creativity and flexibility of ICH practitioners and communities in embracing the challenges they faced. Active efforts to overcome various restrictions to continue ICH practice in turn created new opportunities and means to practice, transmit, and safeguard ICH. These strong spirits and actions shown by individuals and ICH community members exemplify the resilience of living heritage that is adaptive to ever-changing situations.

As presented in this booklet, diversified yet interesting cases of ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic were documented and analysed through the questionnaire. These outcomes will not only become a resource to look back and review the situation of ICH during the COVID-19 pandemic but also will be useful as general knowledge on ICH in the context of epidemics to be better prepared for safeguarding ICH from future pandemics.

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