**label:** 14

**title:** Surveying and Inventorying Intangible Cultural Heritage in a Multicultural Society

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Home to more than 5.6 million people, the nation of Singapore is one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Within the boundaries of just 734.4 square kilometers lies a rich tapestry of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) practices celebrated by people of various ethnicities and religions – a result of centuries of cross-cultural interactions that began with the arrival of migrants from various countries and regions, including China, India, and the Malay Archipelago.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage ({{UNESCO 2003}}), defines ICH as follows:

**[[block quote]]**

Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.

**[[end block]]**

In Singapore, these cross-cultural influences have evolved over time into ICH practices treasured by the different communities. Today, they are most evident in Singapore’s rich multicultural food heritage, where popular dishes like *mee goreng* (a stir-fried noodle dish made with Chinese noodles using Indian spices) are made possible through the marrying of ingredients and cooking techniques among the communities.

## Importance of ICH and Inventorying

ICH contributes to the sense of identity and rootedness that shapes Singapore’s multicultural identity. A big part of ICH in Singapore is the celebration of cultural festivals such as Lunar New Year, Hari Raya Puasa, and Deepavali by the Chinese, Malay, and Indian communities, respectively. Each festival consists of a myriad of practices that contribute to the identities of the communities and form part of Singapore’s multicultural ICH. These ICH practices include the traditional crafting of *rangoli* (intricate patterns made from colored rice powder or rice grains) as part of Deepavali, the making of traditional baked goods or *kuehs* (sweet or savory snacks) like pineapple tarts and *kueh baulu* (sponge cake), and social customs such as the kissing of elders’ hands as a sign of respect practiced by the Malay community during Hari Raya Puasa (**fig. 14.1**).

**[[fig-14-1]]**

The importance of ICH was further recognized under Our SG Heritage Plan ({{National Heritage Board 2018}}), Singapore’s first heritage master plan, which outlined the broad strategies for Singapore’s heritage and museum sector to be carried out from 2018 to 2022. The plan was developed in consultation with academics, cultural practitioners, community leaders, educators, students and members of the public.

One of the four pillars of the Heritage Plan – Our Cultures – focuses on ways of safeguarding and promoting ICH in Singapore. The initiatives under the plan include strengthening research and documentation of ICH, developing an ICH inventory through carrying out a nationwide survey, and raising awareness of ICH in the community. The development of such an inventory is also one of the obligations of a state party under the UNESCO ICH Convention ({{UNESCO 2003||2003}}), to which Singapore is a signatory.

## Singapore’s Preparatory Work

Prior to carrying out research on Singapore’s ICH, the National Heritage Board (NHB) studied and referenced that convention, which focuses on the significance of ICH practices to communities and the viability of these practices ({{UNESCO 2003}}). NHB also studied ICH surveys carried out in other cities in the region, such as Hong Kong and George Town, Penang, Malaysia, and learned from their experiences before embarking on the project.

## First Nationwide ICH Survey

In July 2016, NHB launched a nationwide survey to identify and document key aspects of Singapore’s ICH practices. The objectives of this survey were to provide a more definitive understanding of Singapore’s ICH, document the practices and experiences of ICH practitioners, inform policymaking on a state level, and increase public awareness and appreciation of ICH.

To complement the ICH survey and to support the development of the ICH inventory, NHB organized engagement sessions with more than seventy participants from various communities, from September 2016 to November 2017, and sought their views on the elements that could be included in the inventory. The 2003 UNESCO Convention recognizes five ICH domains: 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; and traditional craftsmanship ({{UNESCO 2011a}}). Singapore included all of these as well as a sixth category of Food Heritage, after a nationwide poll of over three thousand respondents in 2018 saw it voted as the most important aspect of Singapore’s ICH, a reflection of Singaporeans’ love for food.

Due to the extensive nature of the survey, NHB commissioned a research company with a network of trained researchers to conduct it. Survey forms and a related comprehensive set of guidelines, both adapted from the UNESCO ICH convention and related guidance documents ({{UNESCO 2021}}), were codeveloped with these researchers to collect information.

The survey involved two layers of research: primary and secondary. Primary research was in the form of fieldwork and captured information through photography, videography, and interviews with practitioners and other informants, typically conducted on-site with each practitioner, in the locale of his or her practice. Where required, those involved in fieldwork were matched to the interviewees based on their language preference, as a sizable number of older ICH practitioners are more conversant in languages other than English, including Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Secondary research involved acquiring information from sources ranging from archival documents and oral history interview records to online and print media.

The research content was then consolidated, transcribed, and logged, and subsequently developed into a final research report for each of the ICH elements. Accompanying each research entry was a short video of the ICH element in which a practitioner would share his or her trade or craft, personal views, and experiences.

### Launch of Singapore’s ICH inventory

After compiling information from the ICH survey and community engagement sessions, in 2018, NHB launched Singapore’s first National Inventory of ICH, with an initial list of fifty ICH elements. That certain ICH elements are listed in the inventory does not suggest they are prioritized over others. Given the multicultural nature of the country, it is important to ensure diverse representation of ICH elements in the inventory. The number of ICH elements in the inventory has continued to grow, and the content in the ICH inventory continues to be updated as ICH evolves over time and more research is conducted.

### Making the Inventory Accessible

To ensure that the inventory is accessible, and its content engaging for the public, NHB has taken a comprehensive digital approach to cater to a digitally connected Singapore audience. At the core of this approach is the online ICH inventory on Roots.sg, NHB’s public facing heritage resource portal ({{National Heritage Board 2023b}}). In this portal, content from the ICH inventory is featured regularly and also interlinked with articles on tangible heritage in Singapore, such as related artifacts from the National Collection and built heritage.

As of this writing, the inventory is home to 102 elements that reflect the practices of the various ethnic groups in Singapore. The content in the inventory is written for the general public and features the associated social and cultural practices, viability, and future outlook of the ICH elements, as well as the experiences of the practitioners. It has also been utilized by schools to educate students on ICH in Singapore, through classroom learning and/or school projects. Social media, particularly Facebook and Instagram, is also actively embraced to further promote awareness of ICH to the wider audience (**fig. 14.2**).

**[[fig-14-2]]**

### Expanding on ICH Research

In March 2023, Our SG Heritage Plan 2.0 was launched, to guide strategies for the next chapter of Singapore's heritage landscape from 2023 to 2027; it includes plans to strengthen research and documentation of Singapore’s ICH ({{National Heritage Board. 2023a}}). NHB administers the Heritage Research Grant, which encourages academics, researchers, and heritage NGOs to embark on heritage-related research projects that document and preserve Singapore’s heritage (**fig. 14.3**).

**[[fig-14-3]]**

## Lessons for ICH Surveys and Inventorying

The extensive research and documentation efforts carried out by NHB, including through the nationwide survey, laid the foundation for the development of Singapore’s ICH inventory. The research on various ICH elements and their history, current practices, and challenges, together with the establishment of the ICH inventory, have been essential to NHB’s efforts to develop new initiatives to safeguard ICH in Singapore and facilitate the transmission of ICH to the next generation of practitioners.

Two key lessons were derived from NHB’s process on surveys and inventorying of ICH that will be essential to guide its future documentation and safeguarding efforts:

* The establishment of collaborative networks between ICH practitioners, researchers, and the communities is a key factor in successfully capturing the multicultural dynamics of ICH elements in Singapore.
* Integrating research with community engagement, be it through focus groups or readily available digital content, is essential to ensuring the documentation and continued transmission of ICH practices.