

Digital literacy and community-led data governance for intangible cultural heritage practitioners in Burkina Faso

Harnessing responsible use of technology for social and economic development in Burkina Faso: supporting community-led cultural heritage data governance through digital/artificial intelligence (AI) literacy

This project seeks to promote sustainable economic and social development in Burkina Faso by working with intangible cultural heritage practitioners to develop digital/AI literacy skills supporting responsible use of technology for cultural heritage data governance.

The concept of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), also known as living heritage, refers to heritage knowledge and skills such as storytelling, crafts, performances and agricultural or culinary knowledge, passed down through generations that provide meaning and value to their practitioner communities and groups. The UNESCO [Intangible Heritage Convention](#) focuses on supporting practitioner communities and groups to manage their own heritage, as distinct from the [World Heritage Convention of 1972](#) which focuses on heritage places, often managed by experts such as architects or archaeologists.

Many kinds of ICH not only provide their practitioners with a sense of identity and meaning, they also support livelihoods. Promoting guidance for heritage-sensitive and rights-based approaches to support both economic and cultural sustainability through ICH safeguarding was recently the subject of an expert meeting and a draft Guidance Note under the Convention.¹ Various projects have worked with ICH communities and practitioners to help develop heritage-sensitive business strategies that also consider heritage safeguarding.² However, there is a lack of clarity about what responsible use of AI might look like in regard to economic and cultural sustainability for ICH, and how practitioners and communities can maximise benefits and minimise risks from use of AI tools by themselves and others.

Finding a balance between promotion and protection

Many contemporary and traditional artists wish to promote their work online, and increase their visibility. Broadening digital access provides opportunities to raise awareness about cultural heritage and market cultural products online. Like contemporary artists, ICH practitioners (such as traditional craftspeople, musicians and performers) can also use AI and other digital technologies to create innovative new

¹ See <https://ich.unesco.org/en/livelihoods-01315> and the Guidance note in the annex to this [document](https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/LHE-23-18.COM-12_EN_Rev.docx) https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/LHE-23-18.COM-12_EN_Rev.docx

² See www.hipams.org

products and services. However, it is important to ensure that artists and cultural communities benefit and are attributed appropriately when they or others use their cultural data to generate income. Putting new data online could expose artists to new challenges of misrepresentation, misuse and misappropriation from third parties, a process that has become easier and cheaper with the emergence of freely-available generative AI trained on cultural datasets. Copyright or design protections do not usually apply to traditional patterns, and ICH practitioners, including Indigenous and local communities, may find that their traditional designs are modified inappropriately, not attributed to them, and that they do not benefit from income generated by modifications thereof.³

African cultural content, particularly from traditional artist communities, is currently underrepresented online, which can be a source of ignorance and misunderstanding. Redressing the North-South data imbalance is as important as providing equitable internet access, and access to AI tools, because there will likely be a significant cost associated with online invisibility in the long term. However, online underrepresentation may give African artists and cultural creators a temporary competitive advantage over western contemporary and traditional artists at the moment, since their work currently cannot be as easily copied and used by third parties using generative AI. This highlights the importance of developing digital/AI literacy tools for cultural heritage communities who are about to gain better access to the internet, but have not yet shared much of their cultural data online. However, much digital literacy training focuses on people who already have good internet access, and on contemporary rather than traditional artists.

Digital/AI literacy tools that will be designed through this project are intended to assist groups or communities of ICH practitioners in Burkina Faso, and elsewhere in Africa, to decide what cultural information to share online, and how to share it. This could involve considering the balance between protecting secret and sacred cultural information from widespread distribution, ensuring that the interests of artist communities are respected and protected (for example by careful selection of what goes online, ensuring attribution in metadata, guarding against unauthorised access and use), and promoting greater visibility for cultural heritage (for example by sharing pictures of baskets or festivals to sell products and services).

Who is the research team?

Partners at the University of Hull, led by Principal Investigator Dr Harriet Deacon and co-investigators Prof Kevin Pimblet and Dr Bhupesh Mishra, are collaborating with partners at the UNB in Burkina Faso, led by Dr Leonce Ki. We will be assisted by Dr Freda Owusu, Prof Avril Joffe and Dr Mathilde Pavis acting as consultants.

³ See for example <https://www.terrijanke.com.au/post/the-new-frontier-artificial-intelligence-copyright-and-indigenous-culture>

What will we do?

During the project, the research team will work with mask society members, basket-making and musician communities and groups to determine their needs, concerns and hopes for online engagement. Appropriate 'AI literacy for culture' capacity-building materials for communities will be co-created with communities in Burkina Faso, addressing diverse local needs on digital/AI literacy and providing support for community discussions on cultural data governance. A priority of the project will be to ensure that communities (and individuals, where relevant) retain ownership and control over, as well as access to, any documentation of their cultural data generated during the project.

Capacity-building toolkits will be tested within the communities and adapted for broader use in African contexts. We will also work with experts and sector specialists from other African countries to adapt the toolkits for digital intermediaries (e.g. museums, NGOs) and other African stakeholders. The project will develop Africa-relevant policy briefs at the intersection between cultural heritage data governance, cultural industries and artificial intelligence. We plan to publish several research articles on these issues.

Who has funded the project?

The project has been funded under the British Academy ODA Challenge-Oriented Research Grants programme 2024: Societal Challenges and Approaches to Responsible Technologies. The programme is supported under the UK Government's International Science Partnerships Fund (ISPF).

See <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/oda-challenge-oriented-research-grants-projects-2024-societal-challenges-and-approaches-to-responsible-technologies/>



UNB (estab. 1995), formerly the Polytechnic University of Bobo-Dioulasso, is a public university in Burkina Faso, named after a pro-democracy politician and author born in the country.

The British Academy is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, and a grant-making body investing in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engaging the public and influencing policy for the benefit of everyone.

The University of Hull (estab. 1927) is a public research university in England, based in the town where Wiliam Wilberforce (1759 –1833) was born, a British politician, philanthropist, and a leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade.