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Revitalising the Bethlehem of Verviers: Interconnection between Intangible Cultural Heritage and Post-Disaster Recovery

Laure Marique and Carla Zurstrassen

Introduction

- 1 Intangible cultural heritage is essential to community identity and well-being.¹ However, during times of crisis – whether due to armed conflict, environmental disasters, or socio-economic upheaval – this heritage often faces significant threats, including loss, damage, and neglect. While disasters can jeopardise intangible cultural heritage, they also provide opportunities for communities to reengage with their cultural practices, using them as tools for resilience and recovery.² International initiatives have demonstrated the positive impact of intangible cultural heritage in post-crisis contexts, particularly in fostering social cohesion and restoring a sense of normalcy.³
- 2 Between 14 and 16 July 2021, unprecedented flooding devastated southwestern Europe. In Belgium, 209 municipalities, including Verviers, suffered extensive damage, resulting in 39 deaths and affecting over 100,000 people.⁴ Among the cultural heritage impacted was the Bethlehem of Verviers, a historic puppet theatre housed in the former Musée d'Archéologie et de Folklore. Following the disaster, conservation-restoration students at École Supérieure des Arts (ESA) Saint-Luc Liège were entrusted with preserving the Bethlehem's material elements. However, the intangible aspects – including the practice of handling the puppets during the Christmas period – were at risk of being lost. Thanks to the collaborative 'Bethlehem of Verviers' project (2023–2025), led by the Musées de Verviers, in partnership with the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) and local stakeholders, efforts were initiated

to revitalise the Bethlehem tradition. This initiative not only seeks to preserve cultural heritage but also contributes to social cohesion and helps heal the psychological, cultural, and social wounds inflicted by the floods.

Research Strategy and Guiding Questions

- 3 This study relies on findings from the Bethlehem of Verviers project. The research seeks to address the central question: How can the revival of intangible cultural heritage enhance social cohesion in a disaster-affected community and aid its recovery?
- 4 The study further explores two sub-questions:
 - Can a crisis create an opportunity to revitalise a cultural practice and help communities reconnect with it?
 - Can intangible cultural heritage strengthen local social cohesion and motivate citizen-led initiatives to reclaim cultural practices?
- 5 The findings fall within the broader international context, particularly aligning with UNESCO's operational principles and modalities for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in emergencies.⁵ However, this study focuses on a specific safeguarding measure:⁶ revitalisation. This approach goes beyond merely preserving existing practices in Bethlehem; it encompasses revitalising them - reviving and adapting traditions. The study investigates the conditions of the Bethlehem of Verviers tradition prior to the flood, the response efforts, and the ongoing revitalisation activities. Although the project is still in progress, initial insights provide valuable considerations for future strategies in disaster preparedness and response for intangible cultural heritage.

Key Findings from the Bethlehem of Verviers Initiative

Safeguarding Intangible Heritage in Times of Crisis

- 6 Intangible cultural heritage encompasses traditions, practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills, along with the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated with them that communities recognise as integral to their cultural heritage.⁷ Emergencies stemming from climate change or conflict present significant threats to this heritage.⁸ Traditional knowledge and practices are often transmitted orally or through direct engagement. Displacement caused by emergencies can disrupt these transmission methods, resulting in the loss of cultural practices. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many cultural events – such as the Carnaval de Binche⁹ – were interrupted, hindering the dissemination of cultural expressions and traditional knowledge. Disasters and conflicts also affect intangible cultural heritage by necessitating community relocations, which can lead to the loss of traditional environments where cultural practices are conducted. This displacement may result in the forsaking of traditional practices.¹⁰ Additionally, emergencies can undermine the social cohesion vital for practising and passing down intangible cultural heritage. The disintegration of community structures can hinder collective cultural expressions and the preservation of traditions. Nevertheless, intangible cultural heritage has the

capacity to be transformed and adapted, promoting reconciliation and strengthening the resilience of affected communities.¹¹ It can contribute to restoring peace and security, mitigate vulnerabilities, and assist communities in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies.¹²

- 7 This underscores the growing global recognition of the importance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in times of crisis. International organisations like UNESCO have developed operational principles and methods to protect intangible cultural heritage during emergencies, emphasising the need for community involvement and integrating such heritage into disaster risk management.¹³ However, the implementation of these strategies varies: some regions have established comprehensive policies, while others lack formal approaches.¹⁴ Success stories include the incorporation of intangible cultural heritage into disaster risk management plans, community-led initiatives, and international collaborations. In 2024, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Non-Governmental Organization Forum (ICH NGO Forum), which brings together 264 NGOs globally, adopted a *Declaration on the Safeguarding, Promotion, and Mobilization of Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Face of Climate Change*.¹⁵ This document aims to safeguard, protect, and promote intangible cultural heritage practices against disasters caused by climate change and applies to all states, intergovernmental organisations, and civil society entities.
- 8 Recently, the READY project, led by ICCROM and funded by the European Union, aims to include courses on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage alongside movable and immovable heritage.¹⁶ However, tangible heritage often receives more attention and resources due to its physical presence and visibility. In contrast, intangible cultural heritage, being non-physical, can be overlooked in emergency planning and recovery efforts. This disparity highlights the need for integrated approaches that consider both tangible and intangible aspects of cultural heritage.¹⁷
- 9 In Belgium, the responsibility for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage rests with the linguistic communities.¹⁸ The Departement Cultuur, Jeugd en Media (DCJM) oversees the intangible cultural heritage of the Dutch-speaking community in Flanders and Brussels.¹⁹ The Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB) is responsible for that of the French-speaking community in Wallonia (excluding the German-speaking community) and Brussels.²⁰ The German-speaking community manages the protection of its intangible cultural heritage. Finally, the Brussels-Capital Region is tasked with preserving the bi-cultural intangible cultural heritage within its territory. Although these communities have established frameworks for protecting cultural heritage, specific policies for addressing intangible cultural heritage in emergencies are not elaborated in the available sources. Challenges in this area often involve integrating intangible cultural heritage into broader disaster risk management plans and ensuring community engagement in safeguarding efforts.

The Bethlehem of Verviers: Navigating Crisis in a Legacy of Puppetry

- 10 The Bethlehem of Verviers (fig. 1) is a 19th century puppet theatre that offers an immersive and captivating experience, drawing audiences into the religious and cultural history of Wallonia. Before the floods, the theatre featured eighteen animated scenes arranged side by side on a platform, each occupying about one cubic metre.²¹

The Bethlehem's audience moved from one scene to another, witnessing the unfolding narrative of the Birth and Early Life of Jesus. These scenes, showcasing miniature settings such as a church, stable, mill, or house, depicted daily life in 19th century Verviers. In total, the Bethlehem included ninety-two puppets, most of which were operated by a puppeteer hidden beneath the platform. The figures were manipulated with subtle movements and rotations, creating the illusion of life, while the story, sung in Walloon – a dialect considered endangered by UNESCO – provided a rhythmic backdrop.²²

[Fig. 1]



Scene from the Bethlehem of Verviers, depicting the peasants descending the mountain.

© Musées de Verviers.

- 11 Originally intended for a largely working-class audience in a town that prospered in the textile industry during the 19th century, the Bethlehem also conveyed moral lessons, promoting hard work, charity, and the denunciation of laziness. Besides its religious and moral significance, Bethlehem played an essential social role, bringing the community together for a shared celebration during the Christmas season.
- 12 Few written records have survived regarding the history of the Bethlehem of Verviers, and those we have gathered primarily come from Jules Feller (1859-1940), a Belgian academician and Walloon activist.²³ The Bethlehem of Verviers traces its origins back to the 17th century, when the Récollets monks first established the tradition in Verviers, though no physical remnants of their work remain. The version known today emerged from several puppet theatres active in the town from the 1820s to the 1890s. These family-run, handcrafted theatres played an essential role in Christmas celebrations, blending local culture with religious themes. In 1890, Jean Simon Renier, the founder of the Musées de Verviers, commissioned his nephew, Rodolphe Closset, to reconstruct one of these Bethlehem theatres. Closset acquired the remains of a Bethlehem from Nicolas Villé, restored it, recreated the missing parts, and reestablished the narrative based on local testimonies. He also incorporated elements from other Bethlehem

theatres. This restored version eventually became the Bethlehem of Verviers, added to the Musées de Verviers collections in 1962 and housed at the Musée d'Archéologie et de Folklore. Since then, every Christmas, the Musées de Verviers have worked to preserve and revive this tradition by organising shows and cultural activities centred around the Bethlehem. The main audience consisted of school groups, with about four classrooms visiting each morning for ten days.²⁴ Afterward, the Bethlehem was open to the general public until early January, after which it closed until the following Christmas. Until the early 2000s, the Bethlehem was operated by Jacques Thonnard, an employee of the Musées de Verviers with a passion for the theatre, who trained children aged around seven or eight to handle the puppets while hiding under the structure. However, from 2002 onwards, due to Mr. Thonnard's retirement and new child labour laws, it was run by teenagers, then by volunteers and museum staff.

- 13 Two significant events in recent years have disrupted this tradition while also sparking its revitalisation. In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the cancellation of Bethlehem's usual Christmas performances due to social distancing measures. In response, the museum created a video of the performance and made it available for free on YouTube to maintain a connection with its audience, both at home and in the classroom.²⁵ The second challenge occurred in July 2021 when severe flooding from the Vesdre River inundated Verviers, submerging the Bethlehem, which was stored in the basement of the Musée d'Archéologie et de Folklore, for 48 hours in contaminated floodwaters (fig. 2). After the water was pumped out, a team of volunteers, including citizens, restorers, and heritage enthusiasts, worked tirelessly to recover the pieces. The museum began cataloguing and organising the Bethlehem materials, grouping them by scene and placing them in crates where they awaited cleaning and restoration (fig. 3-4).

[Fig. 2]



The entrance to the basement of the Musée d'Archéologie et de Folklore, where the Bethlehem was stored. This photo was taken on July 15, 2021, the day before the pumps were activated to evacuate the stagnant water from the basement.

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[Fig. 3]



Scene from the Bethlehem of Verviers, depicting the house of Mary.

© Musées de Verviers.

[Fig. 5]



Details during the cleaning (soft particle blasting).

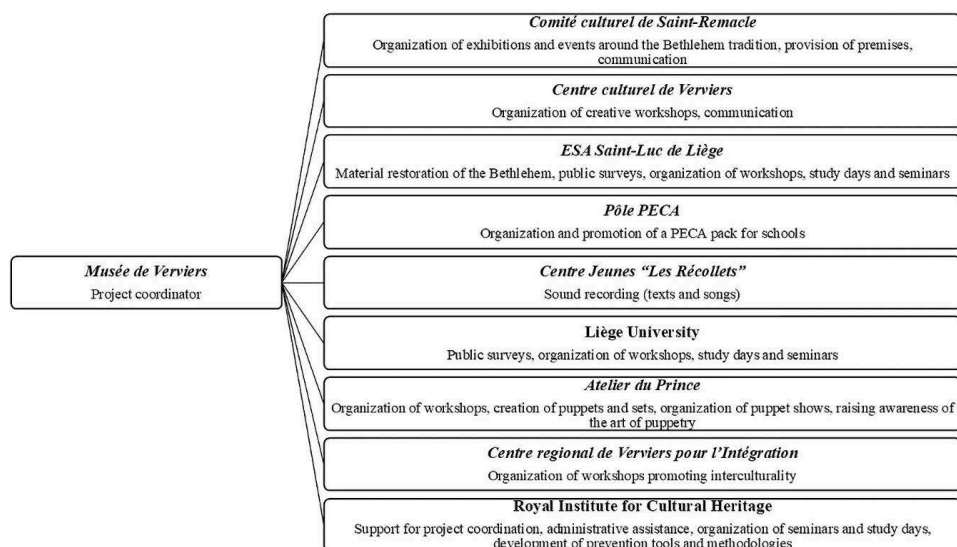
© ESA Saint-Luc Liège.

- 15 A growing interest in the broader cultural significance of the Bethlehem has emerged from material conservation. It is important to consider its intangible aspects. Encouraged by Muriel Verbeeck, a professor at ESA Saint-Luc Liège and President of the Scientific Council of KIK-IRPA, the Musées de Verviers submitted a proposal for the Bethlehem to the KIK-IRPA Heritage Challenge²⁷ 2022 with the aim of perpetuating its tradition.²⁸ Although the application was unsuccessful, it fostered valuable connections between the two institutions, emphasising the social, educational, and recreational importance of the Bethlehem.
- 16 In June 2022, the Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles (FWB) launched a call for projects to support cultural operators affected by the July 2021 floods. This initiative provided an opportunity for the Musées de Verviers and KIK-IRPA to collaborate on a project aimed at reviving the Bethlehem tradition. The project sought to preserve the Bethlehem while also redefining its role in the community's recovery process. Its mission was defined as: 'To bring the Bethlehem of Verviers back to life by enabling the people of Verviers to reclaim it.' The project's objectives are twofold: to safeguard and perpetuate a cultural heritage of inestimable value and to give this legacy a renewed social function as a tool for the psychosocial and cultural reconstruction of Verviers.²⁹
- 17 The project was officially submitted to the FWB in December 2022 and received approval in July 2023.

Revitalising Heritage Through Community: The Case of the Bethlehem of Verviers

- 18 The project officially launched on 28 September 2023 with a kick-off meeting at the Musées de Verviers, attended by various partners (fig. 6).

[Fig. 6]

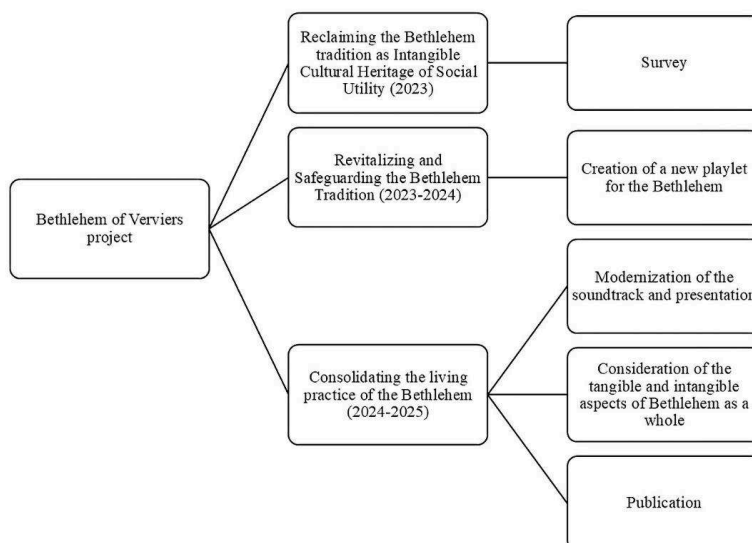


The Bethlehem of Verviers project: Partners and their expertise.

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- 19 The proposed project was structured into three stages (fig. 7).

[Fig. 7]



The various stages of the Bethlehem of Verviers project.

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The Bethlehem Tradition: Reclaiming a Heritage of Social Utility

- 20 Intangible heritage, by its nature, is a living tradition upheld by a community that assigns meaning and value to it. The 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage asserts that ‘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, providing them with a sense of identity and continuity'.³⁰ From the outset of the project, Musées de Verviers recognised that the Bethlehem of Verviers was originally destined to be continually recreated over time through the addition of puppets and sets, while its inclusion in the museum's collections had halted the evolution of these material components. However, it is increasingly acknowledged that museums can play a crucial role in the preservation, study, and transmission of cultural heritage, contributing to social cohesion across societies.³¹ Therefore, to contextualise the Bethlehem tradition within Verviers and highlight the town's cultural diversity, it was essential to understand how the local community perceived it and to determine whether any groups remained connected to this cultural practice.³² KIK-IRPA chose a survey as the most appropriate and respectful method for engaging with the local community. This approach enabled the structured collection of responses, providing valuable insights into the aspects of the Bethlehem tradition that the local community valued and wished to preserve. Furthermore, it helped mitigate potential challenges, such as avoiding stereotypes and preventing misappropriation, while also respecting the community's intentions and needs.

- 21 This article analyses seven survey questions focused on the Bethlehem of Verviers, along with two questions about safeguarding intangible cultural practices during times of crisis, a topic of interest to KIK-IRPA. Four questions were closed-ended, while five were open-ended, allowing participants to provide detailed insights. The questions explored various aspects of Bethlehem, including its recognition, visitor context, key elements, transmission, and feelings of belonging and continuity, along with personal testimonies. Regarding the safeguarding of intangible heritage during crises, the survey examined respondents' expectations and needs, as well as the necessary adaptations during such events. The survey, accessible via a Microsoft Form link, was shared online between 15 December 2023 and 10 March 2024 through multiple channels. The Musées de Verviers distributed the survey via a press release, their website, social media, and flyers in local businesses. Additionally, a museum team member attended Saint-Remacle Church on 27 December 2024, as part of the exhibition *Po n'nin roûvî nos vî Bethléem* to present the project and encourage participation. Information about the survey was also shared by local online newspapers, while KIK-IRPA disseminated details through its website and social media platforms.
- 22 A total of 164 participants responded, providing both quantitative and qualitative data on their perceptions of the Bethlehem of Verviers. Except for three individuals, all respondents were residents of Verviers or lived within a 35-kilometre radius. Regarding age distribution, all age groups were well represented, with a significant proportion aged over 56. Specifically, 26% were between 56 and 65, and 23% were over 65. Additionally, 20% were aged 46–55, 16% were aged 36–45, and 11% were aged 26–35. The remaining 4% were under 25, with 3% aged 18–25 and less than 1% under 18. It is important to note that this sample consists only of individuals who became aware of the survey through the mentioned platforms and chose to participate voluntarily and anonymously. With 164 participants and no predefined criteria to ensure a representative sample of the Verviers population in terms of gender, age, religion, or other demographics, the sample size is too small to generalise the findings to the entire population of Verviers (56,143 inhabitants as of 1 December 2023). However, the survey

provides valuable insights into local perceptions and concerns regarding Bethlehem in the post-2021 flood context.

- 23 Among the respondents, about 88% (144 individuals) were familiar with the Bethlehem of Verviers. Most (44%) learned about the tradition during childhood, while others encountered it later in adolescence or adulthood. Notably, 27% reported that their first visit happened over 40 years ago. Family visits emerged as the most common introduction to Bethlehem, followed by school visits.
- 24 Regarding key elements of Bethlehem, 40% of participants emphasised that the puppets are central to the experience, both visually and interactively. Dialogues and music in Walloon were the second most frequently mentioned aspect (32%), highlighting their significance to Bethlehem's identity. Additionally, 22% pointed out that the mechanisms animating the puppets and sets are crucial to the spectacle's magic. While Christmas is regarded as inseparable from Bethlehem, only 14% explicitly mentioned it.
- 25 Regarding tradition transmission, approximately 65% of respondents did not consider themselves essential to the continuation of Bethlehem. The remaining 35% emphasised their role in passing it on within families, schools, or professional environments. Testimonies ranged from expressions of surprise and enjoyment to nostalgic memories of childhood visits with family.
- 26 Regarding identity and belonging, 71% of respondents expressed a strong connection to Bethlehem, particularly among older participants. Among those over 65, 70% awarded the maximum rating of 5 stars, compared to 40% of individuals aged 18–35, reflecting generational differences in emotional involvement. Furthermore, 74% of respondents strongly believed in Bethlehem's continuity, with generational transmission playing a key role. Although this sentiment was more pronounced among older respondents, younger adults also exhibited a notable sense of continuity, with 40% rating it at 4 stars.
- 27 The survey also explored expectations regarding the safeguarding of intangible heritage during crises. Key priorities included raising awareness through social media, events, and school curricula; ensuring accessibility and participation through inclusive events and sustained promotion; and protecting both material and intangible heritage through digitisation and intergenerational transmission. However, some concerns were raised about the potential loss of authenticity due to reliance on digital platforms or declining interest among younger generations. The survey also examined cultural adaptations during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 floods, citing the online broadcast of the Bethlehem, activities by the Centre Culturel Saint-Remacle, and online events hosted by the museum.
- 28 In conclusion, the survey results highlight the crucial role of the Bethlehem of Verviers in shaping local identity and cultural heritage among respondents, while also recognising a potential bias: individuals with a greater interest in these topics are more likely to participate in the survey. Although no specific community solely bears the responsibility for preserving the tradition, the findings indicate a strong collective attachment to the Bethlehem, with many respondents conveying a profound sense of identity and continuity. The survey not only confirms that the Bethlehem tradition remains rooted in the memories of the people of Verviers but also illustrates a growing interest in its preservation and continued exhibition. This is particularly evident in the strong emotional connection expressed by older participants, who regard the

Bethlehem tradition as a symbol of Verviers' cultural heritage. However, younger generations also convey a sense of belonging, suggesting that the tradition continues to resonate across age groups, albeit to varying degrees. Furthermore, the survey provides valuable insights into the community's expectations for safeguarding intangible heritage more broadly, underscoring the need for accessibility, inclusivity, and the integration of new technologies. The findings emphasise the importance of adopting adaptive strategies that balance preservation with innovation.

Revitalising and Safeguarding the Bethlehem Tradition

- 29 The Bethlehem of Verviers tradition blends creative expression with deeply rooted cultural narratives. To ensure its preservation and revitalisation, the Musées de Verviers launched a large-scale educational project in collaboration with local schools. This initiative received support from the Pôle PECA of the Arrondissement of Verviers, an organisation dedicated to promoting cultural engagement among students. Through an open call, schools were invited to participate in the project, which aimed to renew and reinterpret the Bethlehem tradition while fostering a sense of community ownership and cultural continuity.
- 30 At the heart of this initiative was Atelier du Prince, an organisation specialising in puppetry arts within various socio-cultural contexts. Their expertise helped shape the project to create a new Bethlehem playlet, emphasising the social significance of the tradition while actively involving the local community in restoring their flood-damaged heritage.
- 31 Saint-Remacle Elementary School, located in the flood-affected Pré-Javais neighbourhood near the museum, was selected to participate in the project. With approximately 100 students, the school had been directly impacted by the July 2021 floods, making the initiative particularly significant for its community.
- 32 This interdisciplinary project guided students through a structured creative process. They first explored the historical and cultural significance of the Bethlehem tradition while learning the art of puppetry. Next, they participated in scriptwriting workshops, blending traditional themes with contemporary community narratives. Then, they designed and built puppets, along with stage sets to create a tangible connection to the performance. Working alongside musicians, the children contributed to the creation of a new song, which was later recorded by a choir composed of students from all six grades (fig. 8). To document and extend the project's reach, a video was produced, capturing the final performance and making it accessible to a wider audience (fig. 9).

[Fig. 8]



Recording the Bethlehem's new song at the Peigné Theatre (Verviers) with the children from Saint-Remacle School, Hughes Maréchal, Pirly Zurstrassen, and the Maison des Jeunes des Récollets.

© Musées de Verviers.

[Fig. 9]



Production of a film showcasing the manipulation of puppets from the new scene of the Bethlehem at the Atelier du Prince in Verviers, featuring children from Saint-Remacle school, Sandrine Calmant, and the Maison des Jeunes des Récollets.

© Musées de Verviers.

- 33 The newly created playlet is set between the Annunciation and the Visitation, with Mary journeying through the contemporary landscape of Pré-Javais. By incorporating

locations familiar to the children, the performance bridges biblical narratives with modern-day local life, blending historical tradition with present-day realities.

- 34 The project was made possible through a collaborative network of local cultural actors. Atelier du Prince offered expertise in script development, set design, and puppet-making. The Maison des Jeunes des Récollets provided technical support for sound and video recording, while musicians Pirly Zurstrassen and Hughes Maréchal composed the music and directed the student choir.
- 35 After completing the project, KIK-IRPA and the Musées de Verviers held a workshop to assess student engagement and perceptions. Twelve children (two from each year) participated in reflective activities to evaluate their experiences. The assessment revealed that students most enjoyed watching the Bethlehem video and learning about puppetry, while they found scriptwriting and composing the song to be the most challenging aspects. Singing in the choir elicited mixed reactions - some students enjoyed it, while others found it physically demanding.
- 36 When asked about the importance of safeguarding the Bethlehem tradition, students suggested practical measures such as preserving historical buildings, installing signage on the museum façade, and recording performances for digital platforms like TikTok. Some even proposed more imaginative solutions, such as securing heritage sites with laser protection and bodyguards.
- 37 This initiative successfully engaged children in reinterpreting and transmitting the Bethlehem of Verviers tradition, emphasising the importance of active participation in preserving cultural heritage. By incorporating interdisciplinary artistic processes, the project not only introduced fresh perspectives on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage but also made it relevant and meaningful to younger generations. Findings from the evaluation workshop highlighted the significance of interactive and participatory approaches in heritage education, ensuring that traditions continue to evolve in ways that resonate with future generations. Although the hypothesis that demographic changes have influenced identification with the Bethlehem - particularly due to the Christian values and history it conveys, could not be confirmed by the survey, classroom observations revealed that effective mediation allows all children, regardless of their cultural or familial background, to connect with various forms of heritage. Consequently, this study confirms that heritage, as a medium of cultural transmission, remains a universal language that transcends cultural boundaries, making it accessible to everyone, regardless of their individual origins.

Consolidating the Living Practice of the Bethlehem

- 38 Building on the initial initiatives of the Bethlehem project in Verviers, it is important to note that many complementary efforts have emerged alongside the planned activities.
- 39 To revitalise the Bethlehem of Verviers tradition and adapt it to contemporary society, the Musées de Verviers initiated a project to modernise its soundtrack and presentation. Experts in the Walloon dialect of the Verviers region, including Guy Cabay, Michel Jaspar, and Françoise Lempereur, played a key role in this effort. These songs, passed down through oral tradition, represent a vital component of the region's musical heritage. By recording them in high quality, the project aims to preserve their legacy while also promoting the transmission of Walloon to future generations.

- 40 During the second half of 2024, the Maîtrise des Enfants de l'Opéra Royal de Wallonie will learn and record the songs, while Walloon-speaking actors will record the spoken texts. The future soundtrack, enhanced with sound effects and refined lighting design, will offer a more immersive experience for the audience.
- 41 By 2030, the Musées de Verviers will relocate to a restored and expanded historical site, the former Hôtel de Biolley. This new space will dedicate an entire floor to the Bethlehem tradition, featuring a room that showcases the Bethlehem, along with an interactive cultural mediation area contextualising the tradition and its revival following the 2021 floods. The aim of the Musée de Verviers is to strengthen the community's sense of belonging and to highlight the Bethlehem of Verviers as a symbol of resilience in the aftermath of the disaster. However, by merely displaying the material elements, there is a risk of further exacerbating the process of museumification. Rooted in the crisis, this issue is also central to the project, with the key question being how to integrate activities that keep this heritage alive into the museum's daily operations.
- 42 An important decision must also be made regarding the restoration of the Bethlehem's material elements. A study led by ESA Saint-Luc Liège, in partnership with the Musées de Verviers and KIK-IRPA, will be conducted to determine the best approach. One of the objectives will be to engage as many stakeholders connected to the Bethlehem of Verviers as possible, fostering dialogue and social cohesion to consider both the material and immaterial aspects of the Bethlehem as two interconnected dimensions.
- 43 To ensure the project's long-term impact, these efforts will be documented in a publication that serves as a practical guide for safeguarding intangible heritage during crises. Drawing on the expertise gained from the Bethlehem of Verviers project, this guide will provide tools and methodologies for protecting cultural traditions in similar contexts. By positioning the Bethlehem of Verviers as a model for safeguarding heritage and fostering community engagement, this initiative will contribute to broader discussions on the sustainability of intangible heritage in times of change.

Insights and Reflections: Lessons from the Bethlehem of Verviers

- 44 According to UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage remains alive only if it is relevant to the community, transmitted across generations, and continually reinterpreted over time.³³ Among the key safeguarding measures, revitalisation is crucial as it involves reactivating and preserving practices or expressions at risk of disappearing.³⁴ However, for a tradition to be revitalised, it must still exist within collective memory and maintain some degree of vitality - a tradition that has completely vanished cannot be revived.
- 45 The study of the Bethlehem of Verviers revealed that, although still present in collective memory, its social significance has diminished over time due to societal changes (fig. 10).

[Fig. 10]

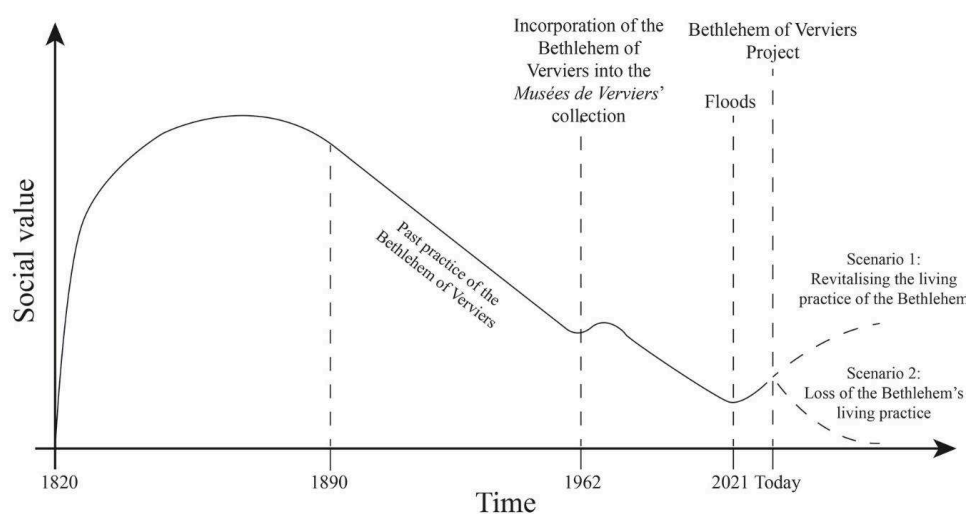


Diagram illustrating the perceived evolution of the social value of the Bethlehem tradition throughout its history, along with two potential future scenarios. This representation is based on sentiment rather than empirical data.

© Brussels, KIK-IRPA.

- 46 Integrating the Bethlehem into museum collections was an initial safeguarding measure, but it also transformed the nature of the practice. Families no longer manipulated the figures, and a new heritage community emerged, comprising children, volunteers, and specific museum staff. This revitalisation process was accompanied by modernisation efforts, including the introduction of lighting controlled via a dashboard. Subsequently, changes in child labour laws further modified the tradition, shifting performances to museum staff passionate about the Bethlehem. However, after Jacques Thonnard's retirement, the emotional connection to the tradition gradually faded, becoming more of a routine professional duty for the remaining staff. Without tradition-bearers, the Bethlehem of Verviers lost its status as an intangible cultural heritage as defined by the 2003 UNESCO convention.
- 47 Despite these challenges, recent events have highlighted the enduring attachment of Verviers residents to the Bethlehem tradition. The COVID-19 crisis provided a significant example: in December 2021, the video released by the Musées de Verviers on YouTube garnered over 1,000 views - far exceeding the average of 100 views for other videos on the channel. Shortly after, the devastating floods that struck the region placed the Bethlehem at a critical crossroads. Two possible outcomes emerged: either the destructive impact of the floods would lead to the tradition's disappearance, or the crisis would act as a catalyst for its revitalisation.
- 48 The latter scenario materialised due to the intervention of Musées de Verviers staff and professors from ESA Saint-Luc Liège. By concentrating on preserving the physical elements of Bethlehem, they transformed the crisis into an opportunity to revive the living practice. What makes the case of the Bethlehem of Verviers especially intriguing is that, with no tradition-bearer remaining, it was the cultural artefacts that ignited the desire to rejuvenate the intangible cultural practice. The Bethlehem project ensured the tradition's continuity. These efforts highlighted the social value of Bethlehem and explored the feasibility of re-integrating it into contemporary communities. This ongoing revitalisation required a more profound process of

recontextualisation and narrative redefinition, placing the safeguarding of the Bethlehem within a broader framework of post-crisis resilience.

- 49 In times of crisis, cultural heritage - especially intangible heritage—frequently becomes subordinate to immediate humanitarian priorities. However, when viewed as a social asset, heritage plays a critical role. The issue is not a choice between prioritising human needs and preserving heritage, but rather recognising that heritage is essential to restoring well-being. It fosters social cohesion and helps rebuild a collective sense of belonging after a disaster.
- 50 The case of the Bethlehem tradition illustrates that intangible cultural heritage is not an end in itself, but rather a means of strengthening social cohesion. Creating spaces for dialogue helps communities navigate tragedies by providing cultural and identity markers. The true power of intangible heritage lies in its ability to unite people, emphasising shared experiences and reinforcing social bonds. Ultimately, it is not merely a tool for resilience but a vehicle for cultural and social survival.
- 51 The revitalisation of the Bethlehem tradition also raises important questions regarding the legal and institutional protection of intangible cultural heritage in crisis and post-crisis contexts. Once tradition bearers have been identified, what measures are necessary to ensure that these communities have access to the spaces and materials essential for maintaining their cultural practices?
- 52 Three years after the floods, visitors are still awaiting the return of the Bethlehem, with no clear timeline for its reinstatement. However, there is hope it will be incorporated into the new museum infrastructure by 2030. Even after its return, though, there is no guarantee that the tradition will remain a living practice, evolving rather than fading into obscurity behind display cases. The Musées de Verviers will need to adopt innovative approaches to keep this puppet theatre tradition alive.

Conclusion: Intangible Cultural Heritage and Its Role in Post-Disaster Recovery

- 53 The case of the Bethlehem of Verviers illustrates how crises, while devastating, can act as catalysts for the revitalisation of intangible cultural heritage. However, this process is not instantaneous - it requires sustained effort, collaboration, and long-term commitment from both institutions and the community. Although significant strides have been made, the Bethlehem tradition has not yet been fully revitalised; it remains an ongoing project, navigating challenges in restoration, transmission, and community engagement.
- 54 This study explores the central research question: How can the revival of intangible cultural heritage strengthen social cohesion in a disaster-affected community and support its recovery? The ongoing efforts surrounding the Bethlehem of Verviers demonstrate that this tradition is not merely a relic of the past but can potentially be a dynamic and evolving practice. Initial findings suggest that its reactivation could significantly reinforce local identity and foster social cohesion. However, ensuring its continuity will require sustained engagement and adaptive strategies to maintain the tradition's relevance in contemporary society.
- 55 The project also underscores the broader implications of intangible cultural heritage in post-disaster recovery. While material conservation is crucial, this case highlights the

need to safeguard both tangible and intangible aspects - from physical restoration to the reanimation of traditions through performance and community participation. The Bethlehem's revitalisation is not merely about preservation; it is about ensuring its role as a living practice rather than a static exhibit. Furthermore, the approach proposed here for one form of intangible practice can be applied to any type of intangible cultural heritage. It is essential to proactively engage with and support the preservation of such heritage, rather than waiting for it to be endangered before taking action to safeguard it and assist communities in its ongoing transmission.

56 Several key challenges continue to shape the path ahead forward:

- Ensuring the long-term sustainability of heritage practices: the Bethlehem tradition must be actively practiced, not merely restored as a museum artefact.
- Community involvement and intergenerational transmission: strengthening connections between schools, local stakeholders, and heritage professionals will be crucial for sustaining engagement.
- Navigating modernisation without losing authenticity requires integrating the Bethlehem tradition into contemporary society while preserving its original spirit to ensure its relevance today.

57 At this stage, the future of the Bethlehem remains uncertain. However, the collaborative efforts underway provide a blueprint for integrating intangible cultural heritage into disaster recovery frameworks. Future research and policy initiatives should focus on institutional support, funding mechanisms, and innovative safeguarding methods to ensure that cultural heritage remains a resource for resilience and collective identity, rather than a casualty of crisis.

We would like to sincerely express our gratitude to all those who contributed to the completion of this work. We warmly thank the residents of Verviers, especially those who participated in the survey, for their involvement and valuable contributions. Our thanks also extend to the partners of the Bethlehem of Verviers project, as well as to the Musées de Verviers, whose support has been essential. A special thank you goes to the children and teachers of Saint-Remacle Primary School for their enthusiasm and collaboration. Finally, we would like to thank our colleagues at KIK-IRPA, whose expertise and guidance were crucial in bringing this article to fruition.

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NOTES

1. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage 2020; Samek Lodovici 2022; Lenzerini 2011.
2. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage 2020.
3. For example: ALIPH – International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH undated); the initiatives led by UNESCO regarding cultural heritage and climate change (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage undated b); and ICCROM's tool, PATH – Peacebuilding Assessment Tool for Heritage Recovery and Rehabilitation (Tandon 2021).

4. Deffet 2022.
5. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage 2020.
6. UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines safeguarding as 'measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage.' (UNESCO 2003, Article 2.3).
7. *Ibidem*, Article 2.1.
8. Lenzerini 2011.
9. City of Binche 2020.
10. Harkes 2023.
11. Aktürk and Lerski 2021.
12. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage undated c; Council of the European Union 2021.
13. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage 2020.
14. For example, Honduras has carried out a pilot project for the implementation of a methodology for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage in relation to disaster risk reduction (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs 2021).
15. ICH NGO Forum 2024.
16. ICCROM undated.
17. Vecco 2010.
18. De Clippele 2020.
19. Departement Cultuur, Jeugd & Media undated.
20. Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles 2022.
21. For a full description of the Bethlehem, see the Musées de Verviers inventory.
22. UNESCO 2010.
23. Feller 1931.
24. Interview with Jacques Thonnard on 13 March 2024.
25. Two videos are available on the City of Verviers' YouTube channel. The first features the show in its entirety, with subtitles. The second is interspersed with commentary to help viewers understand the heritage object in its entirety (City of Verviers 2021 a and b).
26. ICOM-CC 2008.
27. The Heritage Challenge is a KIK-IRPA initiative designed to offer cultural objects, submitted by heritage managers and accepted in a call for projects, personalized fund-raising support for their study, conservation and restoration, and enhancement (KIK-IRPA undated).
28. See the dossier submitted by the Musées de Verviers to KIK-IRPA.
29. Project proposal formulated as part of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation's call for projects to cultural operators and their populations affected by the July 2021 floods (Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles 2022).
30. UNESCO 2003.
31. Blake 2018; Jacobs, Neyrinck and Tsakiridis 2020.
32. Verviers experienced significant demographic changes during the 19th century, and today, approximately 20% of its population is of immigrant descent (City of Verviers 2022).
33. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage undated a.
34. UNESCO Patrimoine culturel immatériel undated.

ABSTRACTS

Revitalising intangible cultural heritage is crucial for helping disaster-affected communities recover, fostering social cohesion, and reinforcing local identity. This article examines how the revival of the Bethlehem of Verviers - a 19th century puppet theatre - has contributed to the psychosocial and cultural reconstruction of the Verviers community after the catastrophic floods of 2021. By analysing heritage revitalisation efforts, survey data, and participatory projects, this study explores how intangible cultural heritage acts as both a stabilising force and a catalyst for resilience.

La revitalisation du patrimoine culturel immatériel constitue un levier fondamental dans les processus de reconstruction des communautés affectées par des catastrophes, car elle favorise la cohésion sociale, renforce les identités locales et soutient la résilience collective. Le présent article s'attache à analyser comment la renaissance du Bethléem de Verviers - un théâtre de marionnettes datant du XIX^e siècle - a contribué à la reconstruction psychosociale et culturelle de la communauté verviétoise à la suite des inondations dévastatrices de 2021. À travers l'étude des initiatives de revitalisation patrimoniale, des données issues d'enquêtes et de projets participatifs, cette recherche met en lumière le rôle du patrimoine culturel immatériel en tant que vecteur de stabilisation sociale et moteur de résilience communautaire en contexte post-catastrophique.

Het revitaliseren van immaterieel cultureel erfgoed is cruciaal om door rampen getroffen gemeenschappen te helpen herstellen, sociale cohesie te bevorderen en de lokale identiteit te versterken. Dit artikel onderzoekt hoe de heropleving van het Bethlehem van Verviers – een 19e-eeuws poppentheater – heeft bijgedragen tot de psychosociale en culturele wederopbouw van de gemeenschap van Verviers na de catastrofale overstromingen van 2021. Door de analyse van de inspanningen voor het revitaliseren van erfgoed, de enquêtegegevens en de participatieve projecten bekijkt deze studie de manier waarop immaterieel cultureel erfgoed fungeert als een stabiliserende kracht en als een katalysator voor veerkracht.

INDEX

Trefwoorden immaterieel cultureel erfgoed, revitalisering, bescherming, noodsituaties, poppentheater, maatschappelijke betrokkenheid, overstromingen

Mots-clés: patrimoine culturel immatériel, revitalisation, sauvegarde, situations d'urgence, théâtre de marionnettes, engagement communautaire, inondations

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, revitalisation, safeguarding, emergencies, puppet theatre, community engagement, flooding

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