

LISTS

10 Fascinating Practices on UNESCO's Cultural Heritage List

BY BRETTE SEMBER

JULY 27, 2017

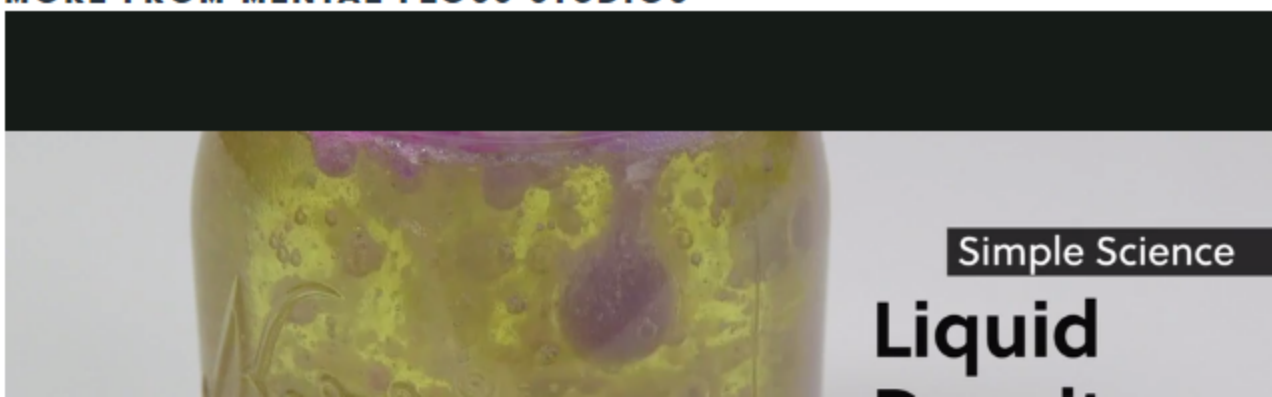


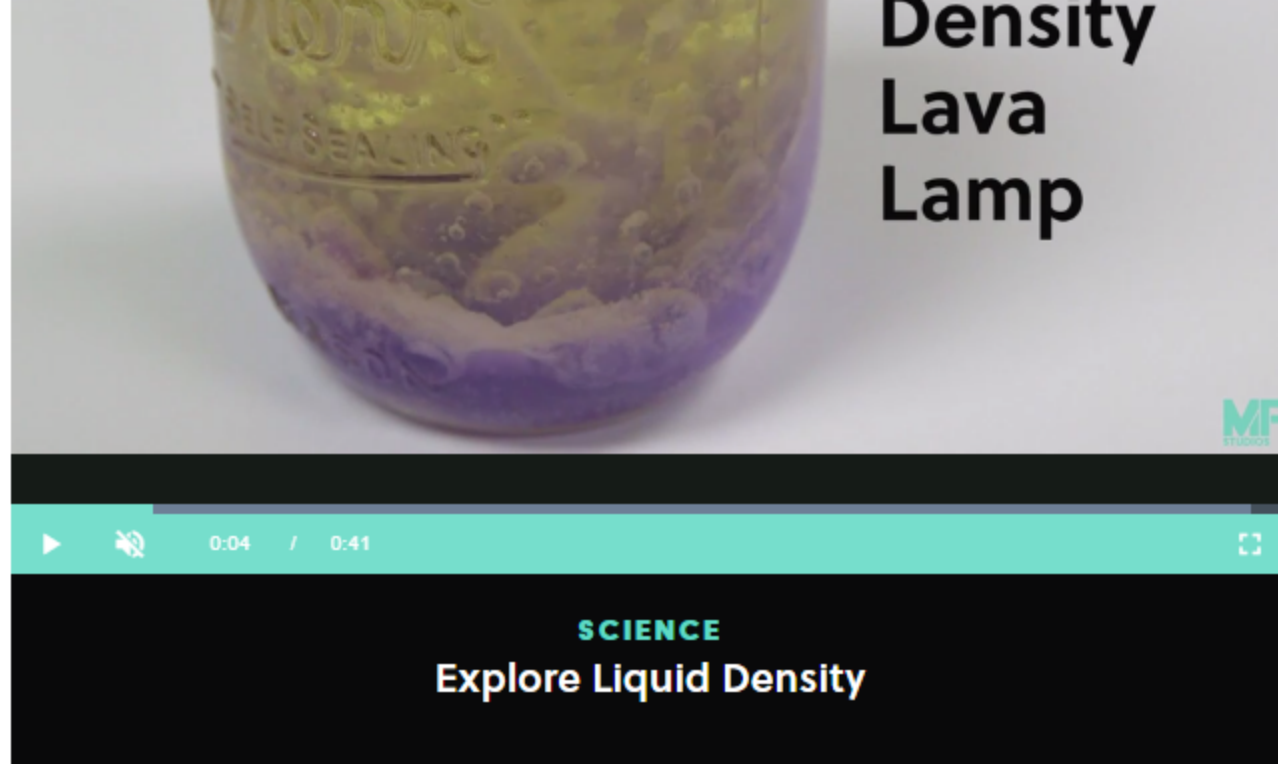
ED JONES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

You've probably heard of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Sites—places like Machu Picchu, Auschwitz, and the Tower of London that UNESCO has deemed architecturally or historically important. But UNESCO doesn't just choose important *places* to protect—it also maintains an Intangible Cultural Heritage List, which includes traditions and ways of life passed down from generation to generation and now in danger of being lost.

The list is rooted in a 2003 [Convention](#) for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which created the list to raise visibility for the practices and encourage dialogue around cultural diversity. The list protects five types of cultural heritage: oral expression and traditions (including language); performing arts; social practices, rituals, and festivities; knowledge and practices about nature and the universe; and traditional craftsmanship.

MORE FROM MENTAL FLOSS STUDIOS





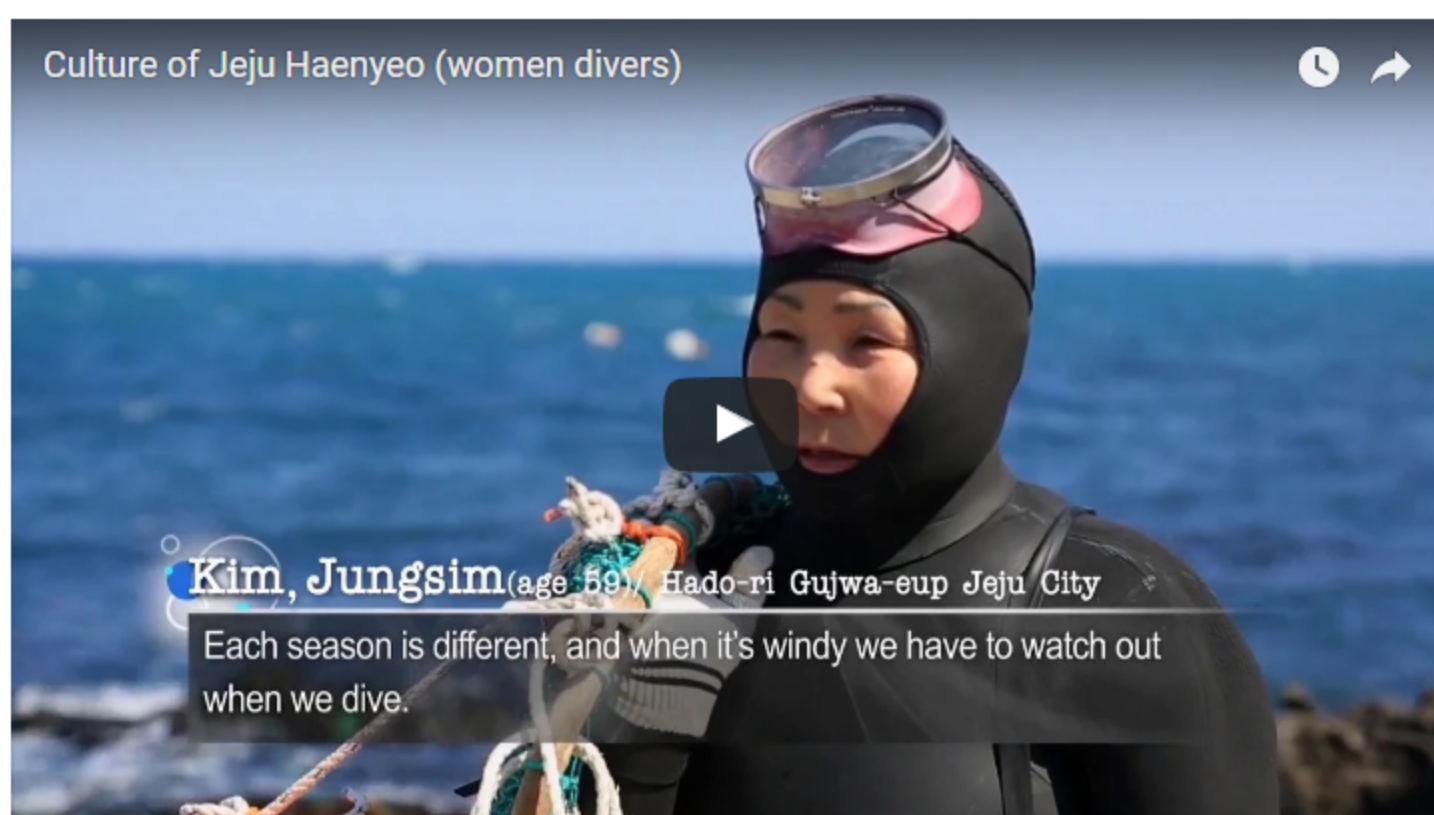
In some ways, cultural heritage is even more fragile than buildings and archaeological sites because it lies in people’s memories, and so can be easily lost or changed with no real record to preserve it. And the results of a loss of cultural heritage can be dire: Culture helps define a minority group, and the loss of that culture can mean a disconnection from the past.

UNESCO now maintains two lists: the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding (the latter only includes items identified as needing immediate protection).

To be added to a list, an item must be nominated by one of the countries that is a party to the convention. A committee then meets annually to determine which practices should be added to the lists, based on whether they meet the convention’s definitions of cultural heritage, whether inscribing the practice will encourage dialogue and awareness, and whether there’s been wide involvement by the culture concerned, among other criteria.

1. CULTURE OF JEJU HAENYEO // KOREA

Female divers (some as old as 80) from Jeju Island in the Republic of Korea have been collecting shellfish for hundreds of years. The divers, known as Haenyeo, submerge as much as 30 feet without scuba gear to harvest sea urchins and abalone, working up to seven hours a day. They hold their breath for a minute during each dive, and each makes a distinctive whistling noise when surfacing. Prayers are said to the goddess of the sea before the dives begin. The culture has played an important part in elevating women’s status on the island—women are the primary breadwinners in these families, and the *haenyeo* have become a symbol of the place.



2. HIKAYE // PALESTINE

Palestinian women over the age of 70 are part of this narrative tradition. During the winter, at gatherings of women and children (it’s considered inappropriate for men to attend), the older women in the community tell fictional stories that critique society from the female point of view and,

UNESCO notes, often reveal a conflict between “duty and desire.” The storytelling involves rhythm, inflection, and other vocal arts, but is now on the decline due to the availability of mass media.



3. CAMEL COAXING // MONGOLIA

Mongol camel herders perform a special ritual when they want a mother camel to accept a newborn calf or adopt an orphan. The mother and calf are tied together and the camel coaxer sings a special song that includes gestures and chants designed to encourage the mother to accept the baby. A horse-head fiddle or flute is also played. The ritual reinforces social ties in the nomadic society, and is passed down from parent to child. But as motorcycles are replacing camels as transportation, the practice is in danger.



4. SUMMER SOLSTICE FIRES // PYRENEES MOUNTAINS

In the Pyrenees Mountains of Andorra, Spain, and France, residents from local villages carry flaming torches down the hills to light large beacons on the night of the summer solstice. Carrying the torches is a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood, and setting the first fire is a special role given to priests, politicians, or the newly married. Unmarried girls greet the torch carriers with pastries and wine, and ashes are collected the next morning to put in gardens.



5. KNUCKLE-BONE SHOOTING // MONGOLIA

In Mongolia, residents play a game in which small teams of six to eight people flick pieces of marble across a table to push sheep knuckle bones into a target. The shooters wear personalized costumes denoting their rank in the game, and use individually created shooting tools. They also sing traditional tunes throughout the game.



6. VÍ AND GIẶM FOLK SONGS // VIETNAM

In northern Vietnam, folk songs in the Nghệ Tĩnh dialect are sung while people harvest rice, row boats, make conical hats, or put children to sleep. The songs focus on the values important in that culture, including respect for parents, honesty, and goodness. The songs also provide a way for unmarried young men and women to share their feelings with each other.



7. YURT-MAKING // KAZAKHSTAN AND KYRGYZSTAN

Nomads in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan make round yurts for use as temporary, portable homes, as well as for ceremonies like weddings and funerals. A round wooden frame forms the basis for the structure, and is then covered in felt and braided ropes. Men create the wooden frame, while women create the outside covering and inside decorations, working in groups to create the intricate patterns and reinforce social values.



8. WEAVING OF THE Q'ESWACHAKA BRIDGE // PERU

Quechua-speaking peasant communities in Peru come together each year to replace the suspension bridge over the Apurimac River in the Andes Mountains. The bridge is made of an unusual material—straw that's twisted and tied into ropes. The ropes are attached on each side of the river, and the bridge builders work until they meet in the middle. When the bridge is complete, a festival is held.



9. BARKCLOTH MAKING // UGANDA

Buganda craftsmen from southern Uganda harvest bark from the Mutuba tree and beat the bark with wooden mallets until it is soft, cloth-like, and a terracotta color. The barkcloth is worn as togas by men and women (who add a sash to their outfit) during ceremonial events. The availability of cotton has resulted in a reduction in the production of this specialized cloth.



10. SHRIMP FISHING ON HORSEBACK // BELGIUM

In Oostduinkerke, Belgium, 12 families harvest shrimp using horses. The Brabant horses walk breast-deep in the water parallel to the shore, pulling funnel-shaped nets. They also pull a chain along the bottom, which causes vibrations that make the shrimp jump into the nets. The caught shrimp are then carried in baskets attached to the horses' sides. Each family specializes in a particular part of the practice, such as caring for the horses or weaving nets. The community celebrates this heritage with a yearly Shrimp Festival.





Culture

