

The Intangible Cultural Heritage of Wales: a Need for Safeguarding?

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, appearances of the *Mari Lwyd* have steadily increased during winter time in Wales. A tradition based around the decoration of a horse's skull, regulated competitive verse and song, and community integration, would in many other parts of the world be acknowledged and celebrated as intangible cultural heritage. Yet, while the number of nations to have ratified the UNESCO *Convention* on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage continues to grow on an annual basis, no such examples can be found in Wales however, or any other part of the United Kingdom, due to a continuing position of reticence from the Westminster government toward the *convention*. Does this lack of ratification indicate that Wales is not home to any examples of intangible cultural heritage? This article explores the notion of whether Wales is home to any valid forms of intangible cultural heritage, before challenging whether the same vulnerability seen in many of the international examples of intangible heritage can be illustrated in Wales. Ultimately this will argue that Welsh intangible cultural heritage is an important, living component of contemporary Welsh culture, and that UK ratification of the treaty, rather than being something that might be desired in Wales, should in fact be considered as a necessity.

Keywords

Mari Lwyd, Christmas traditions, *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru* (EGC), or the National *Eisteddfod* of Wales, Super Furry Animals (SFA), Welsh culture, competition, language festival, step-dancing, revivals.

In November 2011, the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) met in Bali, the sixth occasion such a congress has been held since the original ratification of the

Safeguarding Convention in 2003.¹ During this meeting eleven new examples of ICH were added to *the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding*,² and nineteen examples were included on

the *Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list*.³ The continued expansion of the respective ICH lists indicated the growing relevance of this category of heritage resource, while revealing an increasing level of awareness of, and respect for, the ideals of the 2003 *Convention*.

The original *Convention* might be seen as serving many purposes for a wide range of stakeholders. Initially as a tool to rebalance the position of 'world' heritage among nations overlooked by the terminologies that guided the definitions of heritage under the 1972 *World Heritage Convention*, or as an essential device in the protection of the most fragile aspects of cultural identity; the applications of the *Convention*, as with the WH *Convention*, retained a broad potential. Its flexibility is perhaps best illustrated by Hafstein's description of intangible heritage as:

*a mechanism of selection and display. It is a tool for challenging attention and resources to certain cultural practices and not to others. Intangible heritage is both a dance-band and a hospital: a serious enterprise concerned with life and death of traditions and communities and a fund-raising dinner dance party with colourful costumes, glaring spotlights, and rhythmic tunes.*⁴

As with World Heritage, the ICH equivalent faces a challenge of being both a conservation—ethic driven programme of protection and safeguarding, while at the same time being the tool of commerce and tourism.

When the *Convention* was conceived, the same breadth of definitions employed with regard to the World Heritage list criteria, was mirrored. As ICH was initially defined, the *practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills* of societies were to be the focus of the new lists, and within these criteria, clearly labelled, was a role for the performing arts, oral traditions and social practices, among others.⁵ Among those examples of ICH to be considered worthy of 'representative' (or world) status and inscribed in 2011 were the *mariachi* band tradition of Mexico,⁶ and the poetic duelling of Cyprus.⁷ These two inclusions provide an interesting illustration of what—or indeed, who—is not included within the official ICH family of nations. The *oral tradition that emphasizes improvisation and friendly competition* seen in the *Tsiattista* poetic duelling for instance, can be given a

number of comparative examples in the Welsh ICH landscape. The '*Ymryson y Beirdd*', or the 'Contention', or 'Battle of the Bards' offers a unique, but equally valid ICH example that sits well within the stated criteria. Yet given the continuing stance of the UK Government regarding ratification of this *Safeguarding Convention*, no example from Wales, or indeed the rest of the British Isles, can currently be considered for inclusion on either safeguarding or representative ICH lists.

ICH for Wales and the UK

The continued reticence of the Westminster Government, via the Department for Culture Media and Sport, to ratify the *Convention* has been the subject of limited research, while few volumes have been produced on the concept of ICH in Britain in more general terms. Of the discussions on ICH in Britain to have been published, which considers the traditions of a region/nation in respect of the 2003 UNESCO *ICH Convention*, the joint 2008 Edinburgh Napier University - Museums Galleries Scotland report remains the most comprehensive. Within the report, there is a clear assertion that *especially in Scotland and Wales, there is a willingness to adhere to best practice in the matter of the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage (ICH)*, despite the unlikelihood of the 2003 *Convention* being ratified by the UK government (although the report indicates that there is no 'hostility' from Westminster towards the *Convention*).⁸ Napier University and Museums Galleries Scotland go on to present a wealth of compelling examples which clearly illustrate that examples of ICH, as defined by UNESCO, are alive and well in Scotland. However, the potential remains that these resources will 'miss out' on the advantages of being considered within the global framework of the *Representative List of ICH*.

Discussions on ICH in a British context raise issues beyond the Scotland report. Useful contributions have been made on the practicalities of developing ICH resources in an English context by the likes of Steffano and Smith.⁹ In Wales, although there is little in the form of published academic debate centred on the ICH as defined by UNESCO, efforts have certainly been undertaken to develop an 'Intangible Heritage of Wales' project, along similar lines to that seen in Scotland. The decision in 2011 to end the funding of the UNESCO -

Cymru Wales Committee has had a detrimental impact on this project, yet it is still seen as a priority for those involved in the committee, with ICH having been described as being *far too important for Wales, in her present stage of cultural and social development, to abandon*.¹⁰

Despite these clear assertions from heritage practitioners throughout the British Isles that ICH is a present and visible element of the cultural landscape, it remains the case that the 2003 *Convention* is still not ratified in the UK. Smith and Waterton's work on the rationale behind the lack of ratification is troubling, and offers little confidence for any future efforts to see British examples of ICH being submitted to the world ICH lists. Their research, based upon interviews conducted with English heritage practitioners and DCMS representatives,¹¹ returned strong responses that asserted that ICH *is not relevant* to the UK, and that *the UK has no intangible heritage*.¹² Hassard suggests that the failure to ratify the *Convention* is rooted in a lack of understanding of the concepts of intangible heritage within the administrative systems of the island,¹³ a suggestion exhibited in the work of Smith and Waterton. Yet this lack of understanding of the ideas of ICH, and the statements bordering on ignorance taken from the DCMS, is staggering given the clear evidence for the presence of ICH in the British Isles, as illustrated in the works of the Edinburgh Napier University and the Museums Council, Scotland.

Whatever the particular arguments in favour or against ratification of the 2003 *Convention*, for Wales, the prospect of seeing any examples of ICH that are representative of any part of Welsh culture joining either world ICH lists, remains remote. Despite the increased political devolution granted to Wales, the ability to act on the international stage (in this case in the ratification of international treaties) is still beyond the control (and it would be a fair assessment to suggest beyond the ambition) of the Welsh Government. So long as the 'British' Government in Westminster does not recognise the relevance of ICH to any part of the British Isles, the ICH of Wales will remain isolated from and unable to be included on any world list.

While little has been published by authors in Wales that considers ICH as a specific entity, there is a wealth of historical and contemporary accounts and reports of

Welsh cultural traditions which closely mirror international examples already listed, and might promote the argument that the ICH *Convention* holds greater relevance to Wales than does the *WH Convention*.

Andrew Dixie has provided detailed discussion of such examples in his work on Welsh ICH and it is unnecessary to repeat those considerations in detail here. However, one of several examples to be considered in his work is the *Mari Lwyd* tradition. Based around

*...a horse's skull which had been prepared by burying it in fresh lime or which had been kept buried in the ground after the previous year's festivities...Reins with bells attached were placed on the Mari's head and held by the 'Leader' who also carried a stick for knocking doors.*¹⁴

The *Mari Lwyd* once offered a particularly macabre addition to the Welsh calendar specific to the Christmas period. This decorated skull would be accompanied by a small party of men moving from house to house through a community, engaging in competitive singing and recitation. The rules of the tradition appeared structured and organised, both in their enactment, but also in the time of year, with the *Mari Lwyd* being traditionally associated with the 6th of January.¹⁵ Community engagement was likely an important component to the tradition, it being a winter time event that brought community members together in agriculturally focused locations, at a time of year when there was probably no practical/working reason for people to come together. In meeting the criteria of ICH, the *Mari Lwyd* would be at the very least an example worthy of consideration, if not a viable element for inscription.

However, the *Mari Lwyd* tradition, while capable of meeting many of the ICH criteria, would perhaps fail to achieve this status due to that fact that many 'surviving' examples of the practice of the *Mari Lwyd* are 'revivals'. The concerns expressed in relation to the *urgent safeguarding* list of ICH could easily have been applied to many of the now 'lost' *Mari Lwyds*. Popular and growing examples such as the South East Wales *Mari Lwyds* to be hosted in *Llanfihangel Tor y Mynydd* and the Chepstow *Mari*,¹⁶ both represent a new generation of *Mari*, essentially re-creating and relocating the tradition in areas where either historic accounts or local memory indicate a lost tradition having once been performed in

that locality, or the tradition being a new addition to local cultural distinctiveness. This, however, should not undermine the validity of these examples as ICH or discredit the role they have in their local communities in a contemporary cultural climate; indeed, the very fact that communities have brought such traditions back to life, arguably gives these examples of ICH more validity than those that have passed into memory.

Mari Lwyd, while experiencing many revivals which mirror the traditional use of a horse's skull, was the subject of a 2012 Heritage Lottery Funded programme to increase awareness and participation in the tradition with the creation and distribution of 'flat-pack' *Mari Lwyds* (see Plate 1).¹⁷ The project allows for much wider access to the tradition, with the cost and cultural implications of procuring a real horse's skull being removed through the circulation of the cardboard equivalents, and yet the heightened awareness and increased survivability offered to the *Mari Lwyd* tradition must be offset by the fact that this is no longer the same tradition that might be considered for safeguarding.

Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru

Of all the 'created' examples of ICH to be found in Wales today though, the *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru*, or the National *Eisteddfod* of Wales (hereafter referred to

as the EGC), is perhaps the single most important ICH resource to be found. The EGC stands as a symbol for many things in Wales, but perhaps the description provided by its organisers, that *the Eisteddfod is a celebration of Wales, its culture and its language*, with a central goal of its mission being to *promote the Welsh language and our culture*,¹⁸ offers the most succinct summary of what the EGC tries to achieve.

Despite the perceptions that surround the EGC, of it being not only a central tool for the protection and promotion of the Welsh language, but a festival with great historical roots that link it to Wales' ancestral past, much of what is seen during the 'performance' of an EGC is as much 'created' as are many of Wales' 'surviving' *Mari Lwyd* traditions. While elements of the *eisteddfod* tradition are rooted in a historically attested cultural tradition, the role of its most recognisable element, the *Gorsedd* of the Bards, was largely a contemporary fabrication. Towards the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, people like Iolo Morganwg were engaged in what could be described as an early, pre-National Museum, period of nation-building developing a new wave of traditions and rituals that would support a growing sense of Welsh identity, although based on a largely fabricated view of the past.¹⁹ However, regardless of the historical legitimacy of the *Gorsedd* it, as with new versions of the *Mari Lwyd*, is now an accepted and important element of Welsh ICH.

The evolution of the EGC, though, continues to adapt



Plate 1

The cardboard *Mari Lwyd* with a 'traditional' horse's skull for the *Mari Lwyd* in the background. Photo: author.

to the needs of the country, and its own need to survive in an increasingly challenging economic climate. Even its role in preserving and promoting the Welsh language, so central to the way in which EGC organisers present the festival today, can be seen as a relatively new emphasis. Bernard has explored the role of the Welsh language in the festival during the 1930s-1950s, noting that the period saw great changes regarding the position of the language in the core 'performance' of the *Eisteddfod*, which also witnessed the perceived marginalisation of the festival from anglicised Wales.²⁰

The language debate, juxtaposing concerns about the perceived anglicisation of the festival, with a need to open the festival up to a more English-speaking audience to ensure its long term viability, is ongoing. The success of Welsh music bands on an international stage contributed to such debates, in particular the argument developed by *Cymdeithas yr Iaith* against the highly successful band, *Super Furry Animals* (SFA), to be allowed to play English language songs during the 1997 EGC.²¹ While SFA had been hugely successful in raising the profile of Wales and the Welsh language through their Welsh album *Mwng*, their desire to play more commercially successful hits at the EGC met with strong resistance, possibly indicating a counter-productive attitude and approach to language preservation, given the status of the band in question.

However, these points of debate should do nothing to detract from the previously stated goals of the EGC. It is important to acknowledge that this is a festival that continues to evolve and react to cultural/societal changes, but its current aim, to celebrate Welsh language and culture, remains at its heart. As part of this goal, individual examples of ICH retain their most prominent platform, allowing audiences across Wales the opportunity to view the performance of ICH specific to the country, the *Cerdd Dant*, step dancing, and group choral performances. Despite more than a century of adaptations, many of the competitions at the EGC do retain a sense of consistency with the earliest days of the festival's existence.

Despite the importance of the EGC in the role it plays in safeguarding the Welsh language, and other exemplars of ICH that form the core of the annual competitions, the festival cannot in any way be described as being secure. Plagued by financial difficulties, the organisers of the EGC have had to face issues of declining sponsorship,

core funding and visitor numbers. The summer 2011 EGC, held in the north Wales district of Wrexham, reported a financial loss of £90,000, largely attributed to the economic situation in Britain at the time, which is seen to have impacted on the willingness of corporate partners to fund the event to the same extent as in previous years, and an inevitable downturn in general ticket sales.²² While a shortfall in tickets was accepted in the official literature, other reports by the same organising committee confirm that ticket sales were below expectations and therefore the loss cannot be accepted as inevitable.²³ This has led to calls being made for the EGC to adapt to the current climate, possibly leading to the disappearance of several aspects of the EGC that contribute to its uniqueness.

The *Urdd Eisteddfod*, the branch of the *Eisteddfod* specifically orientated to young people, has already seen changes made at both competition and social levels, with go-karting, bowling and surfing all being introduced in Welsh for festival goers, activities that may be seen as more relevant and accessible to a contemporary youth audience.²⁴ Interestingly, when discussing the ideas of 'safeguarding' the EGC tradition, former Heritage Minister, Alun Ffred Jones spoke about the need, in the long term, for the EGC to change and acknowledge that the *traditionalists cannot hold out* in the face of financial shortfalls.²⁵

While these voices are all concerned with ensuring the survival of the EGC for future generations, it is notable that the best-rehearsed proposals to safeguard the festival in fact revolve around changing it. The ground-breaking introduction of alcohol sales on the main *Maes* at the EGC for the first time in the organisation's history could be seen as revolutionary in some respects given the EGC's 'dry' history, yet the 'erosion' of tradition would appear to be central to the majority of proposals put forward.²⁶

Prominent Welsh academics have also made the case for a semi-permanent location for the EGC, as opposed to maintaining the tradition of finding a new location in the north and south of Wales respectively, in alternate years.²⁷ Thus in the same year as alcohol was introduced, a 'fake' *Gorsedd* circle was established, abandoning or adapting the nomadic tradition of the EGC with the cost-saving introduction of a fibreglass moveable version of the circular formation of standing stones traditionally left

at the location of each successive *Eisteddfod*. In some respects, efforts to safeguard the EGC offer an ideal developing case study in the compromises faced in efforts to protect ICH. While there is little doubt that the EGC will survive in one form or another for the foreseeable future, in seeking sustainability for the EGC will we end up losing the ICH qualities that gave the EGC value in the first place?

Competitions at the *Eisteddfod Genedlaethol Cymru*

While the EGC is famous for being a Welsh language festival, and, following recommendations in *The Way Forward* of 2003, draws large audiences for its 'event' evenings featuring well-known Welsh-speaking recording artists, its greatest importance today is perhaps the national platform it provides for the performances of the many examples of ICH in Wales. The stepping dance or *Cerdd Dant* has been introduced earlier, but a variety of other dance forms specific to Wales, including Clog Dancing variants, are all performed in the EGC, in what amounts to the highest level of competition, associated with the highest profile performance level available for performers.

The range of competitions available at the EGC has, as with the wider non-competition based traditional EGC elements considered above, been subject to important developments in recent years. Following the example of the *Urdd* (youth) *Eisteddfod*, more contemporary forms of performance have been introduced into the range of core EGC competitions, with the aim of ensuring the relevance of the EGC to younger audiences. This can be seen most clearly in the dance categories, where 'Dawn's Disco' or disco/hip-hop dancing has been accommodated, as well as other contemporary dance competitions.

When considering the statistical data compiled by the organising committee of the EGC over the past nine years, there are some obvious trends regarding participation rates and the relative popularity of certain competition forms. Dance competition data (see Figure 1), shows clear indications that the contemporary dance forms, in particular hip-hop/disco dance elements, have proven to be highly attractive to competitors. For 'solo hip-hop/disco dance' elements, apart from one year in 2008 when no participants were recorded, the discipline has largely

dominated the performance category in terms of participation. The only dance categories to have seen similar participation numbers are those of 'pairs hip-hop/disco dance' and, to a lesser extent, those of groups in the same division. While contemporary dance competitions saw peaks of interest in 2008 and 2011, and generally performed better in terms of competition entries than the majority of other categories, the hip-hop/dance criteria still dominated.

In some respects, high participation numbers should be seen as a positive. For the future sustainability of competitive elements in the EGC, competitive and well-attended competitions are essential. Positives should also be drawn from the way in which elements such as the pairs hip-hop/disco dance can be seen to be averaging an increased number of participants over this period. However, the evidence from the opposite end of the participation figures, in particular when considering the folk dance elements, raises concerns. From an ICH perspective, a strong argument can be made that it is these elements that, were Welsh or British elements to be considered for the World Lists, might be considered for listing on either *Representative* or *Urgent Safeguarding* lists. They are examples of ICH relating to a folk-based tradition in Wales that is distinctive, unique and in decline. In the EGC, participation numbers for many of these elements average single figures, or in many years, fail to attract competitors at all. Certainly there is a correlation between declining numbers of participants for more traditional EGC dance competitions during years when contemporary elements gained popularity.

Participation figures released by EGC for two other categories of competition, *Cerdd Dant* (literally translated as 'Tooth' or 'Teeth Music') (Figure 2) and Folk Singing (Figure 3) do, however, give more promising indications for the future of these areas of ICH. In participation data compiled over the same nine year period, it is the age grade competitions, in particular competition grading for age brackets of under 16, 12-16 and under 12, that have proven to be the most successful. For *Cerdd Dant*, many of the competitions exhibit a 'zig-zag' pattern of fluctuating participation, best explained by the relevance of certain competition types to regions in Wales, reflecting the movement of the competition between North and South Wales. In this respect, participation numbers can be seen as remaining consistently high. Concerns might, however, be raised regarding the sharp fall-off of

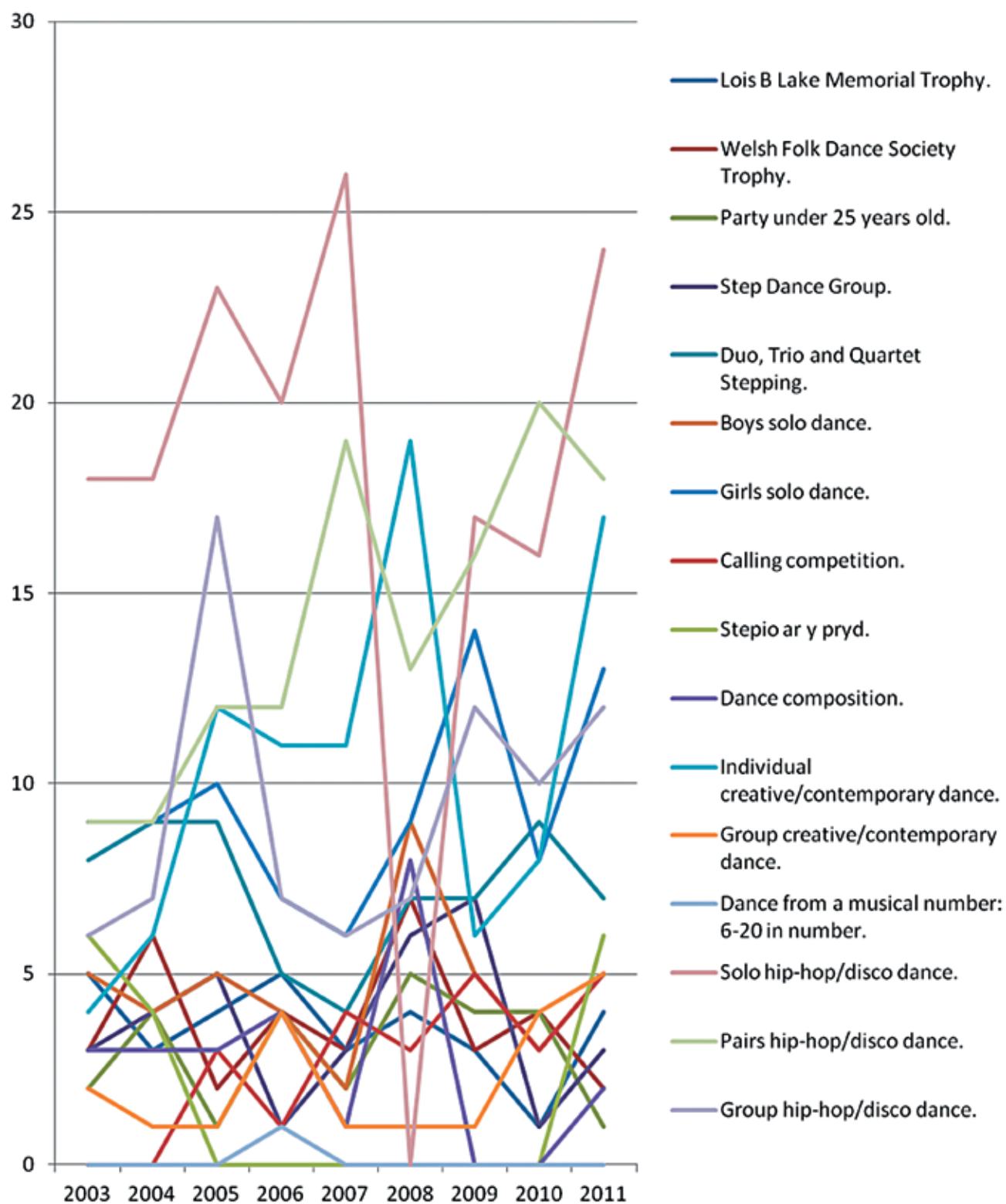


Figure 1
Dance competition participation data 2003-10. Source: author.

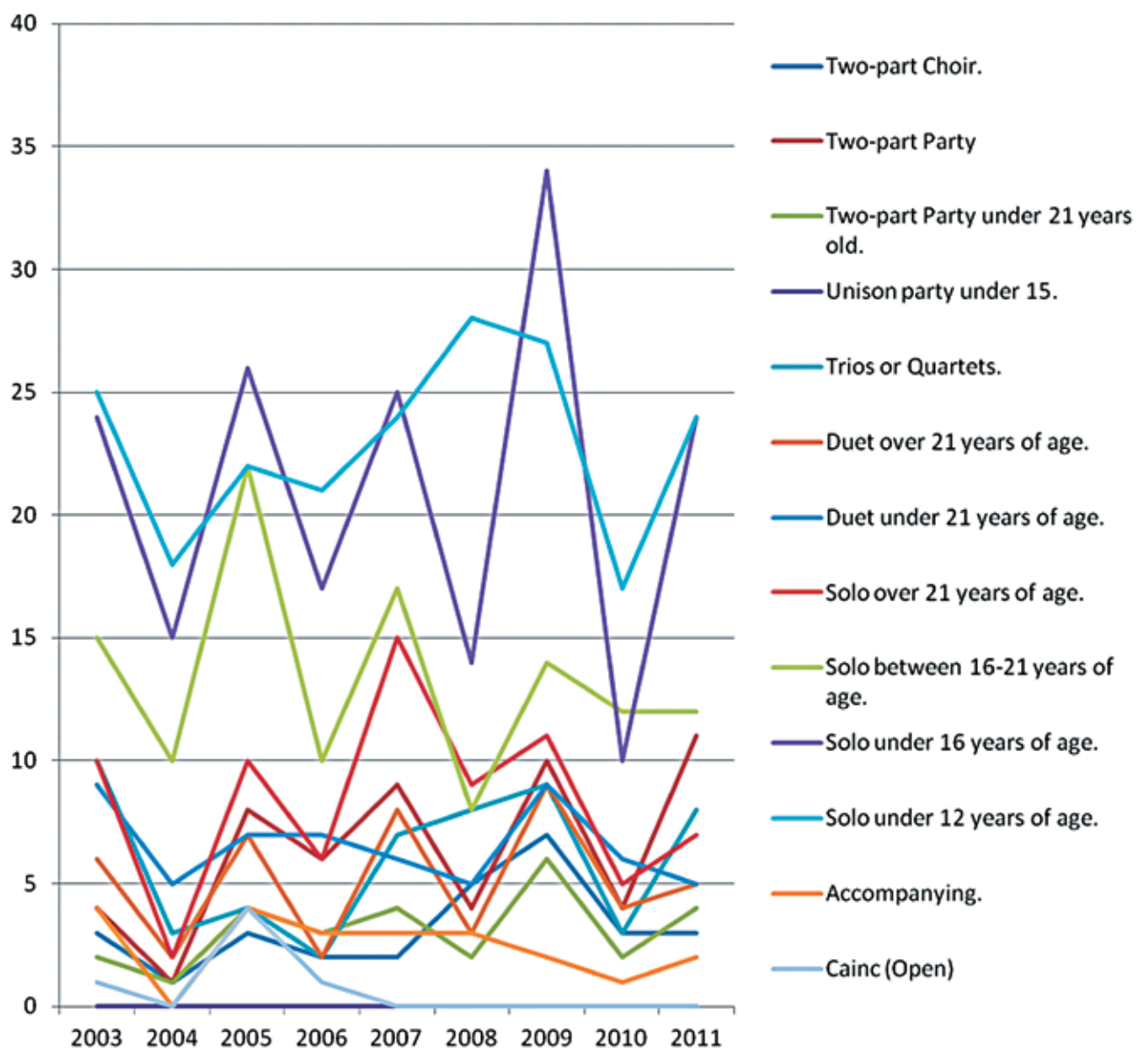


Figure 2
Cerdd Dant competition participation data 2003-10. Source: author.

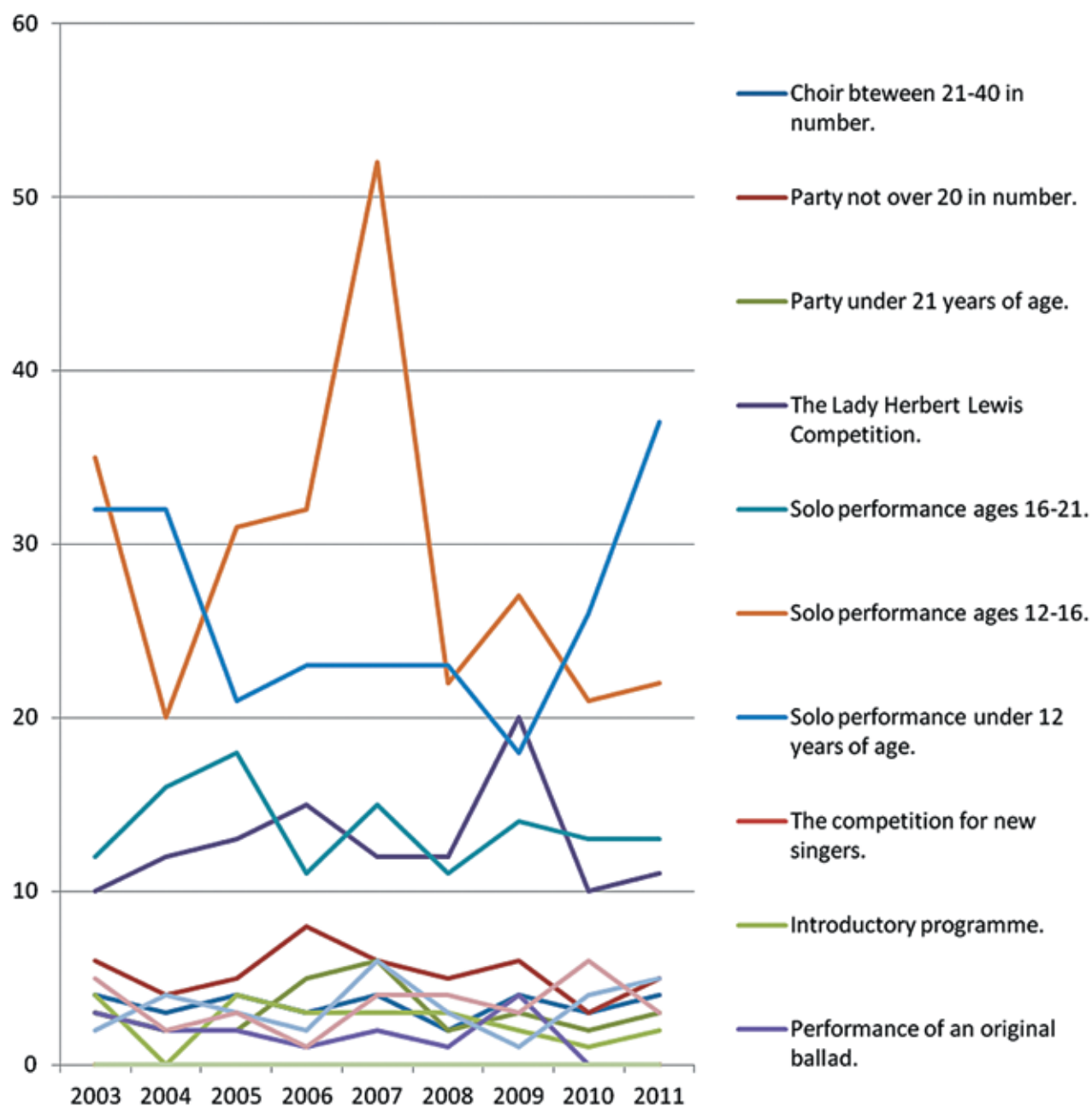


Figure 3
Folk singing competition participation data 2003-10. Source: author.

participation from under 16 age groups to the 16-21 age group, where there is a clear decline in numbers.

Similar concerns could be raised regarding folk singing elements, where again younger age groups, from under 12 and 12-16 years of age, produce the largest number of participants, but the performance category of 16-21 shows significantly fewer, and a decrease in participation year on year. How long can traditional forms of ICH be sustained if the need of the EGC to ensure its relevance to a youth audience continues to encourage the inclusion of competition forms, which may better reflect contemporary Wales, but through their inclusion serve to push 'traditional' competition forms further into decline?

Conclusions

Safeguarding does not equate to the fixed preservation of a tradition at a particular point in time or style. With regard to specific examples of ICH, such as *Cerdd Dant* and related types of folk dance, as well as the evolving forms of *Mari Lwyd*, it could be said that *living dance cultures cannot be fixed and frozen but are constantly in transformation*.²⁸ That such ICH examples in Wales are in a state of decline or change, or that they might be seen to be under increasing pressure within the EGC, does not mean that organisers need to step in and insist on the continued presence or performance of these elements, or that they should be forced to continue to exist in a way which current participants might describe as being 'authentic' or 'traditional'. Evolution is a natural process within the ICH spectrum. Indeed, the most extreme example of this evolution would see the ultimate but natural demise of the traditions in question, *practices of the past are discarded when they cease to be functionally useful or symbolically meaningful to a community*,²⁹ and perhaps this will be the ultimate fate for the examples considered here.

However within the EGC, changes to the traditional elements of the festival are in many respects being made for commercial reasons rather than cultural ones. The EGC is, on a near annual basis, being made to justify the funding it receives. This has placed pressure on the organisers to push through changes and consider further adaptations, not because the festival is poorly attended, but because the festival is

not consistent in producing the expected financial outcomes. For performances, while it is admirable that new forms of competition are included to ensure the relevance of the wider festival to young people in Wales, the knock-on effect may well be to artificially enhance, or cause the decline, of specific examples of ICH. That contemporary forms of performance prove to be popular is not in itself a reason to marginalise those more traditional elements whose popularity has perhaps proven to be consistent, rather than an area of growth.

One final consideration on this point is the potential value of UNESCO ICH status. Hip-hop and disco dance have no shortage of promotional tools in Wales to ensure that a youth audience will have a variety of platforms on which to view and engage with this type of performance. This cannot be said of the traditional categories of folk performance represented at EGC. For these, the EGC stands as the only national or international conduit through which the traditions can be brought to the people. It is in light of this that Wales, through the Government of Britain, might begin to look at ICH in a more favourable manner. Prestige is something that is widely accepted and sought after in the designation of World Heritage sites in the British Isles, and the same promotional benefits could be gained and applied in the context of ICH. As Kurin has noted in relation to a much wider range of ICH examples on a global level:

*prestige brings with it attention – from the media, officials, the general public, as well as from the more localised communities... The prestige, honour, recognition and attention may indeed make cultural exemplars and practitioners proud of what they do, and energise their own efforts to continue, transmit, and even extend their traditions.*³⁰

This is currently a level of prestige, with associated benefits, which is refused to examples of ICH in Wales (and the rest of the British Isles). The evidence for valid exemplars of ICH in Wales are clear, as are the risks faced by many of those that survive today. Although the attitude of the Westminster Government is one of distant disregard for the concept of ICH, it can only be hoped that with pressure, these attitudes will change. For many of the best examples of ICH in Wales, some of which are safeguarded to an extent (through

their current relationship with the EGC), this change in attitude is essential because the EGC is itself changing at a dramatic rate, and the loss of some elements may be inevitable without the additional awareness-raising tools provided by UNESCO. 🏴󠁧󠁢󠁥󠁮󠁧󠁿

NOTES

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