

## Article

# The Sustainability of Intangible Heritage in the COVID-19 Era—Resilience, Reinvention, and Challenges in Spain

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**Abstract:** The public health restrictions and social distancing imposed as a consequence of COVID-19 have not only had a profound impact on intangible heritage, they have also prompted resilience, reinvention, and creativity. This analysis of the period provides an insight into the social significance of intangible heritage and its adaptability and ability to evolve, while also raising questions about its sustainability. This article tackles the impact of lockdown and public health restrictions on the festivals included in the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Heritage in Spain. Employing qualitative and ethnographic methodology, the study analyzes the effects of restrictions on the 18 elements on the UNESCO list and the responses adopted; it also includes case studies on three elements. The article concludes that in the post-COVID-19 period, it will be necessary to rethink the economic and social sustainability of intangible heritage practices and to discover new ways of managing them. It will also be necessary to go back to more local formats that are less crowded and less dependent on tourism. The pandemic has exposed the fragility of intangible heritage, and it is now time to rethink the perhaps excessive growth it has experienced in recent years.

**Keywords:** intangible heritage; effects of COVID-19; festivals; intangible heritage Spain; ICH sustainability



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the public health measures adopted by various governments have triggered one of the greatest global economic and social crises in contemporary history, affecting the many dimensions of human life. One of the areas in which it has had a profound impact is intangible cultural heritage (ICH), with limitations being imposed on public events that have compromised social rhythms, community relations, and the use of public space [1–3]. Most events involving large numbers of people have been cancelled, and in many cases, this has implied the need to redefine the social value of heritage [4].

The paradox is that, on the one hand, this has led to major disruptions in intangible heritage events and practices, with the cancellation of most of the festivals causing a major economic, social, and psychological impact, but on the other hand, the restrictions have given rise to unprecedented resilience, reinvention, and creativity. It has even led to greater emphasis on the social value of intangible cultural heritage and a recognition that it contributes to the social well-being and psychological health of citizens. A UNESCO study [5] on this impact concluded that the pandemic highlights the fragility of intangible heritage in emergency situations, but also its resilience: while the pandemic may physically separate us, living heritage can connect us by providing hope, solidarity, and inspiration to help us face the crisis together.

This article presents a study on the impact of lockdown and public health restrictions on the elements on the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity in Spain,

particularly on the festivals that have been hardest hit by cancellation. The research, of a qualitative nature, is based on the analysis of the effects on the elements on the UNESCO list and the responses adopted, and there are case studies on three elements.

### *1.1. Theoretical Issues and Research Questions*

Analysis of the various ICH practices addressed in this study raises immediate theoretical debates on how to interpret the effects of the pandemic on intangible cultural heritage; it also raises other long-term debates about the significance of intangible cultural heritage itself and its social uses [5].

Given the short time that has elapsed, there have been few studies so far on the impact of COVID-19 on ICH, although there are already some initial analyses that refer to the effects on communities of the disruption to ICH [6], the celebration of fiestas and festivals [1,7], the use of public spaces [3], the use of digital space and social networks for the dissemination of ICH during the pandemic [8], and, in particular, the effects on ICH-related tourism [9–11]. For the moment, our understanding only relates to the short-term impact. The long-term impact may be highly variable depending on the development of tourism, ongoing health restrictions and, above all, the possible changes to people's cultural consumption and their perception of intangible heritage. This raises many questions that make it necessary, in one way or another, to rethink the very foundations of ICH management in recent decades. Should we contemplate smaller festival formats better suited to public-health restrictions? Should we question the mass tourist appeal of some festivals, which in many cases has led to a loss of the sense of community? What public policies should be implemented to ensure the preservation of the ICH after the pandemic?

Beyond these immediate questions, the different strategies adopted by those responsible for ICH during COVID-19 prompt three theoretical issues: (1) the concept of ICH, the values associated with it, and its social uses, (2) the relationship between intangible heritage and its virtual uses, and (3) the concept of cultural sustainability when applied to ICH.

The category of intangible heritage, which arouses increasing expectations and enthusiasm among social and political actors worldwide, has prompted a large number of academic articles that question the concept because of certain theoretical issues it raises [12]. Among other criticisms, academic debates have pointed out the impossibility of protecting living cultural expressions without freezing them in time [13], the difficulty of determining who is responsible for intangible heritage, since it is generally political authorities who seek to have it recognized although whole communities are supposed to be involved [14], the fact that local celebrations are globalized through the work of UNESCO [15], and the false idea that heritage can be "shared" on an international scale [16]. Above all, however, the most important debates refer to the difficulty of heritagizing ICH at all, since by its very nature, it is changing and alive and its practices cannot be fixed or inventoried like other types of heritage [17,18]. We believe the impact of the pandemic on ICH puts these debates back on the table and allows us to relate them to a period in which many activities were cancelled or adapted. We therefore start from the theoretical assumption that ICH has an evolutionary and creative character, with traditions constantly reconfigured and readapted [19,20], changing both the practices themselves and, above all, their socio-political significance [21]. It is not surprising, then, that during the pandemic, communities devised highly varied approaches [2] that gave rise to new practices and imaginative solutions that confirm both the changing nature of heritage and the ability of local communities to implement new forms. At the same time, it is interesting to note that these new practices have been negotiated by local communities with political authorities that have limited events due to the restrictions and the disruptive nature of the festivities [22].

One of the most prominent elements of this transformation is the widespread use of virtual spaces and social networks, not only to disseminate ICH, but also for new practices [8,23]. Theoretical debates on the relationship between ICH and the virtual space have already contributed to an abundant literature that helps us to understand

the reach of these transformations. Although most of the virtual applications of ICH are to do with creating inventories [24] and, to a lesser extent, virtual museums [25], the internet offers new opportunities for the transmission and dissemination of ICH—as Pietrobruno [26] and Giaccardi [27] point out, social networks and virtual space enable greater social participation than is possible than simply being included on the UNESCO list. Online activity enables communities to share content through virtual networks and museums, and the ability of users to develop, control, and continuously update the content of websites produces synergies with the changing and ephemeral nature of intangible heritage [16]. These theoretical viewpoints allow us to understand the processes that have emerged during the pandemic, during which certain practices have been transferred and even reinvented online. Furthermore, the pandemic has brought about one particular approach that was almost unimaginable until now: holding actual festivities online [1]. Are these practices only emergency solutions or will virtual practice have a lasting effect on ICH?

Lastly, our analysis of this period allows us to reflect on the sustainability of intangible heritage and doubts over the continuity of some of its practices, especially large-scale festivities. The concept of sustainability has been referred to in many studies on ICH, especially with regard to its use in tourism [28–31]. Although in general, these works point out opportunities for tourism, other works have taken the opposite view, arguing that overcrowding by tourists may affect the future sustainability of ICH [8,32]. Apart from achieving “sustainable development” through the interaction between economy and culture, it also seems useful to apply the concept of cultural sustainability proposed by Mason and Turner [33], which argues that there should be a balanced approach that allows communities to shape and control their own cultural practices and representations. It is inevitable that traditions will change, but new representations can only result from complex negotiations between various actors, including community members, NGOs and government officials [34]. Seeing ICH as a negotiated process resulting in new practices may help us to foresee the way in which ICH will evolve after the COVID-19 period. Sustainability is essential for the preservation of intangible heritage [5,35], and the COVID-19 era brings new challenges to the sustainability of some ICH practices, both due to the difficulties in carrying them out and also because of the economic repercussions of not being able to hold events and the consequent reduction of tourism. How can this heritage be safeguarded and sustained after the COVID-19 period? Will new sustainability parameters have to be implemented? Many ICH practices will have to be reformulated and adapted, and there will need to be a rethink of their interrelation with tourism. This aspect has been debated for a number of years, since tourist pressure has affected, and, in some cases, undermined festive practices, the sense of community, their protagonists, and their agents [28,32].

The post-COVID-19 period opens new debates over and approaches to the sustainability of ICH. To this end, it is useful to apply the concept of cultural sustainability to ICH [33,36,37]. Cultural sustainability takes into account the fact that, in reality, cultural life is constantly changing and dynamic. Rather than trying to “preserve” a traditional element, cultural sustainability traces dynamics of cultural change [38] that involve the entire social and cultural ecosystem and its current actors.

### 1.2. Hypothesis

The health and social restrictions adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a major effect on ICH, with repercussions on the economy and society. ICH has been shown to be fragile and has had to reinvent itself.

- (1) On the one hand, this situation has led to major alterations to ICH festivities and practices and has disrupted community relations by limiting events that act as mechanisms for integration and social cohesion. Local communities have reacted with frustration and a sense of loss. In the same way, the effects on the economy are severe because of the implications for tourism, a lack of revenue for the craft sector that threatens to destroy it altogether, and the loss of income for organizing associations.

- (2) On the other hand, however, lockdown has prompted creativity and reinvention involving new forms, both face-to-face and virtual. Festivals and rituals, far from stopping altogether, have adapted to the new situation with alternative forms and have taken shape in a space negotiated between local communities and political authorities.
- (3) Moreover, during this time of social distancing, ICH has acted as an important means of providing social cohesion at a time of uncertainty and as a response to the overall experience of the pandemic.
- (4) For all these reasons, the pandemic crisis of COVID-19 has posed new challenges and strategies for communities seeking to hold festivities. This makes it necessary to redefine the social value of heritage and, above all, to propose new strategies for cultural sustainability.

### 1.3. Objectives

Our main aim is to carry out qualitative research on the impact of lockdown and public health restrictions on the elements on the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity in Spain.

More specifically, there are three objectives:

- (1) To analyze the social, economic, and political impact of public health restrictions and the cancellation of most festivities on ICH in Spain. Studying the impact of the cancellation of festive practices on communities allows us to analyze the significance and values of intangible heritage under exceptional circumstances.
- (2) To analyze the different responses of communities to the prohibition of events, and to describe and document alternative practices implemented that made it possible to continue holding events, in person or virtually.
- (3) To contribute to formulating a model for the future sustainability of ICH post-COVID-19, both from a theoretical and an applied perspective, providing matters for debate that should be taken into account by the organizing communities to ensure the continuity of ICH.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. General Analysis

Our research, of a qualitative nature, consisted of an ethnographic analysis of the 18 elements on the Representative List of Intangible Heritage in Spain (Table 1). In each case, we studied the effects of public health restrictions on ICH practices, the alternatives adopted, the public debates on the manner in which events were held, and the existence or not of virtual solutions and use of social media.

While the research analyzes the effect of the pandemic, the research itself was also conditioned by mobility constraints and most of the information was obtained by applying virtual ethnography procedures [39]. Virtual ethnography was selected not only because it enabled us to analyze the events as they occurred, but, above all, because a large number of the new manifestations, resignifications, and resilient practices adopted by festival organizers occurred in a virtual environment. In each case, the information was obtained from the following sources of information:

- Documents and reports on public health regulations, economic effects, impact on organizing associations, public announcements, etc;
- Programs of alternative activities, news, and reports on events on websites of the different towns in which events are held;
- Monitoring of the effect of COVID-19 in online discussions arranged by the various organizers of heritage elements. This was only possible in seven heritage elements that actually organized such debates (a total of 23 videos observed). We were particularly interested in the debates involving members of the organizing associations themselves who reported on their own experiences. In addition, the fact that these debates were recorded allowed us to see how they evolved over time as the constraints and perceptions of the social constraints developed;

- Analysis of local and national press reports for each of the cases that reported on debates around the festivities and activities and statements made by public officials and the heads of associations;
- Analysis of social networks (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram) related to each of the ICH elements. In the case of Twitter, the mining and search for the information was conducted by means of the qualitative analysis software application Atlas-Ti and resulted in an analysis of 1840 messages related to these events throughout 2020. Since the contents of the networks are generally produced by the users themselves, they have the potential to “store” the circumstances experienced as they occurred, thus capturing the changing nature of ICH practices and the sequence of events and perceptions [26]. Analysis of these narratives enabled us to offset a potentially fossilized view of ICH representations [26].

This digital content has its limitations, and its use prompts methodological debates over the best way to identify and analyzing these data [40], the difficulty of identifying the origin of the information [23], ethical issues over the use of the information, and the temporary nature of the data [41,42]. However, despite these drawbacks, observation of the online space is very useful in a field such as ICH in which there is an abundance of content such as inventories, discussion groups, and social participation [43], which was even greater during the pandemic when there were large numbers of digital initiatives. This provided a wealth of information on the period, which has already given rise to a good number of investigations in very diverse disciplines [44].

## 2.2. Case Studies

In addition to the general analysis, three case studies were carried out to gain a more detailed understanding of the interrelationships between the measures adopted, the specific characteristics of the festivity, and the social and political context. The researchers selected ICH elements they were already familiar with and had previously investigated within the framework of ICH research [45]. This enabled them (1) to put the effects of the period of the pandemic into context as they already had an understanding of the social and organizational characteristics of each element and (2) to gain direct knowledge of experiences from members of the organizing communities.

These three cases were also selected because they have very different characteristics. In the first case, the Valencia *fallas* (which were to be held on 19 March 2020) were cancelled a few days before the declaration of lockdown and the state of emergency in Spain, making it the first festival in Spain on the UNESCO list to be suspended, at a time when there was little knowledge about the public health restrictions or the protocols. Although the best known *fallas* are those held in the city of Valencia itself (801,456 inhabitants as of 2020), the festival is also celebrated in numerous towns and villages throughout the Valencia region.

The *Patum* festival, the second case, is held only in the Catalan town of Berga (16,199 inhabitants as of 2020) and was due to take place between 10 and 14 June, 2020. It was cancelled when public health restrictions were still in place, but full lockdown was no longer in force. As in the previous case, the suspension of the festival had a major impact on the population due to its close links with local and regional identity. The cancellation caused fierce debate and even conflict. The *fallas* were also cancelled in 2021, and the *Patum* is due to be cancelled, although this has still not been decided.

*Castells* (human towers or “castles”) are raised throughout the year in many parts of Catalonia. About a hundred organizing associations perform at fiestas in different towns throughout the *castells* season (between March and November), with different groups from different localities performing at the same event. As the *castells* require a large number of participants and very close physical contact, they were cancelled from the beginning of lockdown. The rule also applies to any kind of training (generally the groups train once a week), so now activity has almost ceased altogether.

Although the process has been intensively monitored, it was not possible to carry out ethnographic in-person observations, either because the event fell during the lockdown (the Valencia *fallas*) or because travel was not allowed (the Berga Patum) or because there was minimal activity by the associations (*castells*). However, 46 videos from social networks recording various aspects of the alternative celebrations have been analyzed. In addition, a total of 12 in-depth videoconference interviews were conducted with people linked to the organizing associations of the three events.

### 2.3. The Elements on the UNESCO ICH Representative List in Spain

As we have mentioned, there are 18 very diverse elements on the UNESCO list for Spain. Although there are elements of a predominantly festive nature that take place on a specific date (9), there are also other festive practices that are held in various different towns and on different dates (2), ritual activities or practices (3), crafts (3), and gastronomic elements (1). Although information has been sought for each element, the research has focused particularly on festive practices. It should be taken into account that the management of ICH in Spain has a regional character (competences of the autonomous communities) and that the different elements generally have a marked local or regional identity.

Table 1 shows a list of all these elements, indicating the date they were adopted by UNESCO, the venue, a brief description of what they consist of, the effects of the restrictions, and the alternatives, both in person and virtual, that were organized in each case.

**Table 1.** Elements on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible World Heritage in Spain with descriptions of the effects of the public health restrictions.

A. ICH Elements (Year Incorporated and Type)	B. Description	C. Effects of COVID-19	D. Digital Events
<b>The Patum</b> (2008) Berga (Catalonia) Beginning of June	Secular and religious theatrical performances, dances, pyrotechnics, and parades of mythical characters (monsters, fire devils) in the town square.	2020/2021: Cancelled. Substituted by online activities. Protests and alternative celebrations, which gave rise to conflicts.	<i>Patum in lockdown.</i> Celebrations via social networks. Events on local television, children's celebrations at home.
<b>The Mystery Play of Elx</b> (2008) Elx (Valencia) 14–15 August	Sacred sung musical drama about the death and assumption of the Virgin Mary. Performed since the fifteenth century in the local church and in the street.	2020: Cancellation of performances. Shorter performances in religious services.	Online rehearsals. Online broadcasts. Online content uploaded.
<b>Gomera Whistling</b> (2009) La Gomera (Canary Islands)	Whistling language used by island shepherds as a language for long-distance communication. The language is taught in schools.	2020: Scarcely affected. Used as a means of communication between houses during lockdown.	Used and shared on social media. Whistled homages to healthcare workers.
<b>Council of Wise Men on the Plain of Murcia</b> <b>Water Tribunal of the Plain of Valencia</b> (2009) Weekly	Democratically elected tribunals for the administration of justice and resolution of conflicts amongst irrigation communities.	2020: Cancellation of sessions during lockdown.	Website.
<b>Castells (human towers)</b> (2010) Catalonia Various festivities	Erection of human towers of different sizes and heights. Part of festivities in the cities and towns of Catalonia. The <i>castells</i> require the participation of many people.	2020/2021: Complete cancellation of all events and rehearsals. Problems with training and continuity. Difficulties in restarting the activity due to restrictions. Loss of income	Alternative events via social media Training activities transmitted through social media.
<b>Flamenco</b> (2010) Andalusia and other regions	Mixture of song, dance, and instrumental accompaniment. Performed at celebrations or festivities. Distinctive feature of numerous groups and communities, especially the gypsy ethnic community.	2020/2021: Cancellation of performances and closure of <i>tablaos</i> , some permanently. Professional consequences for full-time artists. Loss of income	A 24 h online world event (Escuela de <i>Flamenco</i> de Andalucía). Platforms for online classes ( <i>Flamenco</i> Culture, EFA Online and E-Dancer). Creation of online <i>Flamenco</i> clubs.

Table 1. Cont.

A. ICH Elements (Year Incorporated and Type)	B. Description	C. Effects of COVID-19	D. Digital Events
<b>Chant of the Sybil</b> (2010) Island of Mallorca Christmas Eve 24/25 of December	Song performed by two acolytes (boys or girls) in all the churches on Mallorca during the Christmas Eve Midnight Mass.	2020: Various alternatives in different locations: (1) Limited places; (2) Change of time due to curfew; (3) Behind closed doors.	Some broadcasts on social media. Digital content.
<b>Festival of the Mare de Déu de la Salut</b> (2010) Algemesí (Valencia) 7/8 of September	Theatrical performances, concerts, and dances. Raising of human towers in the main square, with dances and music.	2020: Cancelled. Religious services held.	Broadcast of events held in churches.
<b>Fiesta of the patios</b> (2012) Cordoba (Andalucía) May	Competition for most beautiful garden courtyards in dwellings inhabited by various families.	2020: Change of dates. Celebration in autumn with limitations on visitor numbers.	Virtual 360° tour through different patios by means of an app. Individual videos of each patio via social networks.
<b>Mediterranean Diet</b> (2013) Cyprus, Croatia, Spain, Greece, Italy, and Portugal	Knowledge, practices, and rituals related to food and cooking in various Mediterranean communities.	2020: Little impact, except for restaurant closures and group activities. Controversy: (1) Effects on dietary patterns; (2) Increased consumption of fruits and vegetables.	Exchange of recipes through social networks. Product promotion activities.
<b>Summer solstice fire festivals in the Pyrenees</b> (2015) Various villages in Andorra, Spain, and France 23/24 June	Villagers light torches in the mountains and bring them down to the town squares, where bonfires are lit and there is dancing and music.	2020: Different alternatives among communities: (1) Cancellation of most events; (2) Change of date; (3) Some smaller events; (4) Limited to local people	Creation of the Prometheus Virtual Museum of Fire Festivals. Broadcasting of activities on social networks. Large amount of content on social networks.
<b>Falconry</b> (2016) Various countries	Birds of prey tamed for flight displays.	2020: Difficulties in training birds of prey. Problems with stress in birds.	Virtual conference.
<b>Valencia fallas</b> (2016) Various towns and villages in the Valencia region 14–19 of March	Huge sculptures ( <i>fallas</i> ) composed of humorous figures burnt in streets and squares.	2020: Cancelled. Some <i>fallas</i> were stored in warehouses. Subsequently, the <i>fallas</i> already set up in the street were burnt. 2021: Cancelled. Small-scale events	2021. Virtual <i>fallas</i> . Virtual programs in most places. Participation in social networks. Virtual display of ninots (cardboard sculptures). Sharing of plantà dinner (beginning of the festivities) on social media.
<b>Dry stone walling</b> (2018) Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland	Art of dry stone wall construction in houses and structures for agriculture and livestock.	2020/21: Little impact. Cancellation of projects to train the next generation. Maintenance of various activities such as the Dry Stone Week in Catalonia.	Awareness-raising activities online.
<b>Tamboradas drum playing rituals</b> (2018) Various municipalities in Andalusia, Aragon, Castile-La Mancha, Valencia, Murcia Easter Week	Prolonged and rhythmic ritual drumming by hundreds of drummers throughout the day and night.	2020/2021: Cancellation and reduced format Drumming by children and adults on the balconies.	Digital content on social networks. Initiatives to record drumming on balconies. Virtual broadcasts.
<b>Ceramic making</b> (2018) Talavera de la Reina and Puente del Arzobispo (Castile La Mancha)	Communities of artisans who manufacture ceramic objects for domestic, decorative and architectural uses using traditional methods.	2020/21: Economic impact of artisan store closures. Marketing difficulties. Aid plans to enable marketing of goods.	Online training activities. Promotion of online trade of ceramics. Creation of an online platform for sales.
<b>Wine horses</b> (2020) Caravaca de la Cruz (Murcia) 1–3 of May	Festival with parade of horses through the streets of the town with their handlers.	2020: Cancelled	Program of virtual visits.

Source: compiled from UNESCO Lists of Intangible Heritage (Columns A and B) and information obtained from organizers (Columns C and D).

It is important to point out that the rather different characteristics of the various elements make it difficult not only to compare them, but above all to treat them statistically.

While in some cases the festivities take place in a single town (such as the Berga Patum, the Fiesta of the Patios in Cordova, or the Mystery Play of Elx), in others the festival is held simultaneously in a large number of towns (such as the Valencia *fallas*, the summer solstice fire festivals in the Pyrenees, and the Chant of the Sybil in Mallorca). Moreover, while in some cases the activities take place on a specific date, others have no set dates and are held in numerous places (such as the *castells* or flamenco), and yet others have no specific location at all (falconry, the Gomeran Whistle, the Mediterranean diet, and the various craft activities). For this reason, it was considered unfeasible to adopt a quantitative perspective and we opted for a qualitative approach, which is also more in keeping with the objectives and theoretical purposes of the research.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Strategies Employed by Organizers of Intangible Heritage to Deal with COVID-19 Pandemic

To cope with the pandemic, those organizing the various ICH practices in Spain adopted a wide range of complementary solutions and alternatives (Table 1). The choices made depended on health issues and the varying numbers of people attending events, on the opportunity to maintain social distancing, and on the date of the event (if it was due to take place during full lockdown or under lesser restrictions), and other reasons. We noted four different strategies:

1. **Cancellation of the festivity.** Table 1 reveals that most of the festivities were cancelled during the first year of the pandemic. Generally speaking, official announcements stressed the exceptional circumstances and the need to protect health. For example, the president of the organizing committee of the Mystery of Elx pointed out that “it is with great regret that we have to communicate that is impossible to hold the Mystery of Elx this August. We are convinced that it is the best decision we can take from the point of view of public health and the safety of citizens”, adding that “we will continue our efforts to safeguard our World Heritage and continue to raise awareness of the event” [46].
2. **Change of date.** Although this alternative was contemplated in a good number of cases (such as the Valencia *fallas*, the Pyrenean fire festivals, and the Berga Patum), in the end it was only adopted in one case: the Fiestas of Patios in Cordova were indeed moved from May to October, and were celebrated in a very similar format [47]. A change of dates was rarely applied, not only because it was not known how the pandemic would evolve, but also because the change implied disrupting the life of the community. In guidelines produced by the Ministry of Culture after lockdown was decreed [48], it was considered that “changes of dates should be prohibited”, because intangible cultural assets “are characterized by being closely linked to specific dates”, and “they are governed by temporal rhythms that are usually linked directly and inseparably to a particular season or specific date in the annual calendar”.
3. **Small-scale format.** Some organizers opted for reduced formats, maintaining some elements that were considered symbolic or representative, rapidly reinventing the manner in which they were held, and moving the venues. For example, for the *tamboradas* (an intense, prolonged drumming for several hours in the town square during Easter Week), organizers in Hellín, Castile La Mancha proposed a token 10 min of drumming on people’s balconies [49], pointing out that this was done in “homage to the victims and those who are continuing to fight for our health and wellbeing”. Reports stated that “both children and adults drummed on their balconies, perpetuating our age-old tradition”. Regarding the Chant of the Sybil, which is performed at midnight mass in the churches of Mallorca, alternatives varied according to the location. This meant reducing numbers and moving the time to before curfews, while there were services with no congregation at all (in the Sanctuary of Lluç, for example). In the Pyrenean fire festivals, some municipalities also opted to limit celebrations to a few symbolic events or to allow villagers only. It is interesting to note two aspects of these small-scale celebrations: (1) the choice of certain acts considered



“representative” enables us to see how the various elements are appreciated by the community, and (2) these acts are presented as a way of continuing the festival symbolically. For example, in the *Tamborada* of Vila-real (in the region of Valencia), where locals were able to beat their drums on their balconies, the mayor of the town explained that this continued the spirit of the celebration: “The inhabitants of Vila-real are proud of our traditions, of our identity and values and, of course, of our Easter Week. And we are not going to allow the pandemic to prevent us from enjoying and defending what is ours (...) and enjoying the festivity at home, with innovative initiatives” [50].

4. **Virtual events.** The use of virtual space already has a long history in inventories adapted for the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [19], but during the COVID-19 period, its use has increased considerably [8] and all the heritage elements analyzed in Spain resorted to carrying out some type of online activity.

The most commonly used virtual option was the use of social media. There was an increase in the use of different platforms and all towns, cities, and intangible heritage associations resorted massively to the use of various social networks. The content we observed was very diverse, but we generally found posts of two types: (1) videos and images of previous celebrations as a way of both remembering the festivities and of keeping the festive celebration “alive” and of expressing disappointment about it being cancelled, and (2) images or videos, sometimes humorous, of celebrations held in homes (for example children with Patum costumes in Berga, family dinners for the Valencia *fallas*, beating drums on the balcony for the *tamboradas*, etc.). The activities have been very varied, with the Gomeran Whistle, for example, being broadcast on social media. As one of the promoters of this initiative said, “a whistle, and an inhabitant of Gomera, can be heard from a long distance and all over the world” [51].

After social media, more or less generated spontaneously by users, the second most popular option involved the activities programmed by the associations themselves or the organizing municipalities. For example, there have been online broadcasts of events held behind closed doors (in Algemesí, Mallorca, and Berga, etc.) and all kinds of courses, debates, and classes that have made it possible for various associations or members of the community to stay in contact. In the case of *flamenco* in Andalusia, the internet has been heavily exploited—there was a 24-h *flamenco* marathon on the YouTube channel of the Escuela de *Flamenco* de Andalucía, and online flamenco classes have been organized on virtual platforms. The internet has been seen as a saving grace and a means of generating income by artists who have put on concerts and delivered remote classes.

Some *cantaors* (*flamenco* singers) and guitarists have discovered that they are not only in demand locally, but also by *aficionados* in other countries. Online platforms have also been created with technological functions that enable interactivity (*Flamenco* cultural), courses (EFA Online), and dance (E-dancer) [52], and there is even a virtual Peña Flamenca (association of *flamenco* enthusiasts who meet to sing or dance) called Home Flamenco [53]. As Imber-Black [2] (p. 920) points out, many rituals of a festive, family, or life-cycle nature have been adapted to the virtual format, and she speaks about the invention of new “zoom” rituals.

A third way of using the virtual space has consisted of transferring exhibition contents online. This is the case of the Prometheus fire festival virtual museum. This was proposed as an emergency alternative because “this year 2020, COVID-19 has meant that the festival cannot be held in the same way, but the spirit of the festival is still alive. This virtual museum helps to keep the spirit of the festival alive” [54].

As can be seen, the strategies adopted have been very varied, both real and virtual, making it difficult to analyze them together. What can be said is that there has been considerable readiness to transform and reinvent ICH with new rituals and approaches [2]. The qualitative information provided in Table 1 is in keeping with the conclusions of the UNESCO survey [5] on the various elements on the Representative List of Intangible

Cultural Heritage that indicates that restrictions have affected 95% of events, but also indicates that 59% have organized innovative activities that make it possible for them to continue. In all the cases analyzed in Spain, there have been more or less imaginative measures adopted to enable the festival to go ahead, in one way or another.

### 3.2. Impact of the Pandemic on Intangible Heritage Practices

Although there have been a wide range of responses to the cancellation of ICH practices, all communities have seen the restrictions as painful and disturbing [55] because they have brought about a break with traditions and the sense of community [56]. Quite apart from holding events or not, the health crisis presents three new challenges for ICH: (1) effects of health restrictions and social distancing on ICH practices, (2) effects on social relations and well-being, and (3) economic effects.

#### 3.2.1. Preventive Measures, Social Distancing, and ICH Practices

In general, festivals are major public events. In many of them, there are large numbers of people, close physical proximity, intense social interaction, and, in some cases, a high degree of physical contact. In fact, one of the characteristics of these festivals is a kind of physical proximity that is generally not tolerated in everyday life. Social distancing measures decreed during the pandemic have affected the very essence of the festivities, with the utopia of lockdown bringing a complete halt to many community activities [57]. It is likely that these restrictions will continue in the coming years [1], a prospect that has generated enormous concern among the associations that organize ICH activities. The impact of these restrictions varies widely, however. Of the cases analyzed, it is the *castells* (human towers) that are most affected, due to the physical proximity of both practitioners and the public, while celebrations based on music, such as the Chant of the Sybil or *flamenco*, can be performed with restrictions on numbers.

After the end of the first lockdown in May 2020, several regulations were issued in Spain to enable cultural activity, including ICH practices, to be relaunched. The recommendations, issued both by the central government and by the different autonomous communities, indicated how public events should be held and included measures for disinfection, social distancing, and temperature control, as well as the cancellation of any public events in which numbers could not be controlled [58]. The norms, however, were only very general with regard to the ICH and were limited to pointing out the difficulty of holding events due to the impossibility of maintaining social distance in mass festivities. In practice, however, very few festivities could be held at all. The Spanish Ministry of Culture drew up guidelines for the management, conservation, and public enjoyment of cultural heritage at the end of lockdown. These included three recommendations for ICH: (a) that it should be locals themselves who make the decisions on holding the events, and that “the establishment of rules by those outside the community is not advisable”, (b) the dates of these festivals should not be changed (“it should be forbidden to change the date”), and (c) locations should not be changed (“it should be forbidden to change the spatial framework”) [48].

The most detailed regulations were issued by the government of Catalonia, which drew up a plan in May that set initial guidelines for “the relaunch of popular culture and cultural associations [59]”. The plan detailed the different kinds of health risks for different activities, ranging from those involving greater physical proximity to those where social distancing measures were possible. Thus, for example, it was pointed out that it was utterly unfeasible to restart *castells* (human castles) due to the impossibility of social distancing, the constant interaction between the performers and the public, the use of shared material, the mixing of people of different ages (from young children to those over 70 years of age), and the impossibility of limiting the number of participants in the public spaces. Both training for this kind of festivity and the festivities themselves were prohibited, and events like the *castells* have not been permitted since the beginning of the pandemic. Other events such as plays and concerts and traditional dances have a greater chance of being permitted,

although risks are also highlighted. As a general rule, the Catalan government decreed that “public activities with close physical contact are not allowed, nor activities in which it is not possible to maintain physical distance allowing interpersonal safety, nor any activity in which unpredictable factors that hinder the movement or safe circulation of people may occur”. This meant that most fiestas held in the streets could not go ahead.

The preventive rules and recommendations described above are due to be updated in the light of new knowledge on the means of transmission of COVID-19 and progress made in vaccination. At any rate, it is uncertain whether preventive measures will have to be maintained in the future. Many groups that organize festivities point out that, however the pandemic evolves, it is likely that it will be necessary to adopt smaller and more sustainable celebrations involving fewer participants, perhaps only the local community.

### 3.2.2. Effects on Social Relations and Social Well-Being

The failure to hold most of the festivals for 2 years has other consequences. Generally, the feasts are organized by associations that are themselves intensely social, and the festivity itself, and particularly preparation for it, generates intense social relations, as Matheson points out in the case of Celtic music [60]. Social relations are fundamental for the transmission of tradition and connect festive traditions with modernity [61]. Often the organization of the festivities involves a long period of preparation, which can even last a year (as in the Valencia *fallas*). In some cases, including the *castells*, preparation can be year-round, ensuring that participants are well-prepared technically and in good physical shape. Many ICH elements are organized by different associations in which, similar to that in sports teams [62], there is a strong sense of belonging and identity which strengthen the bonds of collective and cultural identity [63].

The cancellation of festivities interrupts community rhythms and even threatens the continued existence of some ICH. For this reason, the members of the associations are concerned not only about the effects of cancellation, but also about the damage being done to the association itself. It is true that in general, people want to return to the squares and the festive maelstrom, but the interruption has also enabled people to discover other patterns of cultural consumption. Some informants point to the fact that there had been a certain fatigue with the festive rhythm even before the pandemic, with a decrease in the number of people registered in associations, also partly caused by greater demands. Paradoxically, inclusion on the UNESCO list has meant that these elements are more highly valued, but it has also led to a growth in the number of participants and greater demands. The growth has largely occurred without taking into account the need to establish sustainability plans for these practices, and the large numbers of tourists have sometimes interfered with more community-based practices.

In addition to fomenting sociability and inclusiveness [64], ICH plays a decisive role in social well-being. As the UNESCO report mentioned above [5] points out, there is a direct relationship between ICH and social and psychological well-being, in that the activities offer numerous “ingredients of well-being”, acting as a “resource for social and psychological resilience in the face of crises”. Moreover, the report states that “the promotion of diverse cultural expressions offers effective ways of coping with post-crisis trauma and reuniting affected communities”. In many of the elements analyzed in Spain, festivities are promoted as a kind of symbolic social glue. In this respect, it is interesting to note that in various celebrations, events have been held in memory of the victims of the pandemic or as a tribute to healthcare personnel (*Tamboradas*, Gomeran whistlers, flower offerings, Pyrenean fire festivals, and flamenco concerts).

Although festivals certainly promote social cohesion, they may also be disruptive [22,65] and even come into conflict with institutions and government [66]. During the pandemic, there have been various conflicts, of greater or lesser intensity, over decisions regarding whether or not to celebrate the festivities or about how to celebrate them, with debates spilling over into the political arena. In other cases, some locals have held alternative celebrations, which have resulted in even greater conflict. This is the case, for example,

of the Patum (analyzed below), in which some locals held an alternative celebration in defiance of municipal prohibition and public health restrictions. ICH practices are significant components of the life of a given community, but at the same time, they involve tensions that may destabilize the hegemonic order [21], so cancelling them may be seen as a form of social control and domination [67].

### 3.2.3. Economic Effects

As is well known, the economic dimension of intangible heritage is crucial [68], both for its effect on tourism and for its direct and indirect benefits. The organizations consulted do not have any detailed figures on these effects, only estimates that are still unreliable. It can be said, however, that there are three types of economic effect.

Firstly, there are the losses caused by the reduction in tourism: ICH, and especially festivals, make a major contribution to the tourism industry, either by directly encouraging tourism, or because they belong to the destination's culture [36,69,70]. Although all the intangible heritage elements on the UNESCO list in Spain have seen an increase in the number of participating tourists in recent years [32], their impact has been very uneven. In the case of the Valencia *fallas*, the organizers estimated the economic effect of the cancellation to be a drop of about EUR 700 million in 2020 [71], including the lack of income generated by tourism.

Secondly, we should mention the indirect effects caused by the loss of income when events are not held (contracts with companies, audiovisual productions, clothing, etc.). These losses are not only felt in tourist centers in large cities (as in the case of the Valencia *fallas*), but also in small communities in less densely populated areas in which visits to festivals keep the social fabric alive in areas that are particularly sensitive to demographic change. This is very much the case in the case of *tamboradas* held in small towns during the Holy Week.

Thirdly, the lack of income has had a major impact on associations, which have seen a reduction in the number of their members that threatens their existence. A report on the future of *castells* [72] points out that already decreasing numbers dropped further during the pandemic. This was also noted in the case of the Valencia *fallas*, where the associations estimate that they have lost between 20% of their members, putting their continued existence in jeopardy [73]. Furthermore, in Valencia, it was estimated that 65% of the associations surveyed expected a drop in income and that they did not have sufficient resources to make ends meet [74].

Fourthly, sales of crafts are under threat. The prolonged closure of points of sale and the cancellation of markets and craft fairs may imply the disappearance of many crafts (as is the case of ceramics in Castile La Mancha). As Cejudo [75] has pointed out, inclusion on the ICH list brings various different dimensions of value into play, and there has been a major negative impact on production and on the working conditions of artisans. Regional governments have drawn up plans to promote the consumption of crafts, as in Castile La Mancha [76], and to seek new forms of marketing, although in general, the associations complain of scant public support.

Demands for support to cope with the impact of COVID-19 on ICH have been widespread, with the Spanish administrations receiving numerous requests for help from organizing groups. The Andalusian Confederation of Flamenco Peñas, for example, called for an emergency plan to ensure that flamenco could be sustained into the future [77], stating that "the flamenco sector suffers from a lack of business structure, and artists depend on being able to work; they will therefore have no income at all during these months".

Assistance has also been requested to maintain "the associative fabric of the Peñas Flamencas, which represent about four hundred association throughout Andalusia. Apart from their role as non-profit cultural associations, they also represent a source of income for the sector". The associations requested financial assistance "to avoid the ruin of the sector which represents so much in our culture and feeds so many families". The Valencian Federation of *Fallas* also called for financial aid, given that the sector would not be able

to survive a second year without *fallas* and requesting aid amounting to EUR 3 million. In their study, they pointed out that the Valencia committees had invested a total of EUR 7.7 million in *fallas* in 2020, and that 2021 orders to artisans have been maintained. However, they also said that associations cannot maintain their income due to the lack of activities and the reduction in their membership [78]. In March 2021, the city council approved a EUR 2.3 million aid package to cover 30% of the construction costs of the *fallas* that could not be mounted for the second year running [79].

It is more than likely that the current crisis will have economic effects that may lead to profound changes in certain elements of intangible heritage and even their loss. The ICH practices on the UNESCO list have experienced (perhaps) excessive growth in recent years, which has engendered higher quality but also higher costs, a reality that may now be questioned in the post-COVID-19 era. It will undoubtedly be necessary to make plans for their reformulation and sustainability. As one informant, a member of an association organizing the Pyrenean fire festivals, pointed out, perhaps this will imply “a return to the origins of the heritage”, with less external participation: “It will be good because it will be just us again, with no tourists” [80].

### 3.3. Case Studies

#### 3.3.1. The Valencia Fallas

The *fallas* are one of the best-known festivals on the UNESCO list for Spain, especially since they receive a large number of tourists from a wide range of countries. In the city of Valencia alone, more than 100,000 people were registered in organizing groups in 2019, and every year 400 monumental sculptures are erected. Furthermore, the festival is celebrated in numerous places throughout the region of Valencia. Although the *fallas* are held on St. Joseph’s Day (19 March), the festivities do not have a religious origin. Dating back to 1784, each year humorous “monuments” or sculptures made of wood and cardboard (and now also porexpan and resin) are erected in the squares and streets and are then burned to the music of massed bands and against a backdrop of firework displays. The figures are made by associations, which start making new figures as soon as the previous ones have been burnt. This means that people are deeply committed to these associations and social relations are essential for the transmission of the festive tradition [81].

The festival has two characteristic features. Firstly, it contributes to defining Valencian identity and entails a veritable liturgy of Valencian practices that emotionally express Valencian identity [56]. Although during the Franco dictatorship and the post-Franco period the *fallas* were politically instrumentalized [82], in recent years the organizational structures and dynamics have been modified, with direct participation by *fallas* organizations and a desire to ensure the festival is forward-looking. Secondly, the *fallas*, more than other features, are used to promote the city to tourists [83] and a large number of visitors participate, making it a powerful tourist attraction and generating some EUR 612 million annually, 82.7% in the hospitality and tourism sector, with an estimated 1 million visitors attending the 2017 festival, according to the Interagrupación de *Fallas* [82] (p.86).

The *fallas* were one of the first festivals to be affected by the pandemic in Spain. The first discussions over whether to cancel them took place in February 2020, when there was still only talk of a “threat”. On 25 February, for example, the city press said that “there is no imminent danger, but there is concern about the evolution of the coronavirus and its possible impact on the *fallas*” [84]. It was not until 10 March, when the sculptures were already beginning to be erected in public spaces, that the cancellation was announced by the President of the Generalitat Valenciana (the government of the Valencia region), who announced that “they are not cancelled, but postponed until it is possible to hold them safely” [84]. In the following days, before full lockdown had been decreed, there were all kinds of debates about the suitability of the measure, the economic effects of the cancellation, and the possible postponement.

The monuments already erected began to be taken down and taken to a municipal store, ready for reuse in July, but with the lockdown decree on 13 March and the difficulty of moving some of the ninots (giant human figures that make up the *fallas*) that were already fully erected, it was decided to carry out a *cremà* (burning of the figures) at midnight with no publicity and no onlookers. The most symbolic and much-debated act was the burning of the main falla, located in the City Hall Square. The burning was attended only by firemen, a representative of the City Council, and the artist who had made the monument (Figure 1). This almost clandestine burning (despite its secrecy, it was followed on YouTube by more than 45,000 people) [85] became a sad symbol of the cancellation of the *fallas*. Following an annual tradition in which one of the figures is saved from the fire, it was decided to “pardon” the head of the body of the large sculpture, to which the artist had attached a huge mask.



**Figure 1.** Valencia *Fallas* (2020). The falla of the City Hall Square, which had been set up before the festival was cancelled. The artist put a mask on the face of the figure. The image became a symbol of the effects of the pandemic on ICH. Photo: Francesc Fort [86].

The image of the giant head wearing a mask while the rest of the figure was set on fire in an empty square became one of the great international icons of those days, to the point that this image was adopted on the UNESCO website as a symbol of the impact of COVID-19 on ICH. One year later, in 2021, the *fallas* have been cancelled again, but this time a series of virtual activities have been programmed. A street campaign (Figure 2) has sought to draw attention to the cancellation: on each of the spaces where there would normally be a *falla* sculpture, graffiti has appeared which asserts: “Here burns the heart of a *falla* #tornarem” (we will return).

The cancellation of the festivities, which, as we have seen, play a very important role in the social life and identity of Valencia, has been a shock to community dynamics, generating considerable uncertainty, confusion, and sadness amongst inhabitants. The cancellation for 2 consecutive years has also had major repercussions on the whole region of Valencia, and especially on the organizing associations, which are not only unable to organize the festivities, but also unable to conduct other activities. Beyond the economic consequences for associations, which are losing members due to their inactivity, major repercussions on social relations and on the internal dynamics of the organizations have also been noted. There has also been a major economic impact on the family businesses that construct the *fallas* every year, which are now threatened with closure.



**Figure 2.** *Fallas* de Valencia (2021). A street graffiti on each of the spaces where there would normally be a *falla* sculpture. Text: “Here burns the heart of a *falla* #wewillreturn”. Photo: Joan Seguí.

This situation is generating debates on the future role of the *fallas* and raising questions about the huge number of tourists attracted to previous events, while several associations are calling for a return to the origins of the festival, with more neighborhood events and lower-key festivities. In the conclusions of a debate held among representatives of various *fallas* associations, it was pointed out that despite the sadness, it was an opportunity to reinvent and rethink the *fallas* and select more sustainable ways of holding the festivities and organizing the associations themselves [73].

### 3.3.2. The Berga Patum

The festivities of the Berga Patum lie undoubtedly at the core of the identity of the city of Berga in the Catalan Pre-Pyrenees. With deep roots in Catalan nationalist politics (in 2021, 75% of the votes of its citizens were pro-independence [87]), this city is currently governed by a radical pro-independence left-wing party. Within this context, the festival has become the subject of a fight for hegemony between the new leaders and the opposition, who have very different conceptions of the festival [83]. The Patum is a festival with a long history. With uncertain origins in the Middle Ages, it is known for certain to have been held since 1525. With the exception of pandemics long ago (as in 1735) and in periods of war, for example, two years during the Spanish Civil War (1937 and 1938), the festivity had been held without interruption, a fact that was recalled on the occasion of the cancellation in 2020 due to COVID-19. The Patum is linked to the Corpus Christi festivities (a moveable feast held between May and June) and features several mythical and symbolic figures who dance to the rhythm of music and drums in the town square accompanied by dancing crowds and the explosions of firecrackers.

Noyes [88] has drawn attention to the role of the festival in fomenting social integration and describes the town square as a stage not only for the celebration of the festivities but also for debating different perspectives of the fiesta and different political uses. People are packed close together in the square on the days it is celebrated and people’s individuality is symbolically merged in the group. Participation in the festival is seen as a powerful means of integrating people of immigrant origin into the local dynamics, but this group identity is often accompanied by divisions and conflicts, since the festival has been translated into different kinds of demand at different times in history: fierce opposition to Francoism, Catalan demands for democracy following Franco’s dictatorship, and, most recently, Catalan demands for independence. “The fire in the square”, for Noyes [88], is a metaphor for the contradictions that are resolved in the square, with political debates over the use of the festival having taken place throughout the history of the festival [89].

The festival was cancelled in 2020 due to the large numbers who take part in the festival and the characteristically close bodily contact. After some hesitation, the municipal authorities agreed to cancel it in a solemn municipal meeting held on 24 May. Year after year, the councilors agree to celebrate the festival at such a meeting and it marks the beginning of the festivities. In 2020, the meeting was held telematically. Until that year, it would have been unthinkable to vote against holding it [90] and the mayoress of the town emphasized the exceptional nature of the decision: “None of us who are present today in this plenary session, nor the majority of the residents and *patumaires* [active participants in the festival] have ever experienced a cancellation of the festivities of the Corpus (...), and having to vote against holding it is a deeply upsetting historical event. It is a difficult decision that we never dreamt of having to make” [91]. The festival was replaced by a program adapted to the pandemic, dubbed “Patum in lockdown” (Figure 3). It was above all a symbolic celebration, with events that avoided in-person participation in order to avoid crowds. To this end, there were musical performances broadcast on local television, a wreath placed in recognition of the work done by healthcare personnel during the coronavirus crisis, and above all celebrations over social media.



**Figure 3.** Patum de Berga (2020). Festival announcement poster of “Patum in lockdown”. Different Lego figures reproduce scenes of celebration of the rituals of the festivals inside the houses. Source: Ajuntament de Berga.

However, these “lockdown” public health celebrations were not enough for some residents, who organized their own celebrations. This was not difficult, since many people keep replicas of the figures at home, and it was easy enough to get hold of firecrackers. A relatively spontaneous representation of one of the festival dances thus took place in the streets, with music, festival figures, and firecrackers. Images of people packing the streets, dancing to the traditional music, contravening public health measures, and not wearing masks could be seen on numerous mass media and on social networks, prompting



ferocious local and national controversy. Moreover, the participation of a town councilor clearly defying her own town council generated a political controversy, to the extent that the opposition parties asked for her resignation [92]. For its part, the local residents' association also issued a statement condemning these acts and saying that all residents were "eager to celebrate the festival, with longing, yearning, eagerness, and burning with Patum fever", but that for the moment, "health was more important than holding the festival" [93].

The festival has again been suspended in 2021, this time well in advance, and the organizers are currently debating the format of the alternative events. For the local population, with the memory of the cancellation of the festival a year ago still fresh, another cancellation implies further disruption to community rhythms. At the same time, debates have arisen about the need to rethink the festival, reduce the large number of people attending, and to adopt a model better suited to just the local community.

### 3.3.3. Human Towers (Castells) in Catalonia

*Castells* (literally, castles), the raising of human towers in the squares of the many Catalan towns and cities, are among the most characteristic festive traditions in Catalonia. Those involved join so-called *colles* (associations) and train to build towers that can reach up to nine stories high. A large number of men and women of all ages and physical characteristics are needed to create a *castell*. They train throughout the year to participate in competitions and performances, and the collaboration of a large number of people from the public and very close physical contact is needed to support the castle. This has meant that they have been prohibited since the declaration of the pandemic.

Although *castells* date back to the eighteenth century, they became more widespread during the nineteenth century, before entering a period of steep decline. In the last years of Franco's regime, and especially after the end of the dictatorship, there was a huge increase in the practice, which plays an important role in festivals in Catalonia and in advocating Catalan identity. Numbers have also grown in recent years in the context of demands for independence [94]. While in 1970 there were only five associations, today there are a hundred. *Castells* are also important because their members' involvement in associations creates collaborative and relatively egalitarian relationships that challenge traditional boundaries and stereotypes in Catalonia based on class, language, and origin.

All activity has been halted as a consequence of COVID-19. The physical proximity required means that it is highly unlikely that it will be allowed to go ahead in the current context. The problem, pointed out by the observatory studying the effect of COVID-19 on *castells* [60], is that while festivals that only take place once a year can be restarted without major problems, building *castells* requires regular training. A lack of training may have a devastating effect on the activity and put its future in jeopardy. A *castells* season generally lasts between February and October, and during this time participants train once or twice a week and take part in numerous performances. The cessation of activities, therefore, not only means cancelling festivities—it also raises difficulties in maintaining the quality of the towers. Only a few virtual activities were held to maintain the "spirit" of the festivities (Figure 4).

The complete ban has created three major challenges. Firstly, there are the preventive measures themselves, since it is almost impossible to hold the event because of the large numbers involved and the physical proximity. Shortly after the initial lockdown was decreed, a medical working group on COVID-19 [72] was created to analyze the chances of recovery. Right from the outset, work was carried out to encourage individual physical training from home. Later, it was followed by work to enable training within household bubbles. The limitation to a maximum of 20 people has made it impossible to conduct full rehearsals, however. *Castellers* interviewed say that they do not see an immediate solution to this issue, despite extensive vaccine coverage. Various suggestions have been put forward, such as participants undergoing antigen tests prior to each training session, but apart from the cost, this would only be useful for training, not for public performances in town squares.



**Figure 4.** *Castells* (2020). Announcement of a virtual *casteller* day in Barcelona. The Days Festivals usually consist of a competition of teams from different towns to see who performs the highest tower. Source: *Castellers del Poble Sec*.

In addition to fears about more objective risks to health, there is also the concern that it may be difficult to return to normal activity for a long time yet. Weig [95] points out the importance of body language amongst *castellers*, who are exposed daily to a sense of danger due to the characteristics of their physical activity, and who may have feelings that they manage to control through group rituals [96]. However, the risk of physical injury is internalized through daily practice. One may legitimately wonder to what extent will it be possible to internalize the risk of an invisible element, such as a possible infection, through the ritual control of emotions?

The second problem is the lack of training. This has an inevitable impact on physical fitness, technical knowledge, and the future chances of creating towers of the heights that were being built previously. For example, members of several associations interviewed point out the difficulty of incorporating the next generation. The human towers are topped by a very young child called an *enxaneta*; these children are difficult to replace at short notice given the training needed. It is feared that when the towers can be restarted, it will be very difficult to maintain previous standards, and that there will be fewer performances and lower towers.

The last problem concerns the effects on sociability. A study by the umbrella group of *Castells* organizations in Barcelona in 2020 [60,84] indicated that 78.4% of its members consider that the ban will be very harmful to their association and its future activity. The majority (90%) plan to return to raising *castells* when conditions are safe, but the main fear is to do with the continued existence of the associations themselves. It was pointed out in a discussion among representatives of different associations that many members may think that there are other activities they can do and they may not wish to return to such an intense commitment as before [97]. All the associations have launched all kinds of activities to allow them to meet again in person or virtually in order to keep the association going. They understand that now the most important thing is keeping the associations going rather than actually creating castles. The *castellers* are eager to be able to embrace each other again in the squares but in general they also think that the return to normal activity will imply rethinking what they do.

#### 4. Discussion

It is still too early to determine to what extent the COVID-19 period will affect the way in which ICH is practiced in the future. For the time being, our ethnographic analysis allows us to understand the processes seen in Spain under these exceptional circumstances, with most of the intangible heritage activities on the UNESCO list unable to go ahead during this period. The qualitative research procedures employed have enabled us to assess the impact of the pandemic, to analyze the alternative practices deployed, and to observe how communities have reacted and affirmed the social value of ICH. Douglas-

Jones et al. [98] have pointed out that qualitative research methods are more sensitive to understanding the social values of heritage because they make it possible to uncover their relationship with the social phenomena that condition them. This emergency ethnographic study has the value of documenting the period analyzed, but the analysis has its limitations because the COVID-19 era is not yet at an end. Further research, which the authors intend to carry out, will confirm the future development of the phenomena described.

The pandemic provides an excellent vantage point from which to analyze the way in which traditions may be reconfigured [65]. The festivals we have described, far from being halted altogether, have been reinvented in new formats. In all the cases analyzed, festivities have proved to be of considerable importance for local people and may become the subject of political controversy, generating political debates on changes to the festival and its sustainability [83]. As Gramsci pointed out [99], conflicts over the legitimacy of tradition, citizen participation, and the presence of external visitors often prompts conflicts over political and social hegemony of the festival through control over the cultural sphere, a phenomenon that must be confronted by those organizing the festivities.

After the decree of the first lockdown, the communities' reaction was one of sorrow at the cancellation of festivities. Since then, however, this anger has given way to a concern for the future of ICH practices. One of the most frequently repeated concerns of groups is over the future sustainability of the festivities in Spain. There are various reasons for our informants' concerns, but the concerns can be grouped into four main areas: tourism, cultural management of the festivals, the significance of the festivals for the local community, and the use of virtual space (Table 2). Many social actors agree that the festivals will have to be reformulated and that many of the assumptions on which the ICH have been based in recent decades will need to evolve. As Davies [1] points out, it is possible that reduced travel, social distance, and a greater emphasis on local and virtual communities will result in the growth of smaller, more affordable community events.

**Table 2.** ICH problems caused by the pandemic and sustainability challenges for the post-COVID-19 era.

	ICH Problems Caused by Pandemic	Challenges And Debates Over Post-COVID-19 Era
Tourism	Lack of tourism Lack of economic resources	Doubts about recovery and dependence on tourism Tackling the overcrowding of some festivities Possible limits to tourism in some festivals
Cultural management of ICH	In associations: loss of members, reduction in sociability mechanisms In terms of economics: loss of income generated by activities, tourism, crafts, and public funding	In associations: recovery of partners, redefinition of role, organizational dynamics, lack of income In public policies: recovery plans. Regulation of practices in accordance with sustainable models and public health measures. Redefinition of practices
Local community and ICH values	Reinforcement of the role of ICH as a source of resilience and identity Prohibition of activities due to social distancing and the difficulty of controlling public capacity	Recovery of the community component in some overcrowded festivals More local Possible public distrust of large-scale events
Use of internet and social media	Intensive use of social networks, virtual spaces, and virtual museums New rituals and virtual events	Continuity of online practices The need for new communicative languages Role of museums and virtual inventories in the preservation of ICH

Source: authors' compilation.

In recent decades, and especially since the signing of the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* (2003), intangible heritage in Spain has gradually come to adhere to a paradigm that involves increases in tourism, more economic resources, and a growing number of participants in festive practices. This paradigm, stimulated by inclusion of heritage elements on the UNESCO list, is used for the promotion of tourism [100,101], while ICH is considered to be vital in promoting social development [86]. Within this paradigm [102],

the idea of sustainability seems to be more to do with economic development than with local actors' desire to relate intangible heritage to their cultural values [33,103]. In our view, the pandemic calls this paradigm into question and the current situation forces us to rethink the economic and social sustainability of ICH practices, in particular those of festivals. The proposals that follow are intended to open up new avenues and theoretical debates, and to help the ICH organizing communities by suggesting ways these celebrations could be planned in the future.

Firstly, it is necessary to build a model of ICH sustainability that is not based on the growth of tourism. As Morisset and Noppen [104] point out, promoters are keen to use intangible heritage as part of marketing strategies. However, the instrumentalization of ICH for tourism marketing is of concern because excessive "tourismization" may jeopardize the significance of heritage for local communities and may change its nature. Tourism and the over-exploitation of festivals risk transforming practices into fictions, resulting in a loss of authenticity, and a distortion of the celebrations to the point of making them a superficial parody of their former selves [105]. There is a consensus among festival organizers that, in recent decades, some festivals have been heavily over-exploited, which not only has repercussions on safety, but also raises debates about the participation of people from outside the local area and threats to the sense of community. Therefore, the paradigm of mass tourism as a powerful generator of economic revenue will have to be reconsidered in the post-COVID-19 period [11]. This does not imply giving up on the revenue that heritage can generate, but rather moving towards a more social and sustainable approach.

Secondly, it is necessary to construct a new model of cultural management for ICH. The challenge of the post-COVID-19 period forces a rethink of the way in which popular and traditional culture is managed, both by the organizing associations and by public administrations. As we have seen, the associations tend to agree that the pandemic has resulted in a loss of members, a reduction in their budget, and less sociability among their members due to social distancing measures. In addition, however, they point out that inclusion on the UNESCO Representative List had already led to excessive pressure on members' dedication and has even led to interference with some basic elements of the festivities. The weaker associations, many of them more recently created, may see some reduction in the number of members or even run the risk of disappearing altogether, and they will probably have to diversify their activities and reformulate their partnership models. A review of ICH management policies will also be necessary for public administrations. Public plans for the recovery of ICH will certainly have to be formulated in order to support associations and promote ICH practices in accordance with more sustainable models. In this regard, the economic impact of the pandemic on ICH should also be assessed.

Thirdly, cultural management models should emphasize the community component in some of the larger-scale festivals. The focus should be on more decentralized, less overcrowded, and perhaps less spectacular festive celebrations. Public health measures and the public's initial distrust of large-scale events will make this necessary, but there is also a need for formats closer to the members of the local community. At any rate, it should be up to the communities themselves to define and reinvent these celebrations. As the Ministry of Culture's guidelines on the effects of the crisis point out, "it should be these groups—the bearers, experts, and owners of these intangible cultural manifestations—who should determine what to do with them in the face of the pandemic. The establishment of rules by actors outside the community is not advisable" [48]. In this sense, the concept of cultural sustainability [33] provides us with a useful framework, enabling decisions over cultural production to be negotiated between local and global actors [102].

Finally, there should be a decisive commitment to the use of the internet in the preservation of intangible heritage. Digital tools should play a more important role in the future of the ICH, not only as an instrument for carrying out inventories and as a tool for dissemination and transmission, but also as an incentive for greater social participation in heritage management by communities. Intensive use of digital tools during the pandemic

cannot only be seen as a temporary substitution of “real” practices, but as a decisive contribution to the social value of heritage and to its preservation.

## 5. Conclusions

Our analysis leads us to make three main conclusions:

1. To a greater or lesser degree and depending on the type of heritage, the pandemic has had a major social and economic impact on ICH and on organizing associations. The cancellation of the festivities has shown the vulnerability of intangible heritage, a fragility that comes not so much from its intangibility, but from its links to the “bearers” [88], who are subject to the effects of the vicissitudes of social life, as has been seen in the pandemic period.
2. Faced with the cancellation of the activities, local communities have proved to be more than capable of transforming ICH practices. The resilience and social cohesion seen in new social practices have been rooted in a discourse of tradition and the sense of belonging to places and communities. At the same time, the social value of ICH has been highlighted during the pandemic, acting as a collective glue and embodying meanings and values that are important to a community [99].
3. Festival communities are concerned about the future of ICH. The post-COVID-19 era makes it necessary to rethink the cultural, economic, and social sustainability of ICH practices, especially festivals, by adopting cultural management models that ensure this occurs.

Speaking of the impact of COVID-19 on museums, Tully [106] asks what can be done to conceptualize, plan, and shape the future of these institutions. He argues that, although the future is unpredictable, potential outcomes can be modeled to maximize sustainability through adaptation to social change. In the case of intangible heritage, the evolution of practices during the period of the pandemic suggests some trends that, in one way or another, will be present in ICH in the future: its social value, its transformative capacity, its resilience, and its presence online. This future, still in construction, will involve a rethinking of management approaches and an emphasis on local events, smaller formats, and a search for new models of participation.

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