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Article

Beyond ceremony: The doctoral sword and the living history of Finland

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Abstract: This study investigates the under-examined Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Finland's doctoral sword, which is a key symbol within its unique conferment ceremony. The ceremony is recognized by UNESCO and celebrates academic achievement. But the rich historical and cultural significance of the sword and Finnish academic dress more broadly remains largely unexplored and often relegated to a niche academic audience. This research traces the sword's origins beyond its popular connection to figures like the artist Akseli Gallén-Kallela, and back through its evolution from Swedish and Russian traditions to recontextualize its contemporary interpretations. The findings reveal a significant gap between the wealth of historical context and the limited understanding of this ICH, even within Finland. The fact that this history was revealed through independent inquiry highlights a missed opportunity for broader cultural engagement by key stakeholders. This article argues for a more robust promotion of ICH, aligning with UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It advocates that initiatives such as collaborations between cultural institutions, researchers and media producers can effectively raise awareness at relatively low cost, enhancing appreciation and ensuring the vitality of this heritage for present and future generations. The article urges responsible bodies to move beyond treating ICH as a hidden, archived resource and to actively fulfill their obligations under the UNESCO charter. By making the intangible tangible and widely accessible, this study emphasizes the importance of actively promoting ICH to foster a deeper understanding of national identity and cultural history, exemplified by the case of Finnish academic dress.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage; academic dress; doctoral sword; conferment ceremony; Finland; cultural heritage preservation; UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage

1. Introduction

In 2021, the Archives of the Royal Academy of Turku and the Imperial Alexander University were inducted into UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme [1]. Consisting of documents and other archived materials of the Royal Academy of Turku and the Imperial Alexander University (predecessors of the now University of Helsinki) from 1640 to 1924, they preserve the historical record of how Finland's first university developed through the eras of Swedish and Russian Empire rule, up to its independence in 1917. The archives have been used to conduct seminal historical examinations of the Finnish academy [2], and as an aspect of Intangible Cultural Heritage, Finland's master's and doctoral conferment ceremony is recognized as the country's oldest living ceremony, dating back to its first performance in 1643 [3].

Descriptions across sites affirm that the main focus of the three-day celebration is to confer symbols of academic status on graduated masters and doctors, consisting of a master's wreath and ring or a doctoral hat and sword. In this, the 'white tie'

form of Finnish academic dress differs significantly from the 'cap and gown' cultures seen in many academic systems around the world (see examples in **Figure 1**), and university websites offer direction as to where the appropriate dress may be hired or purchased. However, the history and significance of the conferred symbols are often reduced to statements that may be historically inaccurate or that offer unsupported assertions as to why these tangible elements are conferred. As a consequence, while the ceremony itself is well documented and continually experienced (i.e., it is actively preserved), the physical attributes of academic dress remain laden with unseen Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and are reduced to matters of costume. Nowhere is this more evident than in the item of the doctoral sword, which is widely claimed by Finnish universities as a symbol of fighting for '*what is good, right and true*' [4–6] and '*the sharp mind of the doctor and their defense of reason*' [7,8], but also internationally on social media as a symbol of having survived the doctoral degree process [9–14].

Figure 1. Comparative forms of academic dress: BSc(H) hood and mortarboard (Bournemouth University, UK); festal hood and Bishop Andrewes cap (Fellow of the Burgon Society, UK; doctoral tailcoat, hat and sword (University of Lapland, Finland) [Author collection].

These sentiments chime with doctoral graduates around the world to the extent that they are even purchasing swords of their own (and more often by women than men) [9–14], indicating that the ICH of the doctoral sword is both transferable and open to interpretation, and may be appreciated more widely. However, the central institutions and actors involved in Finland's tangible and intangible cultural history have failed to explore this potential, and significant gaps exist in the published cultural and historical record.

Northern European academic ceremonial traditions have been studied in a range of contexts, and are mainly directed to giving a background for graduation events and high occasions. Older institutions tend to offer more detailed accounts that are backed by the historical record, and while contemporary historical works exist on the academic dress traditions of Sweden [15,16] and Finland [17–19], most scholarly work focuses on the form of academic dress (for example, the style and colors of

gowns and hoods for particular degrees at a particular university) and defers to the work of seminal academic dress scholars such as Hargreaves-Mawdsley [20], and Smith and Sheard [21]. However, when referring to Finland, Smith and Sheard make a single-line reference to the doctoral sword as being part of the regalia of a Doctor of Philosophy with only a hand-drawn image, and seminal historical accounts of the University of Helsinki [2] give no mention at all. Consequently, the majority of discussions of Finnish academic dress have featured in the web media of Finnish universities [22] and in social media discussions.

Importantly, scholarly work on the sociological aspects of academic dress (including its consideration within ICH) is generally absent, despite the long recognition of universities as drivers of social progress [23,24].

2. Materials and methods

This study describes the efforts that were made to trace missing historical and cultural information about Finland's doctoral sword. It follows a process of historical research that uses publicly available sources of information to construct a historical and psycho-social picture of how the doctoral sword was developed and what it means as part of Finland's ICH.

The inquiry was sparked by two observations that arose when I was nearing the end of my own PhD in Finland in 2019. Firstly, as an ex-UK academic, I saw awarding a doctoral sword as a unique and intriguing practice that aroused a range of emotions, from feelings of accomplishment and pride, to the thought of what it meant in this modern era to be entitled to wear a sword. A quick online search revealed that this was a practice unique to Finland, but none of the university websites or available sources said how this had come about and what it really meant.

Secondly, all of the university websites stated emphatically that 'only the official civilian sword of Finland may be used'. 'Civil swords' had long existed across Europe (referring to swords worn by government functionaries, officials, and those in civil service as markers of their office and authority). But a 'civilian' or non-military sword reflected personal (hence not official) sidearms and included dueling swords, or even certain types of hangers or hunting swords that were commonly worn by civilians of a particular era, and were always a matter of choice. The aesthetic and social significance of swords is often as important as the weapon's martial capabilities. My own doctoral sword was a variant produced and sold in Finland as the 'rose hilt doctoral sword', which I chose because it reflected my perceptions of difference as an international graduate. Moreover, at my own conferral, I had seen the Master of Ceremonies carrying a 19th-century saber, so the 'rule' appeared to be inconsistently complied with. There were no sources of historical information to go by other than the assertions of university websites, and the seminal history of Klinge on the University of Helsinki [2] made no mention of any decisions being taken regarding the award, wearing or choice of the sword in its 928 pages. As the archives [1] were not openly available online and there were no experts in the field who could help (including the Helsinki University Museum), an independent inquiry was needed.

In terms of method, this broad approach aligns with historical reconstruction methods that have previously been employed in dress studies [25], especially when traditional written and visual evidence is absent. The 'historical reconstruction' approach in historical research aims to build an understanding of the past by methodically piecing together fragmented evidence from diverse sources [26]. When formal records are lacking, this approach becomes crucial, and historians act like detectives, examining museum artifacts, analyzing historical and contemporary literature (published texts, diaries, letters), and studying oral traditions (including social media). However, the approach is not new and expands on the earlier approach of 'historiography', which has been described as "taking little bits out of a great many books that no one has ever read and putting them together in one book that no one will ever read" [27].

Each piece of evidence, although incomplete on its own, offers a clue. In this way, by carefully comparing, contrasting, and contextualizing these disparate fragments, historians can infer patterns, reconstruct events, and build narratives about aspects of the past that were never formally documented. This process often involves critical interpretation, acknowledging biases within the sources, and proposing the most plausible explanations based on the available evidence, recognizing that the resulting history is often an interpretation rather than an absolute record. Short descriptions and depictions of the findings are presented in the next section.

3. Results and discussion

The historical reconstruction the doctoral sword drew from a range of sources. As archival sources were either closed or absent, data was sought that would provide a more robust idea of how the doctoral sword tradition developed, and importantly, how it has been preserved as part of Finland's ICH, going beyond the limited depictions on university websites and social media posts. The source material was evaluated as reliable if it came from formal published texts [2,15,28–30], established cultural sources [1,31–33], experts in the contemporary field [34–37], or from historical knowledge on specific artifacts [38–40]. However, as with any historical interpretation, such accounts are iterative and open to alternative readings, but still serve as a base on which others may build.

3.1. The 'official civilian sword' of Akseli Gallén-Kallela

The artist Akseli Gallén-Kallela (AGK) is frequently mentioned as having designed the official civilian sword that was adopted as the doctoral sword. However, the Army Museum had no written record of the commission, and any discussions are reported as having been verbal. The Akseli Gallén-Kallela museum in Helsinki had no knowledge of the work, but a series of drawings of swords and uniforms found in the digitized archives of the Finnish Heritage Agency revealed a small sketch (**Figure 2**), which remains the only physical record of AGK's civilian sword design process. Thus, there is no concrete record of what the sword intentionally represents, and any imaginings of 'fights for truth' that are popularly

cited by universities [5,6] are likely to be based on national, academic, and romantic emotional constructs.

Figure 2. (L) Gallén-Kallela on attachment to Army HQ in 1918. (R) A preliminary sketch of the official civilian sword designed by Akseli Gallén-Kallela in 1918 is featured in the top left of the image. Finnish Heritage Agency. #F957AC6B001E9C66B84106F44D37A42B HK19350405:76b [CC BY 4.0].

The Finnish doctoral sword is currently produced by the firm of WKC in Solingen, Germany. Discussions with the company's director revealed that no records exist as to when and how the civilian sword had been commissioned, as during the Second World War, the WKC works was the target of Allied bombardment and almost all of the company's buildings and machines were destroyed, and production was stopped. Along with it, all of the company records were lost, but in their basement archives, a glass plate ambrotype was found of what is believed to be the first manufactured Finnish civilian sword (**Figure 3**). The unrelated dagger in the top of the image helps to corroborate the date of the image as being between 1918 and 1924 at the latest, and among collectors, this sword is known as the Finnish M1922 model, presumably relating to the date it was incepted into service.

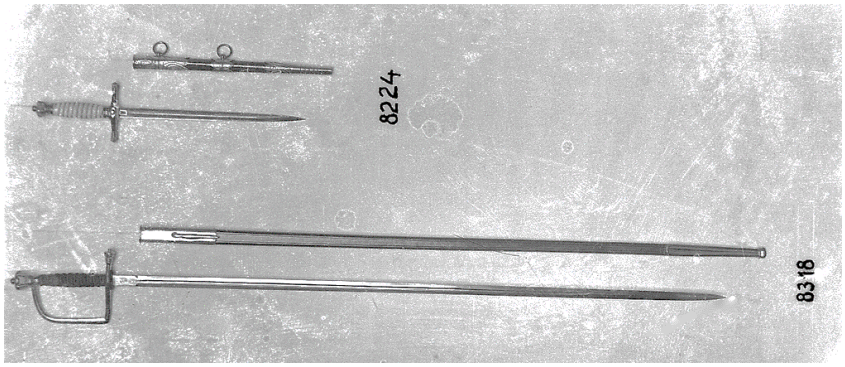

Figure 3. Glass plate ambrotype of the first manufactured Finnish 'official civilian sword' (#8318), designed by Akseli Gallén-Kallela [estimated date of the photograph: 1918–1924]. Reproduced courtesy of W.K.C. Stahl und Metallwarenfabrik Hans Kolping GmbH & Co. KG.

However, a photograph of the ceremony of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Helsinki in 1919 [32] shows two participants carrying M1855 Russian-era state official's swords complete with sword knots, and Mannerheim himself (who was Head of State and chief conferee at the event and who had supposedly commissioned the civilian sword) carrying an M1855 state official's sword. This moves the earliest possible point for an official decree of wearing the 'official civilian sword' to being the conferment ceremony of 31.05.1923 [41]. Furthermore, given that Finland had just gained independence from Russia, if a valid alternative sword had been available, it is likely this would have been chosen for such an occasion.

Earlier accounts [28] are disparaging of academic 'uniform' as an obligation imposed by the state (then Imperial Russia):

> *All who wished to be valued in society were to appear unconditionally in uniform, wearing that shapeless boat, called a two-piece hat, with that bloodless, silver-tasseled shank, which was called a sword. What calm, round-belly, bald chamberlains, professors, and crown princes look like in this belligerent attire can well be seen even today. In the days of Tsar Nicholas I, uniform was an overly important state matter and opened the doors to places where access was denied to a guest who did not have a uniform, such as Viapori and the Russian church on Easter night.*

The existence of an 'official' decision to adopt the AGK sword as the doctoral sword is therefore not clear and definitely dates post-1919 and possibly to 1923, which is the earliest next conferral ceremony year. But a museum exhibited the M1855 doctoral sword (**Figure 4**) from the Åbo Akademi (founded in 1918), which would have had its own first possible year of conferment in 1927 [42], and there are later examples (Author collection) and photos of such swords being carried at more recent conferral ceremonies. So, again, there is a question surrounding the *mandatory* use of the AGK sword, and although this 'regulation' is widely cited, no published reference source is available.

Figure 4. Åbo Akademi University Doctoral Sword (M1855 Russian civil servant model)—Turku Museum Centre TMK23851:3. Available at: https://www.finna.fi/Record/tmk.165288075455400. Image reproduced: CC BY 4.0.

A study of European sword designs reveals where AGK may have taken his inspiration from, and it is highly likely (if for no other reason than cost reduction and practicality) that a traditional practice of combining different existing elements (possibly from different suppliers) was followed. Hence, we can see a transition from conception to production, and the civilian sword was adapted to being a doctoral sword simply by adding a university emblem or escutcheon similar to earlier civil swords (see **Figure 5**). However, unlike his military sabers, AGK introduced no obvious Finnish symbolism, such as the lion symbols that may be seen on his other sword designs [38], which is surprising given his strong and prolific artistic career centered around Finnish National Romanticism and Symbolist Epic Imagery. The sword is often referred to as 'the officially certified civilian sword of the independent Republic of Finland' [43], and yet swords of this type are usually referred to as 'civil' swords, as they are a marker denoting state-sanctioned authority in civil service, and historically, no states have mandated swords for general civilian use. Inquiries among military and city museums found only one use of the sword as part of the dress uniform of the captain of the presidential yacht, although this is no longer current practice (confirmed by the Office of the President—private communication). Thus, the sword is likely to be 'civil' and not 'civilian', which possibly denotes a language translation error, and the remaining images from this AGK commission [38] are of military uniforms, sabers and knives, and military and civil medals. Thus, the 'official certification' of the sword can also be called into doubt, without any corroborative evidence.

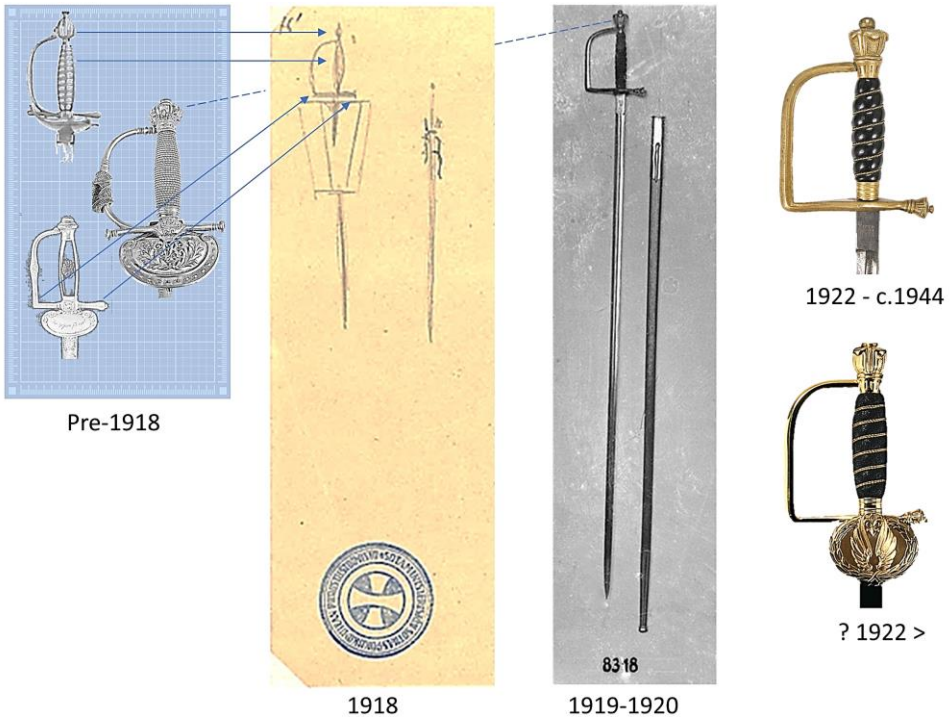

Figure 5. The development and transition of the Finnish official civilian sword designed by Akseli Gallén-Kallela to the doctoral sword as used today.

Imperial Russia also had academic and student sword traditions, which came to bear on Finland when it was ceded to Russia by Sweden in 1809. The Table of Ranks, initiated in 1722 by Tsar Peter I of Russia, required that all those who were "professors at the Academies" and "doctors of all faculties who are in service" (in other words, in state employment) were included in the K9 social class system [29] which conferred and graded 'nobility' and rank. Moscow University was founded in 1755, and on admission, '*all students received the right to wear a uniform and carry a sword, which were seen as the symbols of state service*', and which '*for a young man was an exciting prospect*' [17,40]. In the 1790s, Empress Catherine II affirmed the entry of university students within the Table of Ranks [30], and a sword featured as part of their required uniform.

3.2. The symbolic power of the academic sword

Given Finland's geopolitical history and reputation for social equality, we have to ask where this idea of having an academic sword originally came from, especially as it seems so different from other national traditions and has seemingly withstood the historical resentment of the enforced uniforms imposed by Russia.

Swords were worn in Sweden by nobles and aristocracy up until at least 1811, and similar practices were seen across Europe around this time [39]. However, the sword was seen as an indicator of gentlemanly status or nobility and also featured as a formal part of early Swedish academic dress [15]. Conferring a doctoral sword was part of Swedish conferment tradition, and at the University of Uppsala in 1739, Doctors of medicine were conferred by being named a doctor and receiving a pearl-colored hat, a gold ring, and a silver sword [34,35]. The wearing of swords had been mandatory as a mark of a 'free student' since the 1600s [36]. However, it came at a

price, and new students had to undergo humiliating admission rituals (an early form of 'hazing'), as well as performing menial tasks for older students before they were allowed to wear one [37]. Wearing the sword openly in public was eventually banned at the start of the 1700s due to the frequency of violent incidents (especially in taverns), and although students still had student swords until the early-to-mid 1800s, they were eventually replaced with a student cane, which was carried up until the 1920s [37]. The conferment of swords seems to have stopped in Sweden around the mid-1800s, but until this time, academic swords were still a required part of formal academic dress, with similar grievances expressed at having to obtain them to meet regulations or expectations [34], as were later expressed in the Russian era. In material terms, these Swedish traditions are made visible in the development of the 'rose hilt doctoral sword' that has been produced and sold in Finland possibly as early as 1913 (determined from discussions with the present company director), and although it bears strong similarities to the Finnish 'official civilian sword', its Swedish heritage is clearly visible, together with its M1855 Russian predecessor (**Figure 6**).

Figure 6. The reflection of Swedish sword traditions in the 'rose hilt doctoral sword' of Finland. **(A)** Swedish student swords from 1780-1800 & the early 1800s (author collection); **(B)** Swedish academic sword: early-mid 1800s (author collection)–the laurel indicates its academic connection, and the oak leaves are associated with the technical faculties (as seen in e.g., current Swedish academic collar embroidery); **(C)** The Finnish 'rose hilt doctoral sword' (author collection).

4. Discussion

When reorganized and synthesized, a historical picture emerges that makes an initial but significant contribution to Finland's ICH yet raises further questions in terms of the obligations to safeguard, develop and promote ICH, as laid out in the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [31]. Preserving recognized manifestations of ICH such as Finland's conferment ceremony is important, especially if the wider archival body of ICH is not studied or made openly available. The Helsinki University Museum Flame [33] features

physical and online exhibits, but although it displays a number of academic dress items (ceremonial robes and maces), its swords, hats, and costumes are mainly catalogued items and unresearched (personal communication).

Such items serve as living links to not only Finland's academic past but also its cultural and geopolitical history. According to the UNESCO record [1]:

> *The archived resources are an integral part of the national documented cultural heritage, and also the history of Finland's scientific, national and governmental development. Finnish science, scientific research, culture and education, the essence of being Finnish, including the idea of independence, were created and developed within the sphere of the university. The university's documented resources have a lasting value for Finnish science, research and national culture, identity, self-understanding, and Finnishness, as well as the independent State of Finland.*

Herein, the 'essence of being Finnish' and 'Finnishness' emphasize that in order to gain the full benefit of any aspect of living heritage, there has to be exposure and interaction that involve not only the communities that practice or interact with it (e.g., academics, archivists, historians, or curators), but also an idea that society is able to identify with and impact its own cultural past and present.

Unlike the university graduation ceremonies that happen every year in other countries, the conferment ceremony takes place only every 3–5 years, and only involves masters and doctoral students who have already graduated and have chosen to be conferred or promoted (most academic awards are simply sent by post).

This select group participates in a specific ceremony where their achievement is formally recognized, and they are acknowledged as having mastered skills and knowledge that they can take into their careers and employ or that mark them as qualified to conduct independent research either inside or outside the academy. In Finland, this specifically narrows down the audience who can participate in and appreciate the conferral ceremony, as only 11.2% of the population hold a Master's or equivalent degree, and only 1.2% hold a Doctoral or equivalent degree [44]. Consequently, for many of those who take part, it tends to come across as an elaborate graduation event, complete with dressing up, attending formal dinners and events, and being able to celebrate their achievement with friends, family, and colleagues. But most of society comes into contact with the academy, either directly through their own education, sending their children to university, or interacting in some way with the outputs, services, and people that universities contribute to their societies. Therefore, the preservation and promotion of Intangible Cultural Heritage is not simply a task of preserving archive material and performing traditions, but of seeking out ways to revitalize it in terms of making it meaningful for everybody.

Meeting the obligations of the UNESCO convention for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Stemming from this independent research, the links between Finland's academic dress and its socio-political experiences leading to national independence have been published in academic journals concerning clothing cultures [17] and academic dress [18], expertly evaluated through an examined thesis and lectures

[45,46], and popularized through a purposefully created website describing Finland's socio-political development and showcasing its academic dress history [47]. However, given that the archives of the University of Helsinki [1] have been accepted for inclusion in the Memory of the World program and the national statement includes a recognition of the material (including the conferment ceremony) as offering important markers of ICH and national history and identity, an obligation exists that host nations are active in observing the main tenets of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage [31]. Within the Convention, Article 1(c) imposes an obligation '*to raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, and of ensuring mutual appreciation thereof*'. Furthermore, 1(d) requires States Parties '*to provide for international cooperation and assistance*', which means engaging with others, and in Article 13(c), to '*foster scientific, technical and artistic studies, as well as research methodologies, with a view to effective safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*'. Article 13(d) urges support for institutions (administrative and financial) relating to 13(d)i: '*fostering the creation or strengthening of institutions for training in the management of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the transmission of such heritage through forums and spaces intended for the performance or expression thereof*'. 13(d)ii stipulates '*ensuring access to the Intangible Cultural Heritage while respecting customary practices governing access to specific aspects of such heritage*', and together, these support an investment in ensuring that academic conferment ceremonies and their participants are fully aware not only of the significance of the traditional background of the event, but also of the heritage and development of the existing aspects of academic dress that link the past to the present, and in so doing, to participants' future academic and professional careers [17]. This also links with the requirements of Article 14 (Education, awareness-raising, and capacity-building), which require State Parties to ensure recognition of, respect for, and the enhancement of ICH in society, in particular through:

(i) educational, awareness-raising, and information programs, aimed at the general public, in particular young people;
(ii) specific educational and training programs within the communities and groups concerned;
(iii) capacity-building activities for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, in particular management and scientific research;
(iv) non-formal means of transmitting knowledge.

This article has demonstrated that initiatives such as those outlined in tracing the ICH of Finland's academic dress need not be costly and can advance knowledge from repeated online assertions to supported cases where the past is tangibly linked to a country's history and culture. Even social media posts by relatively obscure organizations (the Burgon Society is the only scholarly society in the world dedicated to the study of academic dress) can attract international attention that reflects the transferable interests of ICH, and in this case, of the relation of the doctoral sword to education and academic cultures and the ideas of internationally shared academic identity [48]. Collaborations between media producers, museum curators, historians, and cultural and educational leaders can bring ICH to life

through documentaries, online exhibits, cultural talks, and general awareness actions such as informational posters, media posts, calls for writing, and the like. Also, expanding the topic of academic dress to include sociological issues of power, elitism, gender, and self/professional perception would not only help us to see how a 400-year-old tradition has relevance today, but also what our ideals and preserved heritage might tell us of tomorrow. In the words of the University of Helsinki [41]: "A university that is aware of its past does not live in the past—the past lives on in us."

5. Conclusion

Promoting ICH and relating it to lived lives and cultures makes the intangible tangible, and fosters social interest that makes sure that our forgotten past talks not only from our history books, but also through activities and practices we might not otherwise take notice of. International attention focuses mostly on Finland's doctoral sword as a 'cool' signifier of having achieved something special. But when the surrounding context of its adoption and retention are considered, then the assertions of ICH as serving '*research and national culture, identity, self-understanding, and Finnishness, as well as the independent State of Finland*' are well exemplified and deserve to be appreciated and celebrated by all.

The recognition of the Royal Academy of Turku and Imperial Alexander University archives by UNESCO underscores the profound historical and cultural significance embedded within Finnish academia, presenting a compelling invitation for stakeholders to actively explore and support the ongoing research that unveils these rich layers of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).

The unique traditions of the Finnish academic conferment ceremony and its associated dress, particularly the doctoral sword, offer a tangible yet underexplored aspect of ICH with demonstrable international resonance, creating an exciting opportunity for diverse stakeholders to collaborate with researchers in illuminating its deeper meaning and broader appeal.

The demonstrated success of this independent research in uncovering hidden histories and challenging existing narratives around academic dress highlights the vital contributions that researchers from all backgrounds can make to understanding Finland's socio-political development and cultural identity, strongly encouraging stakeholders to foster inclusive and supportive environments for these inquiries.

Embracing the study of ICH, including academic traditions, not only fulfills UNESCO's call for awareness and safeguarding, but also presents a dynamic pathway for universities, museums, media and cultural leaders to revitalize heritage, making it relevant and engaging for a wider public and fostering a stronger sense of shared cultural identity.

By actively engaging with and supporting researchers dedicated to exploring the multifaceted ICH within academic practices, stakeholders can unlock valuable insights into the historical, sociological, and even contemporary relevance of these traditions, ultimately contributing to a more profound understanding of our collective past and its enduring influence on the future of education and society.

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