

# Celtic Dilemma and Cultural Security in Ireland under Globalization

Tianhao Fang<sup>1</sup>, Yinyi Lu<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Philosophy, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

<sup>2</sup>Department of Music, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

**Abstract:** *This paper explores Ireland's cultural security challenges in the context of globalization, focusing on the "Celtic dilemma"—the tension between cultural preservation and global integration. Utilizing theoretical frameworks such as securitization theory, postcolonialism, and cultural hybridity, the study examines the impact of globalization on Ireland's national identity, language, and traditional arts. Through case studies, including the global transformation of Irish traditional music, the paper illustrates how globalization can both threaten and revitalize cultural heritage. The findings suggest that Ireland's approach to cultural security involves balancing the promotion of cultural uniqueness with active participation in global cultural exchanges. This strategy not only safeguards national identity but also enhances Ireland's soft power on the international stage.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Security, Globalization, Irish Identity, Traditional Music, Postcolonialism*

## 1. Introduction

Globalization has brought both unprecedented opportunities and profound challenges for small nations striving to preserve their cultural identity. Ireland's experience illustrates this tension, that faces a challenge of reconciling rapid global integration with the safeguarding of Celtic cultural heritage. On one hand, Ireland's global economic boom during the "Celtic Tiger" years and its extensive diaspora have projected Irish culture worldwide, boosting the nation's soft power and international profile. On the other hand, concerns have grown that the influx of global influences, from English-language media to international migration, could erode Ireland's indigenous language, traditional arts, and sense of identity. This paper uses frames this duality as an entry point to analyze Ireland's cultural security in an era of globalization. Cultural security refers to the safeguarding of a nation's heritage, language, and identity against threats of dilution or loss, and is increasingly viewed as a key element of national security in a globalized world.

In the sections that follow, we first outline a theoretical framework, drawing on concepts of cultural security, national identity, postcolonialism, and global cultural flows. We then examine Ireland's contemporary cultural security challenges—focusing on language preservation, cultural identity, and the impact of global media—through case studies of Irish traditional music's global transformation. The case of Irish traditional music illustrates how globalization can both spread and reshape a cultural tradition. Finally, we discuss the implications of these cases, considering how Ireland can navigate the Celtic dilemma by balancing global engagement with cultural preservation, before offering conclusions on safeguarding cultural security amid globalization. By engaging academic literature and policy documents, the paper situates Ireland's experience within broader debates on cultural identity and national security in the 21st century.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Security, Identity, and Global Flows

International institutions increasingly recognize cultural diversity as integral to peace and security. UNESCO's *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* emphasizes that cultural diversity is "as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature" [18]. For Ireland, historically shaped by colonial cultural erasure, this global mandate translates into policies like the revitalization of the Irish language and the preservation of UNESCO World Heritage sites aimed at countering homogenization. Barry Buzan's securitization theory contextualizes these efforts as state-driven responses to existential threats, elevating cultural erosion to a national security priority [6]. Cynthia Enloe's feminist analysis reveals how gendered roles in cultural preservation—such as women leading Gaelic language education—underscore

the intersection of identity labor and societal resilience<sup>[13]</sup>. Meanwhile, Amitav Acharya's subaltern security framework critiques Eurocentric models, positioning Ireland's UNESCO-aligned policies as a strategy to assert sovereignty from a non-Western perspective<sup>[1]</sup>. Collectively, these frameworks illustrate how cultural security, anchored in global norms, sustains Ireland's identity amid globalization's pressures.

Ireland's national identity, shaped by British colonial rule, reflect tensions between cultural preservation and globalizing forces. Edward Said's concept of cultural hegemony frames the suppression of Gaelic traditions through Anglicization as epistemic domination<sup>[17]</sup>. Post-independence initiatives like the 19th-century Gaelic Revival sought sovereignty by mythologizing Celtic roots; However, Terry Eagleton critiques this as a "fractured modernity," torn between romanticized pasts and colonial legacies<sup>[12]</sup>. Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity—though not explicitly focused on Ireland—contextualizes this ambivalence: efforts to "purify" identity inevitably intersect with globalizing forces, producing ambivalent practices like Celtic-rock fusion<sup>[5]</sup>. Alan Bairner discusses the role of the Gaelic Athletic Association (the GAA) in promoting traditional Irish sports and its significance in the construction and expression of Irish national identity<sup>[4]</sup>. Declan Kiberd's analysis of post-famine Ireland as a linguistic "nowhere" underscores cultural fragility<sup>[14]</sup>. While Manuel Castell does not directly address Ireland, his framework on local cultural resilience and identity politics provides critical tools to analyze Ireland's negotiated balance between tradition and modernity—a dynamic where heritage adapts to global pressures without dissolving into homogenization<sup>[7]</sup>. Today, Ireland navigates a duality: a mythologized Gaelic, Catholic "old Ireland" coexists with a secular, pluralist "new Ireland," reflecting the unresolved Celtic dilemma of reconciling heritage with global interconnectedness.

Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's scapes framework (ethnoscapes, mediascapes) illuminates Ireland's dual role in globalization: as a cultural exporter and importer<sup>[3]</sup>. Outward flows are epitomized by the Irish diaspora, estimated at 70–80 million globally<sup>[11]</sup>, which sustains traditions and projects soft power through phenomena like Riverdance and literary giants. Conversely, inward flows—from American media dominance to Silicon Docks' multinational workforce—risk cultural homogenization, a concern theorized by Roland Robertson as "globalization" tensions<sup>[16]</sup>. These global flows create a dynamic interplay. They can lead to cultural hybridization, where Irish culture blends with outside influences to create new forms, and cultural homogenization, where local distinctiveness might fade in favor of global norms. The theoretical challenge is understanding how Ireland can manage these flows to protect core elements of its identity—like the Gaelic language and traditional arts—without isolating itself from the benefits of global connectivity.

In summary, the theoretical perspective adopted here sees cultural security as an essential component of national security for Ireland, rooted in maintaining national identity (shaped by a postcolonial past) amid powerful globalizing currents. The next sections apply this framework to Ireland's contemporary situation.

### 3. Cultural Security Challenges in Ireland: The "Celtic Dilemma"

In today's Ireland, the Celtic dilemma manifests in several interrelated cultural security issues: the future of the Irish language, the preservation of traditional arts, and the maintenance of a distinct national identity and narrative in the face of globalization. Each issue ties into broader national security themes like language policy, identity consolidation, soft power projection, and information security.

The Irish language ("*Gaeilge*") is often considered the heart of Ireland's cultural security concerns. After independence, Irish was declared the national and first official language in an effort to revive it as a living tongue of the Irish people. However, reversing language shift has proven difficult. English remains dominant in virtually all spheres of public and private life. According to the Census, about 40% of people in the Republic of Ireland claim some ability to speak Irish<sup>[9]</sup>. Yet the frequency of use is low—as of 2016, only around 73,800 people (roughly 1.7% of the population) reported speaking Irish daily outside the education system<sup>[8]</sup>. This number of daily speakers actually declined slightly compared to 2011, underscoring the ongoing challenge of sustaining Irish as a community language. Most self-reported Irish speakers either use it infrequently or only within school settings. In Gaeltacht regions (designated Irish-speaking communities), the language is under pressure; even there, the share of people who speak Irish daily has been falling, and younger generations often shift to English.

These trends raise alarms about the cultural security of the Irish language. If a language dies out in daily use, a vast store of cultural knowledge, expression, and identity could be lost—an outcome viewed as a national security concern by many policymakers. The Irish government has responded with a series

of strategies, such as the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030, aiming to increase the number of daily speakers and strengthen Gaeltacht communities. Furthermore, “Culture 2025,” Ireland’s national cultural policy framework, explicitly prioritizes the Irish language<sup>[10]</sup>. “Culture 2025” pledges investment in Gaeltacht areas and support for the Irish language, alongside supporting traditional culture and securing global recognition for Ireland’s unique cultural traditions. These policies recognize that the Irish language is a core element of national heritage that needs proactive protection in a globalized environment. Notably, public sentiment in Ireland still strongly supports the language’s importance: a 2024 survey found that nearly 73% of people agreed Irish is “essential to the identity of the Irish people” and 70% felt Ireland would be culturally impoverished without it<sup>[2]</sup>. Such findings indicate that, even if English is dominant, the Irish language carries enormous symbolic weight for identity.

The challenge is converting that goodwill and symbolic value into actual usage. Globalization, which brings pervasive English-language media and the convenience of communicating in a global lingua franca, can inadvertently undermine efforts to promote Irish. Young Irish people live in an online world largely in English—from Netflix shows to TikTok videos—which makes it harder to incentivize learning and using Irish beyond the classroom. To counter this, initiatives have emerged to carve out space for Irish in media and cyberspace (e.g. the Irish-language TV station TG4, Irish-language radio, and online content creation in Irish). Ensuring a digital presence for Irish is increasingly seen as vital for its security, so that the language survives not just as a school subject but as a living medium in the 21st-century information society.

Beyond language, Ireland’s broader cultural identity faces a balancing act. Globalization has enabled Ireland to project a positive national brand worldwide—an exercise in soft power. The Irish government actively leverages this through cultural diplomacy: for example, each year on St. Patrick’s Day, Ireland orchestrates a global “greening” campaign, lighting landmarks worldwide in green and dispatching government ministers abroad to promote Irish culture. Irish music, dance, literature, and sport (such as Gaelic games and the international fame of *Riverdance* or musicians like U2) all contribute to a distinct national image that garners goodwill.

However, the openness that allows Irish culture to flourish abroad also allows foreign cultural influences at home. The identity narrative within Ireland has been shifting: traditional markers (Catholicism, nationalism, rural folk culture, etc.) have weakened, while a more cosmopolitan, multiethnic Ireland has emerged. This evolution can be seen as a natural progression, but some commentators worry about a loss of “Irish soul” or dilution of heritage in the face of global norms. The decline of institutional Catholicism, for instance, has dramatically changed Irish social values in just a few decades (with Ireland now embracing liberal social policies unthinkable mid-century). While this reflects global secular trends and can be seen as Ireland aligning with Western liberalism, it also marks a departure from aspects of traditional Irish identity (often colloquially tied to “faith and fatherland”). To maintain cultural security, Ireland must negotiate which elements of its identity to carry forward. The collective memory of historical experiences (like the Irish language revival, independence struggle, famine, and diaspora) remains a unifying cultural narrative. As long as these memories and symbols are kept alive and taught to new generations, Ireland retains a secure sense of self, even as it modernizes. Thus, education and cultural institutions play a crucial role in identity security—ensuring that globalization does not result in cultural amnesia.

In summary, Ireland’s cultural security challenges revolve around keeping its linguistic and cultural heritage vibrant while engaging with a globalized world. The Celtic dilemma is evident: How to be a modern, open nation without losing what makes Ireland culturally unique? The following case studies illustrate two facets of this dilemma—one through the lens of music, and another through a comparative policy perspective.

#### 4. Case Studies: Irish Traditional Music and Global Transformation

Irish traditional music is a core component of Ireland’s cultural heritage, encompassing folk songs, dance music (reels, jigs), and iconic instruments like the fiddle, tin whistle, and uilleann pipes. It provides an illuminating case of how globalization can affect a cultural practice. Over the last century, Irish music has journeyed from the kitchens and pubs of rural Ireland to concert halls and festivals across the globe. This journey has had complex effects on cultural security, involving both preservation and adaptation. The late 20th century saw Irish traditional music explode in international popularity, particularly in the 1990s. The catalyst was the 1994 Eurovision interval performance of “*Riverdance*,” a dazzling spectacle of Irish dance and music, which became a full-length show touring worldwide to massive audiences. *Riverdance*’s success exemplified how Irish music could captivate global audiences; it “became a global

phenomenon, way beyond the anticipations of its original intent” as its creator Bill Whelan noted. Following *Riverdance*, shows like “*Lord of the Dance*” and groups like “*The Chieftains*,” “*The Corrs*,” and later “*Celtic Woman*” further globalized Irish music<sup>[20]</sup>. By the turn of the millennium, one could find Irish pubs with live music in cities from Buenos Aires to Beijing, and major international festivals celebrating Celtic music.

This global popularity has had clear benefits for cultural security: it has increased the recognition and appreciation of Irish culture internationally, thus adding an extra incentive to preserve it at home. Irish traditional music became “cool” and commercially successful, attracting young musicians to take it up. The infusion of tourism revenue and diaspora support provided funds and audiences for sustaining the tradition. In 2017, UNESCO recognized the Irish tradition of Uilleann piping by inscribing it on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Such international acknowledgment further legitimizes efforts to safeguard Irish music heritage. Moreover, globalization spurred cross-cultural collaborations, with Irish musicians fusing their music with genres like American country, rock, and world music—arguably keeping the tradition dynamic and relevant.

Globalization has positioned Irish music at the crossroads of tradition and innovation. To appeal to broad audiences, some Irish music productions incorporated modern elements (for instance, *Riverdance* included flamenco and American tap dance segments, and some shows added English-language narration or flashy stage effects). Purists sometimes worry that these adaptations dilute the “authentic” rural Irish tradition—a concern that touches on cultural security: if the form of the music changes too much to suit foreign tastes, is the original heritage at risk? The crux is that multiple forms of Irish music now coexist—from the “pure drop” sessions in Gaeltacht villages to the arena spectacles. Globalization has diversified how the music is practiced. It required Irish artists to reflect on questions of identity: as Whelan mused, has Irish music globalized itself by dressing up for a multicultural audience, or has it been globalized by absorbing foreign influences, or has it in turn globalized others by spreading abroad<sup>[20]</sup>? Likely all of the above. The answer shapes strategies for cultural security. Irish institutions like Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (which runs music schools and competitions worldwide) emphasize teaching the traditional styles, thus fortifying the authentic base, while also embracing the global network of Irish music enthusiasts. The Irish government’s ‘Culture 2015’ policy highlights supporting traditional arts as well as achieving global recognition for Irish traditions, a dual goal that captures the balance between inward preservation and outward promotion.

Irish traditional music’s global saga also underscores the resilience of cultural practices. Despite fears in the mid-20th century that Irish folk music would die out (as it was then confined to pockets on the western seaboard), it experienced a remarkable revival—aided ironically by globalization, such as the folk music revival in the US which embraced Irish tunes in the 1960s, and the Irish diaspora folk scenes. After Ireland joined the EU and its economy opened up, one might have expected modern pop music to eclipse fiddles and pipes. Instead, the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger era created a new urban audience for traditional music, and government and private patronage gave it new platforms. Thus, globalization provided both competitive pressure and resources for Irish music. The competitive pressure was the influx of global culture (rock, pop, etc.) that could have displaced trad music among youth, the resource was that global interest provided funding, recognition, and new participants. Ireland’s approach has effectively been to harness globalization to safeguard its music.

This case suggests that cultural security is not about sealing off a tradition from outside influence, but about managing change in ways that keep the tradition’s core alive. Irish music today is arguably more secure than the Irish language, despite similar historical pressures, because music crossed language barriers and found a global community of practice that reinforces it. This yields a critical insight: cultural forms that are made accessible to global audiences can gain a new lease on life, but the risk is maintaining the integrity and meaning of those forms amidst commercialization. Ireland’s task is to support both the grassroots local music sessions and the high-profile global showcases, so that one feeds the other in a virtuous cycle.

## 5. Conclusion

Ireland’s experience with the Celtic dilemma—balancing globalization with cultural security—offers valuable insights into the broader challenge of preserving national identity in an interconnected world. Ireland has demonstrated that it is possible to achieve economic globalization (as one of the most open economies in Europe) while actively striving to protect and promote its cultural uniqueness. The concept of cultural security, once perhaps overlooked in national security debates, has gained salience as Ireland

and other nations realize that loss of language or heritage can have profound long-term consequences, including the erosion of social cohesion and national morale.

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