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From Routes to Roots: Preserving Cultural Heritage Amidst Climate-Induced Displacement

Gijse, Ashanti

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*From Routes to Roots:
Preserving Cultural Heritage Amidst Climate-Induced Displacement*

Ashanti Gijse, s3064891

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Thesis supervisor: Dr. Jelena Belic

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INTRODUCTION

Climate change is leading to significant environmental changes, including rising sea-levels, desertification, and extreme weather events, which are forcing populations to migrate (Calvin et al., 2023, pp. 5-14). Those affected are typically referred to as climate migrants or climate refugees—individuals or communities displaced due to the environmental impacts of climate change. Climate migration is a social issue that grows with the intensifying effects of climate change, putting many at risk of displacement (p. 15). Addressing the cultural impacts of climate migration is crucial to ensure the maintenance of identity, dignity, and well-being of displaced communities, particularly those whose cultural practices are deeply tied to their geographical homelands (Kim, 2011; Schorlemer & Maus, 2015; Wewerinke-Singh, 2018). This means that their identity, traditions, and ways of life are specific to the land they inhabit. This connection manifests in unique ways: communities often develop ecological knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and traditional practices that are specific to local environmental conditions. For example, the Pacific Islander communities have traditional navigation and fishing methods adapted to their oceanic environment.

The current discourse (Atapattu, 2018; Atapattu, 2020; Foster & McAdam, 2022; Kupferberg, 2021, Lentner & Cenin, 2024; Wewerinke-Singh, 2018) focuses largely on the material losses and economic challenges faced by climate migrants, often overlooking some deeper issues, such as the potential loss of cultural heritage. As people are forced to leave their homes, they risk losing the cultural practices, traditions, and identities that are tied to specific geographic locations. For instance, Shishmaref, an indigenous Alaskan village, might need to be relocated as permafrost melts and coastlines erode, threatening their cultural heritage rooted in subsistence practices like fishing and seal hunting, all intimately connected to the unique Arctic landscape (BBC News, 2021). While discussions tend to focus on the survival and socio-economic needs of climate migrants, this emphasis often neglects the critical issue of cultural heritage loss—an integral component of both individual and collective identity. Although survival and economic security are essential, the significance of cultural heritage cannot be underestimated. Its loss can lead to profound social, psychological, and intergenerational harm, as displaced communities face the erasure of their cultural heritage. I aim to research the normative dimensions of this problem, specifically whether there is an obligation to protect the cultural heritage of climate migrants and

what form this obligation may take. Therefore, the questions I intend to address are: Are there ethical obligations toward preserving the cultural heritage of climate migrants? If yes, how should these obligations inform responses to climate-induced displacement?

In response to these questions, I argue that there is an ethical obligation to preserve cultural heritage for climate migrants, and this obligation should shape responses to climate displacement by prioritising the agency of vulnerable communities. This thesis will apply a normative analysis combined with international law, in which I will evaluate relevant literature on the ethical significance of cultural preservation, climate and cultural heritage litigation, and the existing policy frameworks that address climate-induced displacement. This approach will involve a critical examination of various ethical theories, including human rights perspectives and cultural heritage ethics, to establish a framework for understanding the moral obligations toward safeguarding cultural heritage for climate migrants. Through this approach, I will develop my argument that there is an ethical obligation to preserve the cultural heritage of climate migrants. With this thesis, I aim to contribute to the literature by exploring how cultural heritage and cultural rights can be protected in cases of climate-induced displacement.

This thesis is structured as follows: Chapter 1 provides a literature review, analysing key debates surrounding the protection of climate migrants and cultural heritage. In Chapter 2, the focus shifts to constructing the central argument, beginning with an exploration of the significance of cultural heritage and progressing to the ethical obligations to safeguard it within the context of climate-induced displacement. Finally, Chapter 3 addresses potential objections to the arguments presented in Chapter 2, offering critical responses and further refining the discussion.

CHAPTER 1: Literature Review

This literature review explores key debates on climate-induced migration and cultural heritage preservation. It begins by defining climate migrants and examining proposals to expand legal protections for them, followed by an analysis of intangible cultural heritage and critiques of existing protective frameworks.

Defining climate migrants

The concept of climate migrants emerged subsequent to the increasing amounts of people who have been displaced because of the adverse consequences of climate change (Atapattu, 2020). However, unlike political refugees, climate migrants do not enjoy formal recognition under international law and are offered no legal protection under any binding international treaty (Atapattu, 2018, p 36). The 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugees as individuals who flee persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (United Nations, 1951). As climate-induced displacement is not categorised as persecution, individuals fleeing environmental disasters or gradual changes like sea-level rise do not fit this definition.

Climate migrants can be understood as communities or individuals forced to leave their homes due to environmental disruptions exacerbated or caused by climate change. While the term remains somewhat ambiguous, scholars and organisations alike define climate migrants as people who move primarily for environmental reasons linked to climate change. This migration is often involuntary, driven by gradually uninhabitable conditions. As a result, the global population of climate migrants is growing, with small island nations and coastal regions being among the most vulnerable, such as Kiribati (Atapattu, 2020). In this paper, I will focus on vulnerable communities rather than individuals, as cultural heritage is deeply tied to collective identities and memory (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021, p. 130). Displacement threatens not only the survival of individuals but also the cohesion and continuity of communities, making the preservation of cultural heritage a critical issue for maintaining collective identity and well-being.

Some disagreement remains about which term to use when referring to people that are displaced by the effects of climate change, mostly because of the multi-causal nature of climate-

induced migration (Rosignoli, 2022, p.1). In this thesis, I will use the term climate migrants to describe those compelled to relocate due to environmental changes caused by climate change. While 'climate refugees' is a term commonly used in advocacy contexts to convey urgency, it lacks legal recognition under the 1951 Refugee Convention, which only grants refugee status to those fleeing persecution. By using the term climate migrants, I aim to reflect the current legal understanding while still acknowledging the often-involuntary nature of this migration.

Limits of legal protections

While climate migrants have yet to receive refugee status and the legal protections that accompany it, there is a large body of literature that utilises a human rights framework in order to argue that climate migrants should be included within frameworks that protect displaced people. Authors following this approach have suggested that existing human rights frameworks could theoretically offer a layer of protection for those displaced by climate change (Anderson et al., 2019; Atapattu, 2020; Kupferberg, 2021; Wewerinke-Singh, 2018). Documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) enshrine the rights to life, liberty, security, and an adequate standard of living—all of which are relevant to people forced to migrate due to environmental factors. In particular, Article 27 of the ICCPR asserts the right of minorities to enjoy their own culture, which some argue could extend to communities facing displacement due to climate change (UNGA, 1966).

Atapattu (2020, p. 102) argues that if, as the UN states, all rights are universal, interrelated and indivisible, then all peoples, no matter who they are and where they come from should be entitled to enjoy basic rights recognised under international human rights law. The author especially highlights the first sentence of the UDHR referring to human dignity and thereby offers dignity as a framework to protect the rights of displaced persons, including those displaced due to climate change (p. 102). Similarly, Kupferberg (2021, p. 1798) has problematised the lack of mention of climate change migrants in binding international treaties and so argues for the necessity to establish a conceptual framework by which to define and protect their most basic rights. Maintaining the view that relocation should be a last resort, however inevitable an outcome it may be, the author stresses the importance of adhering to human rights principles and “guaranteeing a minimally good life” (p. 1810).

Scholars like Wewerinke-Singh (2018) have examined the potential of human rights frameworks to protect not only the safety but also the cultural rights of climate migrants. She first identifies the gap that the potential loss of cultural heritage as a result of climate change will have significant implications for the enjoyment of human rights in general, recognising that the UN Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) and other bodies acknowledged climate change as a “far-reaching threat” to human rights, which includes the right to heritage (p. 159). Cultural rights, as recognised in international law, allow individuals and communities to practise their culture freely, and these rights are essential for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage. From this perspective, climate migrants could invoke their cultural rights to seek protection of their identity and way of life, even after displacement (Wewerinke-Singh, 2018). However, this argument overestimates the practical enforceability of cultural rights within the broader human rights hierarchy. Although international law acknowledges cultural rights as essential, they are frequently subordinated to other rights deemed more urgent, such as the right to life or basic subsistence, as seen in cases like *Daniel Billy et al. v. Australia* (Lentner & Cenin, 2024). The reliance on human rights frameworks assumes a level of parity between cultural rights and other human rights that rarely exists in practice.

While the potential of these frameworks is emphasised, cases like *Teitiota v. New Zealand* and *Daniel et al. v. Australia* reveal the practical challenges of enforcing these rights within existing legal standards. In the *Teitiota v. New Zealand* case, a Kiribati citizen appealed the denial of refugee status in the New Zealand High Court (Foster & McAdam, 2022, p. 975). Teitiota argued that his displacement was a direct effect of climate change, and that the loss of his home due to rising sea-levels threatened his and his community’s survival. The High Court denied his claim because they found no grounds for granting his refugee status as they claimed that the dangers posed by climate change did not meet the threshold of the 1951 Refugee Convention. When his claim was rejected, he lodged a complaint with the UNHRC. While there was no violation found on the facts, the Committee’s “recognition that ‘the effects of climate change in receiving states may expose individuals to a violation of their rights under articles 6 or 7 of the Covenant, thereby triggering the non-refoulement obligations of sending states’ is significant for the signal it sends to lawyers, decision-makers and policymakers considering how to respond to displacement in the context of climate change” (Foster & McAdam, 2022, p. 976).

Foster and McAdam (2022, p. 976) argue that this decision, aside from being inherently unjust, highlights an ill-considered focus on the “imminence” of harm, reflecting a concerning occurrence in human rights cases to recognise violations only where rights are immediately threatened. This suggests that neither the 1951 Refugee Convention nor current human rights frameworks allow for the recognition of long-term, slow-onset threats, which are inherent in the consequences of climate change (Calvin et al., 2023, p. 6). The authors suggest an appropriate frame of analysis to be one of foreseeable harm, and not the imminence of harm (Foster & McAdam, 2022, p. 982). The focus on imminence limits the capacity to address any gradual, yet foreseeable, harm posed by climate change and its consequences. A shift in perspective can provide a more robust legal foundation for addressing the needs and rights of climate migrants, especially in preserving their cultural heritage, among other integral parts of their lives (Foster & McAdam, 2022; Wewerinke-Singh, 2018). This case demonstrates the limitations of current legal frameworks in addressing the multifaceted impacts of climate displacement.

The case of *Daniel Billy et al v. Australia* further exemplifies the challenges faced by climate migrants. This case involved a group of Torres Strait Islanders who sought asylum in Australia, arguing that their homes were becoming uninhabitable due to rising sea-levels and extreme weather events attributed to climate change. They claimed that their human rights had been violated because of Australia’s failure to take mitigation and adaptation measures to combat the effects of climate change (Lentner & Cenin, 2024, p. 136). The plaintiffs highlighted the imminent threats posed to their cultural identity, way of life, and physical safety as their ancestral lands began to erode and face increased flooding, expressing their concern for the transition of their unique culture to future generations in the case of forced relocation (p. 137). Australia maintained a strict interpretation of the ICCPR, stating that the communicated violations of rights are not included within it.

Furthermore, Australia argued that treaties such as the UN Convention on Climate Change and the Paris Agreement were irrelevant, denying that climate change is a current threat to the enjoyment of human rights of the Torres Strait Islanders and asserting that the threats are future risks rather than present impacts (p. 138). Although the Committee acknowledged violations of the Islanders' rights to family life and culture, they deemed the threats from climate change too speculative to constitute a violation of the right to life. Even though the violation of the right to

enjoy one's culture was acknowledged, the decision ultimately made was based on whether the right to life was violated. This begs the question of whether some rights are considered more important than other rights and if so, whether the prioritisation of some rights over others is ethical. Additionally, this is an example of the point that Wewerinke-Singh (2018) was making, but in this case the violation of the right to culture was not rectified in any way. This highlights challenges in holding states accountable for climate inaction and the inadequacy of existing legal definitions around climate refugees and what is considered to be a harm worth responding to, echoing Foster and McAdam's (2022) criticism of the result of the *Teitiota v. New Zealand* case. Are some human rights violations more important than others? This discussion establishes the significance of climate migration as a human rights issue, providing a foundation to explore the critical role of cultural heritage within the broader climate migration discourse.

(Intangible) cultural heritage

Now that frameworks for the protection of climate migrants have been addressed, the discussion shifts to frameworks for the protection of cultural heritage, which presents a distinct set of challenges. First, it is important to define cultural heritage. Cultural heritage encompasses the traditions, practices, languages, and beliefs that are passed down through generations and are vital to shaping the identity of a community (UNESCO, 2009, p. 9). According to UNESCO (2009, p. 89), cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements, ranging from historical buildings and monuments to rituals, knowledge systems, and folklore. Importantly, intangible cultural heritage, i.e. the traditions, oral histories, and skills that communities practise, plays a crucial role in defining who people are and their connection to their environment (Tschakert et al., 2019, p. 58). The identification as well as definition of intangible cultural heritage therefore rests with the communities, groups, and individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage (UNESCO, 2009, p. 28; Lenzerini, 2011, p. 102).

This thesis will focus particularly on intangible aspects of cultural heritage, which are subject to gradual, slow-onset losses that are often difficult to recognise or prevent until they have significantly impacted a community. According to Article 2 of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, intangible cultural heritage includes “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and

cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5). These elements are integral to shaping cultural identity, as they are “transmitted from generation to generation” and are “constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history,” thus providing them with a sense of continuity and belonging (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5).

Several international legal frameworks have been established under UNESCO to safeguard cultural heritage, including the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. These frameworks aim to identify, protect, and promote heritage through mechanisms such as the World Heritage List and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Lists. The 1972 Convention focuses on tangible heritage, such as monuments, landscapes, and natural sites, while the 2003 Convention emphasises practices, knowledge, and traditions vital to community identity.

Schorlemer and Maus (2015) criticise these frameworks for being undervalued and playing a minor role in climate change adaptation. In 2005, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee first acknowledged climate change's impact on heritage sites, stating that it would affect many properties. Subsequent reports and a 2007 Policy Document identified legal obligations and challenges but have seen little follow-up, indicating insufficient urgency in addressing these threats (p. 15). Additionally, Schorlemer and Maus (2015) emphasise the potential of the Fund for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage but argue that it remains underutilised. UNESCO faces institutional challenges that hinder effective climate action, such as the need for better collaboration among its sectors and with relevant stakeholders (p. 15). Instead of leading in this area, UNESCO has often deferred to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which primarily focuses on environmental issues without addressing cultural heritage.

The literature explores distinct frameworks aimed at addressing climate migration and protecting cultural heritage, yet it also reveals significant gaps when these two domains intersect. While legal mechanisms potentially address these areas separately, they often fail to account for the unique vulnerabilities faced by displaced communities whose cultural heritage is deeply tied to their environments, leaving these aspects inadequately protected. The literature shows the limits

of legal protections and therefore highlights whether there are moral obligations to protect cultural heritage. Additionally, if these moral obligations exist, how can they be enforced? With this research, I aim to contribute to the ongoing debates by drawing on existing analyses of human rights, cultural heritage protections, and other ethical frameworks. By grounding this obligation in theories of ethics and human rights, I seek to shift the discourse around climate migration to include cultural dimensions, encouraging a more holistic approach to displacement.

CHAPTER 2: Moral Case for Cultural Preservation

Importance of culture

To advocate for the protection and preservation of intangible cultural heritage in the context of climate displacement, it is essential to first recognise the profound significance of culture. Cultural heritage represents the practices, beliefs, and traditions that communities cherish and sustain, offering insights into their values and identity. Intangible cultural heritage, defined by UNESCO (2003, p. 5), is shaped and valued by the communities themselves, reflecting meanings tied to their lived experiences and environments. Unlike tangible heritage—such as monuments or natural landmarks—which is physically tied to specific geographic locations and has well-established protections, intangible cultural heritage remains harder to safeguard due to its qualitative, dynamic nature (Tschakert et al., 2019, p. 58). For instance, many forms of intangible cultural heritage, including oral traditions or cultural practices, are deeply connected to the landscapes where they originated, drawing identity and purpose from these spaces. This connection between intangible cultural heritage and place underscores the vulnerability of such practices in the face of climate change and displacement. Climate-induced displacement disrupts the sense of place and identity, threatening the transmission of cultural practices across generations (Adger et al., 2011, p. 8). Therefore, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires recognition of its ties to the environment and deliberate efforts to protect these cultural expressions as communities face environmental upheavals (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021, p. 307).

The place serves as the physical setting where cultural practices and traditions are formed, practised, and transmitted over generations. For many communities, specific landscapes—like rivers, mountains, or ancestral lands—are not merely locations but hold deep symbolic, spiritual, and practical value. They influence ways of life, customs, and even languages, as people develop practices that harmonise with their environment (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5). Cultural heritage reflects the unique relationships communities have with their specific places. For instance, subsistence practices are often tailored to the local environment, such as fishing in coastal communities or farming in fertile valleys. Culture embodies the accumulated knowledge, beliefs, and values that emerge from the community's interactions with their surroundings, making place a vital component in the preservation and meaning of these cultural practices (Adger et al., 2011, pp. 3-6). People's sense of who they are often includes where they come from and the traditions they

uphold (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021; Lenzerini, 2011, p. 103). When place and culture align, they foster a strong sense of belonging and continuity, giving individuals and communities a stable foundation of identity.

While personal and collective identities are often closely linked to cultural heritage, it is important to acknowledge that identity can also be shaped by other elements, such as individual experiences, shared values, and broader human connections that transcend specific cultural traditions or places. This view suggests that cultural heritage, though deeply significant, does not entirely define identity. Nevertheless, the loss of cultural heritage through displacement removes a fundamental layer of identity—one that connects individuals and communities to their history and fosters a sense of continuity. For those experiencing displacement, this connection becomes even more pronounced, as the loss of a home can disrupt both cultural continuity and personal identity, amplifying the challenges of maintaining a sense of belonging (Cantrill & Budesky, 2022, p. 430; McGuire, 2020, p. 180).

A concept that is helpful to illustrate the interconnectedness of these ideas is Albrecht's (2006) concept of solastalgia. While solastalgia refers to sadness connected to the environmental changes and their adverse impact on home, this concept can still meaningfully apply to climate-induced migration (p. 35). In many cases, communities facing climate-induced displacement experience solastalgia before they actually migrate. They witness the transformation or degradation of their environment that signals an inevitable loss of their home and the possibility of displacement (Albrecht, 2006, p. 35; Cantrill & Budesky, 2022, p. 432). This anticipatory grief can be distressing, as people realise that the place integral to their cultural identity may soon be uninhabitable. In this sense, solastalgia reflects the emotional suffering experienced not only from changes in the environment but also from the looming reality of forced migration. When climate migrants are ultimately displaced, the "solastalgic" distress tied to their homeland can persist. Even if they are physically removed, the emotional and psychological connection to their homeland endures, as does the sense of loss over a changing or disappearing landscape (Cantrill & Budesky, 2022, pp. 430-433). This can create a kind of extended solastalgia, where the sense of loss continues as migrants grapple with separation from a place that is undergoing irreversible changes. Their cultural identity remains linked to the homeland and its landscape, intensifying the experience of dislocation and grief (Albrecht, 2006, p. 36). By understanding and valuing the role

of culture, we can ensure that the response to climate displacement goes beyond mere physical relocation and addresses the deeper, human dimensions of resilience and recovery.

Intergenerational responsibility

Another important way to conceptualise the value of cultural heritage is through the lens of intergenerational responsibility, particularly the impact on future generations. For those who embody and carry culture as stewards of traditions, practices, and collective identities, the obligation to safeguard this heritage extends beyond the present, ensuring the continuity of well-being and identity for future generations (Lenzerini, 2011, p. 102). Climate-induced displacement, for example, not only threatens the immediate livelihood of affected communities but also jeopardises the continuity of their cultural legacy, including language—a vital proxy for culture and a key medium for transferring knowledge (UNESCO, 2003, p. 5). This urgency highlights a critical ethical obligation: to safeguard cultural heritage as both a resource for contemporary communities and a foundation for future generations, ensuring that displaced peoples can preserve and transmit their culture despite the challenges they face. The centrality of language is especially critical, as linguistic expressions like poetry are particularly vulnerable in displacement and play an essential role in the integration and resilience of displaced communities (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021, p. 308). By prioritising the preservation of cultural heritage, we are not only respecting the past but also investing in the future of diverse communities, fostering resilience and continuity in the face of climate change and other disruptive forces. As conveyed earlier, if cultural heritage is an essential part of one's identity, there is indeed the obligation to preserve it and ensure its transmission in the way the bearers of culture intended.

Many communities at risk of displacement due to the effects of climate change express profound concerns about their ability to transmit their cultural heritage to future generations (Tschakert, 2019). These communities bear witness to the environmental changes that disrupt their cultural practices, highlighting the tangible ways in which rising seas and loss of land threaten their traditions. For instance, Tschakert describes a woman voicing her distress about being unable to bury the dead in traditional ways and expressing fears for her great-grandchildren, uncertain if their way of life can be preserved in the case of relocation (p. 66). Such concerns illustrate that the transmission of culture is not merely a symbolic act but a crucial aspect of a community's identity

and well-being. Language plays a key role here, assisting in the transmission of knowledge through generations, which is vital for marginalised groups rebuilding their communities in host countries (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021, pp. 308-9). Practices like ceremonies and rituals are essential for the continuity of identity; however, displacement forces these traditions to adapt under duress, often in ways removed from the preferences of cultural bearers. Although cultures are dynamic and capable of adaptation, changes imposed by external forces like climate change constitute an injustice. These changes occur without the agency of affected communities, exacerbating the harm caused by displacement and threatening diverse cultural networks—such as the 100+ indigenous languages in Vanuatu—that sustain knowledge systems essential to adaptation and resilience (p. 309).

This involuntary alteration underscores the intimate connection between cultural heritage and cultural memory. Cultural memory is more than a record of a community's past; it is the living story of who they are, expressed and sustained through storytelling, rituals, ceremonies, and other forms of cultural transmission. For example, burial rituals mentioned in Tschakert's (2019, p. 66) research illustrate how environmental changes disrupt the physical spaces where cultural memory resides, such as sacred sites and ancestral graves. When sea-levels rise and erode these spaces, the stories and practices tied to them are also threatened, weakening the community's ability to maintain a sense of collective continuity and identity. Displacement forces communities to adapt their rituals and narratives in ways that may feel inauthentic or incomplete, exacerbating the loss of connection to their past. The process of cultural transmission is not merely about preserving practices but about empowering communities to shape their cultural legacy on their own terms (Lenzerini, 2011, pp. 109-111). Climate-induced displacement undermines this agency, forcing cultural change that reflects the pressures of survival rather than the community's own intentions or values.

This transformation should be understood as a systemic injustice, rooted in the unequal vulnerabilities of nations and communities in the face of climate change. Wealthier countries like the Netherlands have the resources and infrastructure to adapt to rising sea-levels while preserving their cultural landscapes (Hughes, 2009, pp. 99-101). With advanced flood protection systems and a robust economy to fund large-scale adaptation measures, the Netherlands is well-equipped to deal with the impacts of climate change and maintain its heritage (Hughes, 2009, p. 101; Utrecht

University, 2022). In contrast, low-income nations and Indigenous communities—who often contribute the least to global emissions—are facing the greatest risks of displacement. These vulnerable groups struggle to secure the same level of protection due to limited financial and technological resources. Many Small Island Developing States (SIDS), for instance, are unable to implement comparable mitigation strategies, leaving them highly susceptible to rising sea-levels, loss of land, and the destruction of their cultural heritage (World Bank, 2021). As a result, despite their minimal contribution to climate change, these nations bear the brunt of its consequences, highlighting the disparity in both the causes and responses to climate-induced displacement. This disparity emphasises the relevance of distributive justice principles, such as the Polluter Pays Principle (PPP), which advocates for holding historically high-emission nations accountable for the harm caused to vulnerable populations (Tan, 2023, pp. 2-3).

Furthermore, cultural memory is not just about the content of traditions but also the process through which they are shared and embodied. Storytelling, rituals, and ceremonies are performative acts that create bonds within a community and link generations together. The forced interruption or alteration of these acts—such as being unable to bury the dead in traditional ways, or losing access to ancestral lands—fundamentally disrupts the community’s ability to sustain their narrative (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021, p. 306; Hickey & Killeen, 2022, p. 477). This disruption is particularly devastating in the context of climate change because it represents a double loss: not only is the land physically lost, but the cultural identity tied to that land is fractured as well. The erasure or forced alteration of cultural heritage due to climate change is not just a loss for the communities directly affected but for humanity as a whole, as it risks the impoverishment of cultural diversity (Lenzerini, 2011, p. 120). Preserving the ability of these communities to pass down their cultural practices—on their own terms—is essential for achieving climate justice. This requires addressing systemic inequalities, ensuring that vulnerable populations have access to the resources needed for adaptation, and creating global frameworks that value cultural heritage as much as material well-being. Only then can we rectify the profound injustices imposed by climate change and its impact on the cultural continuity of displaced peoples.

(De)Humanisation of climate migrants

Up to this point, I have explored the importance of culture through the lenses of solastalgia, intergenerational responsibility, and cultural memory. This analysis has underscored a recurring theme: the loss of control in preserving and reproducing culture is a significant consequence of climate displacement. The loss of control over migrants' cultural heritage reflects a broader loss of agency in their lives. Vulnerable communities are forced to uproot their entire existence to survive, disrupting their life plans, family spaces, and cultural contexts (McGuire, 2020, p. 184). The loss of agency should be seen as dehumanising because it undermines their sense of self-worth, disrupts their connection to their cultural and social foundations, and erodes their capacity to adapt on their own terms. It effectively marginalises their voices and disregards their humanity by treating them as objects of circumstances rather than as empowered actors. This dehumanisation is exacerbated when their survival is viewed in isolation, with their migration fate placed in the hands of others. By overlooking the rich cultural and traditional inner lives of these communities, we reduce them to mere lives to be saved—left to fend for themselves afterwards. This is assuming, of course, that we even choose to intervene in their plight. This approach fails to acknowledge the full humanity of displaced communities, treating them as passive recipients of aid rather than as active agents with the right to determine their futures (Hickey & Killean, 2022, p. 469). It perpetuates a narrative of dependency and survival, ignoring the deeper layers of loss—identity, belonging, and self-determination (p. 477). When cultural heritage and traditions are disregarded in discussions of displacement, we risk erasing the very aspects that give these communities their resilience and sense of purpose.

Furthermore, this reductionist view overlooks the long-term consequences of displacement. Cultural disconnection often leads to intergenerational fractures, as younger generations grow up in host environments that may not value or support their ancestral practices (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021, p. 307). This loss is not just personal but communal, as the shared stories, rituals, and languages that bind a group together are at risk of disappearing. The preservation of these cultural elements is not merely a matter of survival but of dignity and continuity (Hickey & Killean, 2022).

To address this, a shift in perspective is needed—one that centres on the cultural agency of displaced communities and recognises their traditions, languages, and practices as integral to their

well-being. Supporting displaced peoples must go beyond ensuring their physical survival; it must include creating conditions where their cultural heritage can thrive. This means recognising that migrants exercise “social and political agency and that this agency can be transformative of them and others” (McGuire, 2020, p. 180). However, one might wonder whether the cultural practices of host and guest communities can coexist. While coexistence may require negotiation and adaptation on both sides, it is not inherently a zero-sum scenario. In fact, fostering an environment of mutual respect and dialogue can allow both communities to enrich each other, creating new forms of shared cultural expression (Lenzerini, 2011, p. 103). By honouring the humanity of displaced communities and embracing cultural diversity, we uphold the broader ethical imperative to value and preserve the world's wealth of human knowledge and expression. Displacement may be inevitable for some, but cultural erasure does not have to be. Empowering communities to retain their heritage, even in new contexts, fosters resilience and continuity, ensuring that their stories, traditions, and languages endure for future generations.

Imminent vs. foreseeable harm

Understanding the importance of cultural heritage highlights the profound stakes involved in addressing climate-induced displacement, as both imminent and foreseeable harms threaten not only physical survival but also the preservation of culture and identity. This dual lens offers a critical framework for examining the ethical responsibilities required to mitigate these impacts and safeguard both lives and cultural legacies (Foster & McAdam, 2022). Imminent harm refers to immediate and visible consequences, such as the destruction caused by hurricanes or wildfires, which demand urgent responses due to their dramatic effects on lives, homes, and the environment. In contrast, foreseeable harm unfolds gradually over time, manifesting through slow-onset processes like rising sea-levels and ecosystem degradation (Calvin et al., 2023, p. 6). Although less immediate, these harms are no less significant, as they result in cumulative, often irreversible consequences, including the displacement of entire communities and the loss of cultural heritage.

Anderson et al. (2019) argue that relying solely on imminence in determining international protection risks marginalising those facing slower-developing threats. Instead, they propose that within climate-related displacement cases, it would be instructive to consider assessments from the IPCC itself of the likelihood of certain climate change risks (which could affect displacement)

(p. 133). Evaluations within the IPCC report like “due to unavoidable sea-level rise, risks for coastal ecosystems, people and infrastructure will continue to increase beyond 2100 (*high confidence*)” could help the assessment of the intensity, severity, and nature of future harm (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 135; Calvin et al., 2023, p. 15). Recognising the temporal distinction between these types of harm is critical because it influences the allocation of attention and resources (Foster & McAdam, 2022). Immediate harms tend to take precedence because of their urgency and visibility, often overshadowing foreseeable harms, even when the latter have long-term and potentially more devastating effects. This tendency mirrors the logic of procrastination: acting on foreseeable harms sooner rather than later is not only more ethical but also cost-effective, as interventions are generally simpler and less resource-intensive before the problem fully manifests.

Cultural loss as harm

Having established the importance of cultural heritage and the need to protect it, along with the significance of addressing foreseeable harms, I now turn to the argument that cultural loss should be recognised as a form of harm. The existence of UNESCO’s efforts, such as the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, underscores the importance placed on cultural preservation globally (UNESCO, 2003). This framework signals that cultural heritage is not merely a passive element of human life, but a foundational aspect that contributes to the collective and individual identity of communities (UNESCO, 2003, p. 143). However, the real question remains: what is lost when cultural heritage is not protected? While culture naturally evolves over time, the involuntary and externally imposed changes caused by climate displacement differ fundamentally from organic cultural evolution. Climate change forces these shifts upon communities in ways that deprive them of agency over their traditions, practices, and stories. This loss is not simply one of material goods or practices but of a fundamental part of the community’s ability to adapt and pass down its cultural knowledge and traditions. Such a rupture in the continuity of culture creates long-lasting psychological and social effects, often leading to the loss of identity and the destabilisation of the community as a whole.

The ethical question surrounding cultural loss ties closely to rights discourse, particularly as it intersects with human rights. A key example of this intersection is found in the abovementioned *Daniel Billy et al. v. Australia* case, where the UNHRC found that the rights of the Torres Strait Islanders to enjoy their culture had been violated due to climate change-induced threats to their land and way of life. However, in the same case, the Committee did not find a violation of the right to life, despite acknowledging the existential threats that climate change posed to the islanders' physical survival. This decision raises important questions about how we prioritise rights and why immediate threats to life take precedence over cultural rights, even when cultural loss can directly impact an individual's well-being and sense of self (Aktürk & Lerski, 2021, p. 310; Wewerinke-Singh, 2018, p. 199). The prioritisation of imminent harm over the foreseeable harm of cultural erosion, reflects a common approach in both legal and ethical reasoning (Foster & McAdam, 2022). Yet, this approach overlooks the interconnectedness of these rights.

Cultural heritage is not merely an ancillary part of life; it is, in fact, integral to what it means to live a fulfilling life. As Adger et al. (2011) argue, climate change policies frequently underemphasise or completely ignore the symbolic and psychological importance of place and identity in communities (p. 19). This gap in climate policy impedes a fair and comprehensive response to the challenges posed by climate-induced displacement. Both scientific assessments and economic frameworks for addressing climate change often rely on material and instrumental reasons—focusing on aggregate human welfare and economic benefits. However, these frameworks fail to account for the non-material, symbolic values that people attach to their places, cultures, and traditions. As Adger et al. (2011) state, “localised material and symbolic values have hitherto remained undervalued in the standard political and welfare economic calculus of climate change policy and science” (p. 2). This critique highlights the necessity of integrating cultural values into climate action, particularly as they pertain to the rights and well-being of climate migrants.

Thus, cultural loss is not merely a peripheral concern, but a significant harm that compounds the suffering caused by climate displacement. The loss of cultural heritage can have severe consequences for community cohesion, identity, and well-being, just as environmental destruction can threaten the physical survival of individuals (Hickey & Killean, 2022, p. 477;

Lenzerini, 2011, p. 114). Framing cultural loss in this way reinforces the urgency of not only addressing the physical and economic well-being of climate migrants but also the preservation of their cultural identities. Climate change policy must move beyond economic and material concerns and prioritise a more holistic approach that includes the protection of cultural heritage as central to the dignity and humanity of those displaced.

While I do not argue that cultural rights should take precedence over fundamental human rights, such as the right to life—after all, there can be no culture without life—it is essential to recognise that cultural rights are deeply intertwined with human dignity and well-being. The preservation of cultural heritage provides individuals and communities with a sense of identity, belonging, and purpose, which are critical for resilience and recovery, especially in the face of climate displacement (Lenzerini, 2011, pp. 109-113; Tschakert, 2019). Ignoring cultural loss diminishes the holistic understanding of what it means to protect human rights, as the erosion of cultural heritage exacerbates the psychological and social toll of displacement (Lenzerini, 2011, pp. 114-118). Thus, safeguarding culture should not be seen as secondary but as complementary to protecting physical survival, ensuring that displaced communities can maintain their identity, rebuild their lives, and pass their traditions to future generations. This perspective broadens the framework of harm to include not only physical threats but also the enduring impacts on identity and collective memory.

Prioritising agency

The problem of the loss of agency re-emerges throughout my argument. This leads me to stress the importance of prioritising agency within climate displacement. Within the Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Heritage, it is included as an ethical principle that communities should play a “significant role in determining what constitutes threats to their intangible cultural heritage, including the decontextualisation, commodification, and misrepresentation of it, and in deciding how to prevent and mitigate such threats” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 144). This idea is further echoed in Lenzerini’s (2011) article on the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, in which the author emphasises self-identification, which “makes intangible cultural heritage valuable in light of the subjective perspective of its creators and bearers, who recognise the heritage concerned as an

essential part of their idiosyncratic cultural inheritance, even though it may appear absolutely worthless to external observers” (p. 108).

These principles underscore the necessity of placing the agency of communities at the heart of climate displacement responses. Without agency, communities are at risk of being reduced to passive recipients of external solutions that may fail to account for the cultural and historical specificities of their heritage. This reflects broader critiques of top-down approaches in displacement, which often marginalise local voices and prioritise efficiency over equity (Cernea, 1997, p. 1580). Ensuring that communities maintain control over how their heritage is identified, preserved, and adapted is not merely a procedural matter but a substantive recognition of their dignity.

Moreover, prioritising agency aligns with the growing call for decolonial approaches to climate action. Scholars such as Whyte (2017, p. 160) argue that Indigenous and marginalised communities must have the power to define their pathways forward, resisting the imposition of solutions rooted in colonial paradigms. Whyte also highlights the concept of intergenerational responsibility, stressing that ethical responses to climate displacement must consider the long-term impacts of today's decisions. Being "good ancestors" requires protecting cultural heritage not only for present communities but also for future generations, ensuring that they inherit both the tangible and intangible aspects of their heritage (p. 160). This perspective emphasises that preserving agency is not merely a matter of justice for current populations but a commitment to future generations who will inherit the legacies of these decisions.

To illustrate the importance of this approach, I will look at two potential reparations in response to climate migrations which could theoretically avoid cultural erasure. One form could be the opportunity for immigration and free movement (Buxton, 2019, p. 214). Providing climate migrants with the opportunity to migrate could function as reparations for a climate migrant, whilst also taking into consideration their choices. Byravan and Rajan (2010) have proposed a policy that connects the number of climate refugees a state may be obligated to host with that state's historical emissions, using PPP as a guidepost in assigning responsibility for migration (p. 244). This does consider the choice of those affected on where to put down new roots, which has been identified as one of the most important parts of the procedure according to some Islanders themselves

(Perumal, 2018, p. 46). However, this approach still runs into potential challenges, including the risk of cultural assimilation and loss of identity when migrants are integrated into different societies that may not reflect their original cultural context. While free movement offers significant advantages in granting climate migrants agency, it may not fully address the nuances of cultural preservation unless host nations adopt policies that protect and facilitate the maintenance of their cultural heritage.

Another possibility for reparation could be new land or territory. In the case of entire territories being lost to rising sea-levels, this seems to be an instinctive solution; to compensate for the loss of land with new land. However, this option does overlook some key things such as the importance of the sense of place. Simply allowing refugees to move to new land may not remedy the very paramount loss they have suffered. As De Shalit (2011) puts it, new land is similar to a step-father replacing the loss of a biological father (p. 328). Despite the fact that a step-father could replace the functioning of a real father, it will never be a complete replacement (Buxton, 2019, p. 216). While new land may provide a physical space for displaced populations, it may not address the deeper connections that communities have to their original territories. The sense of place encompasses more than geography; it embodies identity, traditions, and the symbolic significance tied to ancestral lands. For example, Pacific Islander cultures often view their islands as integral to their existence, linking their identities to the land in ways that cannot be replicated elsewhere (Perumal, 2018, p. 53).

Reparative solutions like free movement or new land underscore the importance of agency, allowing climate migrants to actively shape their futures rather than passively accept external decisions. Without such agency, reparations risk compounding harms, further eroding identity and dignity. Procedural approaches, grounded in participatory frameworks, ensure that displaced communities are central to decisions about relocation and cultural preservation. By engaging these communities pre-emptively, policymakers can create strategies that anticipate and address both cultural and social needs. Given IPCC projections of inevitable displacement for certain regions, proactive and participatory measures are essential (Calvin et al., 2023, p. 15). These should include international agreements and frameworks that safeguard cultural practices and heritage during resettlement. This approach not only protects physical safety but also preserves cultural integrity,

treating humanity as central to climate migration policies. This balance could ensure that solutions are both just and effective.

CHAPTER 3: Objections

Given that the preservation of cultural heritage within the context of climate migration is a relatively new topic, it inevitably invites objections. Climate change presents unprecedented challenges to humanity, and the argument for prioritising cultural preservation within this context is bound to raise questions. Below, I address three key objections that I find most robust, which highlight concerns about relevance, unethical cultural practices, and heterogeneity of culture.

Anthropocentric?

Some may question the relevance of cultural preservation within the broader climate change debate, suggesting that it represents an anthropocentric focus on adapting to the effects of climate change rather than addressing its root causes. While this critique is valid—our mitigation efforts to reduce emissions and prevent further harm are paramount—it does not negate the importance of preparing for inevitable consequences. My argument does not position cultural heritage preservation as the primary focus of climate policy but rather as a crucial component of adaptive responses that acknowledge our current reality. As IPCC reports emphasise, global mitigation efforts are insufficient to prevent escalating climate impacts, leading to increased losses and damages (Calvin et al., 2023, pp. 10-24). Among these, climate-induced migration is expected to grow significantly in scale (p. 15). Addressing this migration requires not only pragmatic measures but also solutions that respect the humanity and cultural identity of displaced peoples. By emphasising the cultural dimensions of adaptation, I aim to contribute to a more holistic approach that recognises the multifaceted impacts of climate change. Ultimately, this is not an either-or proposition. While mitigation remains essential, adaptation must also be robust and inclusive. Preserving cultural heritage is one way to ensure that responses to climate displacement honour the dignity and agency of affected communities. This complements rather than detracts from broader climate action, recognising that effective adaptation is a necessary counterpart to ongoing mitigation efforts.

Harmful cultural practices

Another objection that might arise in response to my argument is whether all cultures are worth preserving. For instance, cultures that are inherently sexist or homophobic—are these cultures still deserving of protection? My response to this is twofold: first, we must ask, what would be the alternative? Should we save these people's lives but ensure their culture dies simply because it does not align with our own values or definitions of what is "right"? Second, it is essential to recognise that cultures are not static; they are dynamic and evolve over time (Lenzerini, 2011, pp. 113-114; UNESCO, 2003, p. 144; Zellentin, 2015, p. 493). The fact that certain aspects of a culture may be problematic does not mean that the entire culture lacks value or should be abandoned. Rather than imposing an external judgment, we should focus on empowering communities to reshape and transform their cultures from within, fostering dialogue and reflection on issues like gender and sexuality without erasing their cultural identity altogether. Preserving culture does not mean preserving harmful practices—it means supporting the community's right to define and adapt its own heritage, while respecting human dignity and fostering inclusivity.

However, my response to this objection may be seen as relativist. This tension between respecting cultural autonomy and advocating for universal human rights complicates the approach to cultural preservation in climate migration. The scope of this thesis does not allow me to dive deeper into the relativist aspects of my argument, but I respond by reiterating that cultural preservation should not mean the perpetuation of harmful practices. It should support cultural adaptation and transformation that empowers communities to align their heritage with evolving ethical standards.

Heterogeneity

Another valid critique questions whether cultures are truly cohesive enough to preserve. Critics may argue that communities are not monolithic and question how it is possible to talk about preserving a single "culture" when it often contains competing perspectives and internal divisions. Communities often encompass diverse identities, experiences, and interpretations of what their culture represents. The notion of a singular, unified cultural heritage is indeed simplistic. I argue that this complexity does not make cultural preservation impossible—it makes it more nuanced. For instance, when addressing climate migration, it becomes even more critical to ensure

participatory and inclusive approaches. Critics might ask how to account for disagreements within a community. While I do not have a set answer on how this has to be approached, a possible solution lies in ensuring that every voice has the opportunity to contribute to decisions about cultural preservation and adaptation. This highlights the need for processes that prioritise inclusivity and agency. Sceptics might respond that this would complicate matters even more. That is why these processes must be adaptable and context-sensitive. The richness of cultural diversity within communities should not be viewed as a barrier to preservation but as a strength that requires creative solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

All in all, I argued that there are ethical obligations to preserve cultural heritage for climate migrants, and that these obligations should inform responses to climate migration by prioritising the agency and participation of vulnerable communities. Within the scope of this thesis, I have had to make certain assumptions or ignore some objections in order to make my argument. Even though I was able to counter some objections, which concern relevance, unethical cultural practices, and heterogeneity, they still hold validity and should prompt further research in the fields of climate justice and cultural heritage, as these criticisms can lead to more nuanced responses to climate justice and the protection of cultural heritage. As I argued, there will be no perfect one-size-fits-all solution to protecting the cultural heritage of climate migrants. Each case will require a tailored approach that prioritises the unique cultural, social, and environmental contexts of the affected communities. Recognising the diversity of traditions and values across displaced populations, responses must involve meaningful participation from these communities to ensure their agency is preserved. This means policies and actions must avoid imposing top-down solutions and instead foster inclusive dialogues that respect local knowledge systems and cultural priorities.

Future research should explore how localised frameworks can integrate international principles of cultural heritage preservation with specific community needs. Additionally, the interplay between cultural rights and other human rights, particularly in legal and policy-making contexts, requires further examination to ensure that neither is subordinated in ways that exacerbate harm. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for advancing equitable, ethical, and effective solutions to the dual challenges of climate displacement and cultural heritage loss.

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