Towards a Right to Cultural Identity?
To my parents Frans and Marita

SCHOOL OF HUMAN RIGHTS RESEARCH SERIES, Volume 15

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Towards a Right to Cultural Identity?

Yvonne M. Donders
This volume is an adapted version of a dissertation defended at Maastricht University on 20 September 2002.

Yvonne M. Donders  
Towards a Right to Cultural Identity?

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

At the start of this research I came across the following quote in a Dutch newspaper: “Culture is too important to be left in the hands of experts only”. It concisely reflects why the topic of a right to cultural identity interests me. Cultural identity affects every individual and community. In fact, everyone and at the same time no one is an expert in this field. In any case, researchers or ‘experts’ should never lose sight of the people that are actually affected by the many complex issues surrounding a right to cultural identity.

This dissertation has provided me with many useful experiences, personally as well as professionally. At this point, I would like to express my gratitude and thanks to all who have helped and encouraged me over the last years. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisors, Professor Cees Flienterman and Doctor Fons Coomans, for their input, comments, encouragement and support. It has been a very enjoyable experience to work with both of them, who were always able to remain calm when I had one of my ‘stressful’ days. I would also like to express my appreciation to the members of the reading committee, Professor Menno Kamminga, Doctor Marlies Galenkamp, Doctor Fred Grünfeld, Professor Martin Scheinin and Professor Bruno de Witte, for reading and commenting on my manuscript.

Additionally, I have to thank my colleagues at the Department of International and European Law for their support and co-operation. A special word of thanks to Professor Ellen Vos for applying her critical mind on parts of my book, and then cheering me up over a good dinner. I am also thankful to Eva Rieter for reading parts of my book and providing me with helpful comments. As far as the material realisation of the book is concerned, I am very grateful to Sophie Janssen and Chantal Kuypers for their help in editing the book, and to Chris Engert for correcting the English.

In May 2000, I was given the opportunity to visit the Institute for Human Rights of Åbo Akademi University in Turku, Finland, which included a trip to Lapland. Thanks to the financial support of NWO and the warm welcome of Professor Martin Scheinin and his staff, it was both a wonderful experience and gave me extra insight into my research.

Two other ‘AIO’s’ should be mentioned here, as without them my life as a researcher would have been much more difficult. To Nicola Jägers and Heleen Janssen, I express my thanks for sharing some of the tough moments with me and cheering me up with a good laugh and a drink.
Acknowledgements

A special word of thanks to my ‘paranimfen’. To my sister, Ellen Janssen-Donders, who, after finding out what a ‘paranimf’ actually was, now knows more about procedures and defences than I do. And my thanks also to Marjorie Blagrove for making life in Maastricht so much more comfortable and fun. It was great figuring out life in ‘Mestreech’ together with you.

This book is dedicated to my parents, Frans and Marita Donders, who have always loved and supported me, for which I can never thank them enough. Finally, Hans Lokker, thank you so much for supporting my going to Maastricht and for all the love and hugs when I most needed them. You truly are ‘the wind beneath my wings’.

Maastricht, 25 June 2002
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements v

List of Abbreviations, Document Symbols and Websites xv

## Chapter I

**General Introduction**

1. Background of a Right to Cultural Identity 2
2. Cultural Human Rights 2
3. Collective Rights 4

2. Supporters and Opponents of a Right to Cultural Identity 5
2.1 Formulation of a Right to Cultural Identity 5
2.2 Supporters 6
2.3 Opponents 7

3. The Central Question of the Research 9

4. The Meaning of the Concept of Cultural Identity 12

5. Cultural Identity as a Human Right 14
5.1 Universalism versus Cultural Relativism 14
5.2 Equality and Non-Discrimination 15
5.3 The Proliferation of Human Rights 16
5.4 Level of Recognition and Justiciability of a Right to Cultural Identity 16
6. Plan of Research 19

## Chapter II

**Culture and Cultural Identity in Social Sciences: A Survey**

1. Introduction 23
2. The Concept of Culture 24
2.1 The Meaning of ‘Culture’ Changing over Time 25
2.1.1 Culture in the Singular Form as a Normative Concept (1850-1950) 25
2.1.2 Culture in the Plural Form as Unique Entity (1900 – 1950) 26
2.1.3 The Modern Notion of Culture as a Way of Life (1950 – …) 29
3. The Concept of Cultural Identity 30
3.1 Cultural Identity as a Dynamic Concept 31
3.2 The Individual and the Collective Dimension of Cultural Identity 33
3.3 Cultural Identity in Relation to ‘Otherness’: the ‘Us and Them’ Principle 34
3.4 International Developments Encouraging Cultural Identity: Decolonisation, Emancipation and Globalisation 36
3.5 Concluding Remarks on Culture and Cultural Identity 39
### Table of Contents

4. The Accommodation of Cultural Differences
   4.1 Tolerance and Multi-Culturalism
   4.2 Forms of Recognition and Protection of Specific Cultural Identities
5. Concluding Remarks on the Social Science Framework of Cultural Identity

#### Chapter III

**Cultural Rights and Collective Rights in Political Sciences**

1. Introduction
2. A Liberal Theory for Collective Rights to Protect Cultural Differences: Kymlicka and Others
   2.1 Background of Kymlicka’s Liberal Theory of Special Minority Rights
   2.2 The Value of Culture and Cultural Membership
   2.3 Individual Rights or Collective Rights?
   2.4 Which Collective Rights and for Whom?
   2.5 What to do with Intolerable Cultural Practices?
3. Concluding Remarks on a Liberal Theory on Collective Rights to Protect Cultural Differences

#### Chapter IV

**Cultural Rights and Collective Rights in a Human Rights Framework**

1. Introduction
2. Cultural Rights as the “Cinderella of the Human Rights Family”
   2.1 The Nature and Scope of Cultural Rights
   2.2 Which Rights are Cultural Rights?
   2.3 The Fribourg Group and the Draft Declaration of Cultural Rights
   2.4 Levels of Recognition: Soft Law, Hard Law and Justiciability
   2.5 State Obligations with regard to Cultural Rights
      2.5.1 Positive and Negative Obligations
      2.5.2 State Obligations according to the Tripartite Typology: to Respect, Protect and Fulfil
      2.5.3 The Core Content of Human Rights
      2.5.4 The Possible State Obligations and Core Content of a Right to Cultural Identity
3. Collective (Human) Rights
   3.1 Background of Collective Rights
   3.2 Supporters and Opponents of Collective Human Rights
   3.3 A Collective Right to Cultural Identity
4. Concluding Remarks on Cultural Rights and Collective Rights
### Chapter V

**UNESCO and a Right to Cultural Identity**

1. Introduction 107
2. The UNESCO Organisation and Its Involvement in Human Rights 108
   2.1 UNESCO and Human Rights 109
2.2 Standard Setting Process 110
3. UNESCO Instruments 111
   3.1 Declaration of the Principles of International Cultural Co-operation 111
   3.2 Recommendation on Participation by the People at Large in Cultural Life and their Contribution to It 112
   3.2.1 References to Cultural Identity in the Recommendation 112
   3.2.2 The Drafting Process of the Recommendation 117
   3.3 Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice 119
   3.3.1 References to Cultural Identity in the Declaration 119
   3.3.2 The Drafting Process of the Declaration 121
4. UNESCO Conferences on Cultural Policy 123
   4.1 Inter-governmental Conference on Institutional, Administrative and Financial Aspects of Cultural Policies in Venice 123
   4.2 Regional Conferences on Cultural Policies 124
   4.2.1 Regional Conference on Europe 125
   4.2.2 Regional Conference on Asia 126
   4.2.3 Regional Conference on Africa 126
   4.2.4 Regional Conference on Latin America and the Caribbean 127
   4.2.5 Regional Conference on Arab Countries 128
5. World Conference on Cultural Policies in Mexico 129
6. Culture and Development Report “Our Creative Diversity” 130
5.1 Content of the Report 131
5.2 Comments on the Report by the Member States 132
5.3 Follow-up of the Report 132
7. Concluding Remarks on UNESCO and a Right to Cultural Identity 137

### Chapter VI

**The Right to Participate in Cultural Life**

1. Introduction 139
2. Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 139
   2.1 Introduction 139
2.2 Travaux Préparatoires of Article 27 UDHR 141
2.3 Interpretation of Article 27 UDHR by Scholars 142
2.4 Article 27 UDHR in Relation to a Right to Cultural Identity 143
3. Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 144
# Table of Contents

3.1 Introduction 144  
3.2 Travaux Préparatoires of Article 15 ICESCR 146  
3.2.1 Commission on Human Rights 146  
3.2.2 General Assembly 148  
3.3 Guidelines for the Reporting Procedure under the ICESCR 150  
3.4 General Discussion on Article 15 by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights 151  
3.4.1 Working Paper on Cultural Rights 152  
3.4.2 Day of General Discussion in the Committee 154  
3.5 Interpretation of Article 15 ICESCR by Scholars 157  
4. The Right to Take Part in Cultural Life in Relation to a Right to Cultural Identity 159  

## Chapter VII  
### Cultural Identity and Minorities

1. Introduction 163  
2. Minorities and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 163  
2.1 The Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities 164  
2.2 The Commission on Human Rights 165  
2.3 The General Assembly (Third Committee) 165  
3. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 166  
3.1 The Drafting Process of Article 27 ICCPR 167  
3.2 The Interpretation of Article 27 ICCPR by Scholars and the Human Rights Committee 169  
3.2.1 The Subject of Article 27 ICCPR: Members of Minorities 169  
3.2.2 The Object: the Content of Article 27 ICCPR 172  
3.2.3 State Obligations 174  
4. Case Law on Article 27 ICCPR 176  
4.1 A Broad Concept of Culture 176  
4.2 The Link between Culture and Traditional Economic Activities 177  
4.2.1 Lubicon Lake Band versus Canada 177  
4.2.2 Sami Cases versus Sweden and Finland 179  
4.2.3 Apirana Mahuika versus New Zealand 181  
4.2.4 Diergaardt versus Namibia 183  
4.3 Language Rights: Culture and the Freedom of Expression 184  
4.4 The French Declaration concerning Article 27 ICCPR and Minorities 186  
4.4.1 Hopu and Bessert versus France 187  
5. The Right to Enjoy Culture in Relation to a Right to Cultural Identity 188  
6. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities 191  
6.1 Background and Drafting Process of the Declaration on Minorities 191  
6.2 Content of the Declaration on Minorities 192
6.2.1 Subject of the Declaration on Minorities
6.2.2 Provisions in the Declaration on Minorities concerning Cultural Identity
6.3 Supervision of the Declaration on Minorities
7. Concluding Remarks on the UN Declaration on Minorities

Chapter VIII
Cultural Identity and Indigenous Peoples
1. Introduction
2. General Observations on Indigenous Peoples
2.1 The Definition Issue
2.2 The Right of Self-Determination
3. ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples
3.1 ILO Convention 107
3.2 ILO Convention 169
3.3 ILO Supervision
3.4 Concluding Remarks on ILO Convention 169
4. UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
4.1 The History: the Working Group on Indigenous Populations
4.2 Content of the Draft Declaration in Relation to Cultural Identity
4.2.1 Cultural Genocide
4.2.2 Other Provisions Regarding Cultural Identity
4.3 The Status and Future of the Draft Declaration
4. Recent Developments and Concluding Remarks

Chapter IX
Cultural Identity and the Organisation of American States
1. Introduction
2. Human rights Instruments and Procedures in the Americas
4. Cases Before the Inter-American Commission and the Inter-American Court on Human Rights
4.1 The Guahibo Case v. Colombia
4.2 The Aché Case v. Paraguay
4.3 The Yanomami Case v. Brazil
4.4 The Miskito Case v. Nicaragua
4.5 The Awas Tingi Case v. Nicaragua
5. The Draft American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
6. Cultural Identity in the Inter-American Human Rights System
# Table of Contents

**Chapter X**

**Cultural Identity and the Council of Europe**

1. Introduction 247
3. The European Cultural Convention 249
4. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages 249
5. The Vienna Declaration 251

6.1 The Development of the Framework Convention - Drafts and Proposals 253
6.2 The Subject of the Framework Convention and the Definition of ‘National Minority’ 254
6.3 Cultural Identity in the Provisions of the Framework Convention 255
6.3.1 Preamble 256
6.3.2 Article 5 on the Preservation of Identity 256
6.3.3 Article 6 on Non-Discrimination based on Cultural Identity 257
6.3.4 Articles 10 and 11 on Linguistic Rights 258
6.3.5 Articles 17 and 20 on Trans-Frontier Contacts 258
6.4 Implementation and Supervision of the Framework Convention 259
6.5 Concluding Remarks on the Framework Convention 261
7. Proposal for an Additional Protocol to the ECHR in the Cultural Field 262
7.1 The Mandate of CAHMIN 262
7.2 Provisions in the Draft Protocol concerning Cultural Identity 263
7.2.1 The Right to Cultural Identity 263
7.2.2 The Right to Choose to Belong to a Group 264
7.2.3 The Protection of Cultural and Scientific Heritage 264
7.2.4 The Right to Participate in Cultural Activities 265
7.2.5 The Right to Set Up Cultural and Educational Institutions 265
7.3 Other Provisions in the Draft Protocol relevant to the Protection of Cultural Identity 266
7.4 Outcome of the Drafting Process 267
9. Selected Case Law of the European Commission and European Court of Human Rights 269
9.1 The Right to Education: the Belgian Linguistic Case 270
9.2 The Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience and Religion 272
9.2.1 Jehovah’s Witnesses in Greece 272
9.2.2 The Appointment of Muslim Leaders and Religious Pluralism 275
9.2.3 Ritual Slaughtering: the Case of Cha’are Shalom ve Tsedek v. France 276
9.3 The Right to Freedom of Expression: Cases of Kurds against Turkey 278
9.4 The Right to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and the Freedom of Association 281
9.4.1 Political Parties in Turkey 281
9.4.2 Cultural Organisations 284
9.5 The Right to Respect for Private Life and Family Life, Home and Correspondence 288
9.5.1 Gypsy Cases: the Right to Respect for Home in Relation to Cultural Identity 289
9.5.1.1 Buckley v. the United Kingdom 289
9.5.1.2 Chapman v. the United Kingdom 292
9.5.1.3 Beard v. the United Kingdom, Coster v. the United Kingdom, Lee v. the United Kingdom and Jane Smith v. the United Kingdom 296
9.5.2 Concluding Observations on the Gypsy cases on Cultural Identity 297
9.6 Concluding Remarks on the Protection of Cultural Identity and the Selected Case-Law of the ECHR 299

Chapter XI
A Right to Cultural Identity and the Sami in Norway, Sweden and Finland
1. Introduction 301
2. The Sami as an Indigenous People 302
3. The Cultural Identity of the Sami 304
3.1 Reindeer Herding and Land Ownership 304
3.2 The Sami Language 305
4. Definition of Who is a Sami 306
5. The History of Sami Rights: the Lapp Codicil 307
6.1 Norway 310
6.1.1 Sami Rights and the Alta Dam Case 310
6.1.2 The Norwegian Sami Parliament 312
6.2 Sweden 312
6.2.1 Sami Rights and the Taxed Mountains Case 312
6.2.2 The Swedish Sami Parliament 314
6.3 Finland 314
6.3.1 Sami Rights 314
6.3.2 The Finnish Sami Parliament 315
7. International Instruments 316
7.1 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights 316
7.2 The European Convention on Human Rights 317
7.3 The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities 318
7.4 ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples 322
Table of Contents

7.5 Protocol No. 3 to the Accession Treaty of Sweden and Finland to the EU 323
8. Concluding Remarks 324

Chapter XII
Conclusion: Towards a Right to Cultural Identity? 327
1. Introduction 327
2. What is the Value of Cultural Identity? 327
3. In What Form Could Cultural Identity be Recognised? 328
4. How Has Cultural Identity been Included in Existing Human Rights Instruments? 329
5. What Role Do Other Human Rights Provisions Play in the Protection of Cultural Identity? 331
6. What are the Subject, Object and State Obligations of a Right to Cultural Identity? 334
7. Should a Separate Human Right to Cultural Identity Be Developed? 337
8. The Emergence of Cultural Identity as a Principle of Human Rights Law 340

Nederlandse Samenvatting 347
Bibliography 361
Selected Documents of the United Nations, UNESCO, the Organisation of American States and the Council of Europe 375
Table of Cases 387
List of International Treaties and Declarations 391
Index 393
Curriculum Vitae 401
School of Human Rights Research Series 403

xv
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACM</td>
<td>Adviescommissie Mensenrechten en Buitenlands Beleid / Advisory Committee on Human Rights and Foreign Policy of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAHMIN</td>
<td>Ad Hoc Committee for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCR</td>
<td>Committee on Conventions and Recommendations (UNESCO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDCC</td>
<td>Council for Cultural Co-operation (Council of Europe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDDH</td>
<td>Steering Committee for Human Rights (Council of Europe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEACR</td>
<td>Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (ILO)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CERD</td>
<td>Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Council of Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECHR</td>
<td>European Convention on Human Rights and Freedoms</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECOSOC</td>
<td>UN Economic and Social Council</td>
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<td>ESC</td>
<td>European Social Charter</td>
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<td>FGM</td>
<td>Female Genital Mutilation</td>
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<td>HRC</td>
<td>Human Rights Committee</td>
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<td>IACHR</td>
<td>Inter-American Commission on Human Rights</td>
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<td>ICCPR</td>
<td>International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICESCR</td>
<td>International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICJ</td>
<td>International Court of Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILO</td>
<td>International Labour Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IWGIA</td>
<td>International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAS</td>
<td>Organisation of American States</td>
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<tr>
<td>OAU</td>
<td>Organisation of African Unity</td>
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<tr>
<td>OSCE</td>
<td>Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>UDHRC</td>
<td>Universal Declaration on Human Rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNGA</td>
<td>United Nations General Assembly</td>
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<tr>
<td>WGIP</td>
<td>Working Group on Indigenous Populations</td>
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<td>WGM</td>
<td>Working Group on Minorities</td>
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# List of Abbreviations, Document Symbols and Websites

## United Nations Documents (UN Doc.)
- **A/**: General Assembly
- **A/C.3/**: General Assembly, Third Committee (Social Affairs)
- **A/RES/**: General Assembly Resolution
- **CCPR/C/**: Human Rights Committee
- **CERD/C/**: Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
- **E/**: Economic and Social Council
- **E/C.12/**: Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- **E/CN.4/**: Commission on Human Rights
- **E/CN.4/Sub.2/**: Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights

## UNESCO Documents (UNESCO Doc.)
- **…/C/**: General Conference
- **CLT/**: Documents of the Department of Culture
- **…/CONF/**: Conferences
- **…/DG/**: Reports of the Director General
- **…/EX/**: Executive Board
- **…/PREP.COM/**: Preparatory Commission of UNESCO
- **…/S/**: Secretariat
- **SS/**: Social Sciences
- **SHC/**: Documents of the Department of Social and Human Sciences
- **…/WS/**: Working Series

## Documents of the Organisation of American States (OAS Doc.)
- **AG/**: OAS General Assembly
- **OC/**: Inter-American Court of Human Rights
- **OEA/Ser/**: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

## Documents of the Council of Europe (CoE Doc.)
- **CAHMIN/**: Ad Hoc Committee for the Protection of National Minorities
- **CDCC/**: Council for Cultural Co-operation
- **CDDH/**: Steering Committee for Human Rights
- **CLD-MIN/**: European Commission for Democracy through Law

## General abbreviations
- **…/NGO/**: Documents containing communications from Non-Governmental Organisations
- **…/OR/**: Official Records
- **…/RES/**: Resolution
- **…/SR/**: Summary Records
- **…/WG/**: Working Group Document
- **…/WP/**: Working Paper

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xvi
Council of Europe  www.coe.int
Council of Europe – Minorities  www.humanrights.coe.int/Minorities/Eng/Sitemap.htm
European Court of Human Rights  www.echr.coe.int
Fribourg Group  www.unifr.ch/iiedh/recherche/recherche.htm
IACHR  www.iachr.org
Indian Law Resource Centre  www.indianlaw.org
Inter-American Court of Human Rights  www.corteidh.or.cr/index-ingles.html
IWGIA  www.iwgia.org
OAS  www.oas.org
United Nations  www.un.org
UNESCO  www.unesco.org
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights  www.unhchr.ch
Over the last 20 years, the question as to whether a right to cultural identity should be developed has been the subject of considerable debate. Although the incorporation of cultural identity as a concept in human rights instruments is not entirely new, and the protection of cultural identity has been included in several instruments, no separate right to cultural identity has been adopted. Supporters of adopting such a separate right argue that the existing human rights system, with its individual character and underdevelopment of cultural rights, does not meet the claims of individuals and communities for the protection of their cultural identity. However, the development of a separate right to cultural identity also encounters critics who argue that the concept of cultural identity is too vague to be transformed into a right, and that such a right might cause tension within society and could lead to the approval of intolerable cultural practices. The aim of this research was to examine to what extent a right to cultural identity should be further developed as a separate right within the framework of international human rights law, and what the nature, scope and content of this right could be.

The first chapters include a theoretical analysis of the nature, scope and content of a right to cultural identity, including the clarification of the concept of cultural identity, cultural rights and collective rights, from a social sciences, political sciences and legal perspective. The subsequent chapters contain a study of existing human rights provisions in international instruments that explicitly or implicitly refer to the protection of cultural identity or aspects of cultural identity, including the role of UNESCO in developing cultural rights, the right to participate in cultural life, and rights related to minorities and indigenous peoples, are analysed. Attention is also paid to regional human rights instruments in Europe and the Americas, including an analysis of case law. Finally, an illustration is given of an indigenous people and its cultural identity, namely, the Sami in the Nordic countries.

The conclusion of this study is that no separate right to cultural identity should be developed, because it is neither desirable nor necessary. It is not desirable because translating the vague and general concept of cultural identity into a right would risk abuse or suppression of individual rights and freedoms within a cultural context. It is not necessary because existing cultural rights in the broad sense already offer possibilities to protect cultural identity.