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## **Authors**

**Dr. Carlos Monterrubio** (corresponding author)

Texcoco Campus, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México, Mexico

jcmonterrubioc@uaemex.mx

ORCID: 0000-0002-3706-4644

**Dr. Katherine Dashper**

School of Events, Tourism and Hospitality Management, Leeds Beckett University, UK

k.dashper@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0002-2415-2290

**Dr. Helen Wadham**

h.wadham@mmu.ac.uk

Business School, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK

ORCID: 0000-0002-9980-4409.

## **Contested intangible heritage: equestrian sport and animal welfare in Mexico**

### **Abstract**

Heritage is a cultural process that is constantly exposed to contestation and therefore to reconstruction, resignification and repositioning. This paper goes beyond anthropocentric interpretations and recognises that heritage often involves other species in human-defined heritage practices. Based on an ethnographic approach, this study examines how contemporary practitioners of Charrería - a Mexican equestrian sport - embrace their intangible cultural heritage and problematise some of the interactions between the species involved. It evidences how Charrería participants navigate tensions between national identity and pride in their cultural heritage, on the one hand, and the ethics of involving other animals in sport and human heritage, on the other. The animal ethics issues involved threaten not only the social licence to operate of Charrería as a sport, but also the status and preservation of Charrería as heritage. This paper concludes that international and national organisations that institutionalise heritage play important roles in guiding efforts to protect and maintain intangible cultural heritage while addressing the changing ethical demands of interspecies relationships.

### **Keywords:**

Contested heritage, equestrian sport, animal welfare, social licence to operate, Charrería, intangible heritage

## **Introduction**

Heritage is “something that can be passed from one generation to the next, something that can be conserved or inherited, and something that has historic or cultural value” (Harrison 2010, 9). This broad definition encompasses tangible heritage - including physical objects, such as might be showcased in museums, and places, whether castles or shrines or natural sites - and intangible heritage - including cultural practices, such as language and art. Heritage is about conserving and trying to understand the past, whilst relating to the present and contemporary values and practices. As such, Smith (2006, 44) argued that heritage is a “cultural process that engages in acts of remembering” and thus a constant process of reconstruction, resignification and repositioning.

It is this tension between remembering the past and making sense in the present that lies at the heart of contemporary understandings of heritage and leads to contestation and sometimes conflict over meanings, values, significance and representation. Many studies have examined contested heritage in relation to “difficult” or “problematic” histories, such as colonialism (e.g., Carvalho and Semedo 2023), sites of war and conflict (e.g., Naef and Ploner 2016), totalitarianism (e.g., Ivanova 2017) and slavery (e.g., Burch-Brown 2022). Dissonance between contemporary social values and historic practices often underpin these conflicts, as do tensions between the supposedly universal values of global heritage, as enshrined in heritage standards such as those of UNESCO, and local practices and traditions (Bear, Avieli, and Feldman 2021). In this paper we focus on another area of contestation where contemporary global ethics conflict with the preservation of traditional local practices: intangible heritage of sports involving humans and horses.

The relationship between heritage and sport is a close one, with sporting events representing important individual and collective memories, sporting traditions and practices ingrained into

the behaviours of different communities, and sporting venues, like stadiums and arenas, often conserved as historic sites of interest and reverence (Ramshaw 2019). Sport has been recognised and legitimised as heritage through the inclusion of numerous sporting practices on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, ranging from traditional Korean wrestling to capoeira in Brazil and the Irish sport of hurling (UNESCO 2023). In 2016, the Mexican equestrian sport of Charrería was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List, described as “an important aspect of the identity of bearer communities and their cultural heritage” and “a way of transferring to younger generations important social values, such as respect and equality for people in the community” (UNESCO 2016). Charrería is considered the national sport of Mexico and central to notions of Mexican national identity, as well as being a contemporary competitive sport. It involves predominantly male riders – charros – engaging in numerous events, or *suertes*, involving horses and cattle. As such, it is a manifestation of cultural heritage, a competitive sport and an arena of interspecies relations. These multiple understandings and interpretations of Charrería contribute to contestation as competing demands of heritage (often related to preservation), competitive sport (with globalised reach and strict regulations) and interspecies relations (with focus on animal welfare and interspecies ethics) are sometimes contradictory.

Charrería is not the only equestrian practice recognised as important intangible cultural heritage by UNESCO. Practices ranging from the Classical equitation of the High School of the Spanish riding School in Vienna (2015), to the traditional Karabakh horse-riding game of Chovqan in the Republic of Azerbaijan are also recognised, indicative of the numerous and complex roles horses continue to play in human societies around the world (Adelman and Thompson 2017). However, Charrería’s status as both intangible heritage *and* contemporary competitive sport places it in a slightly different position to these other equestrian practices, and exposes it to wider critique. Equestrian sports in general are undergoing a period of re-

evaluation in the context of changing global attitudes to animal welfare and the ethics of involving other species in human sport and leisure (Furtado et al. 2021). In an era of easy access and social media image sharing, equestrian sports from horse-racing to dressage are coming under increased scrutiny and pressure from animal rights groups and the general public. In some cases, calls for change also come from within. The very acceptability of equestrian sports - their social licence to operate (SLO) - is thus being called into question (Douglas, Owers, and Campbell 2022).

Growing awareness about animal welfare and debates about the SLO of other equestrian sports provide the backdrop against which the intangible heritage of Charrería - and its acceptability as a competitive sport - is increasingly contested. In this paper we draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in central Mexico to examine how contemporary practitioners of Charrería embrace its traditions and importance as cultural heritage, while simultaneously problematising some of the interspecies interactions involved in a time of increased scrutiny of the ethics of involving other animals in sport. In so doing, we illustrate the value of moving beyond anthropocentric understandings of heritage and acknowledging that heritage is often a more-than-human phenomenon, involving other species in human-defined activities. We consider how changing public ethics – on global and local levels – can lead to contestation and revaluing of some heritage practices.

### **Contested and contesting heritage**

If heritage is “a cultural process in which meaning is continuously created, recreated and validated for the present” (Liu, Dupre, and Jin 2021, 442) then it is not fixed but instead is open to change, reinterpretation and challenge. Different groups bring different interpretations, sometimes accepting, sometimes rejecting and sometimes modifying

meanings, and so some level of contestation, or disagreement, may be inevitable. Contesting heritage may lead to pluralistic values and interpretations, as is emerging in Aotearoa New Zealand as Indigenous Māori voices gain momentum and increasing numbers of settler-Pākehā (non-Māori) question colonial histories (Passey and Burns 2023). Contestation may also exacerbate conflict, whether that be over claims to land, as in the case of Maroon communities in Brazil (Loloum and Lins 2012), or igniting racial and ethnic tensions, such as in South Africa's problematic post-apartheid heritage policies and practices (Ndletyana and Webb 2017). Contestation can manifest itself in different ways by the stakeholders involved, from reactions such as violent riots (Wagenaar and Rodenberg 2018) to more subtle and sophisticated forms (Blackledge 2008) to negotiate heritage value, use or interpretation. Debates around heritage can become flashpoints as countries and communities grapple with their problematic pasts, as is currently occurring in Portugal's debates around celebrating or problematising objects seized during Portuguese colonialism (Carvalho and Semedo 2023), or how to commemorate – or attempt to forget and move on from – atrocities in the more recent past, such as in Cambodia (Lennon 2009).

In their systematic review of literature on contested heritage, Liu, Dupre, and Jin (2021) note that this is an area of increased research attention, illustrating how heritage offers opportunity to examine cultural change through different perspectives and experiences. They note that the majority of research on contested heritage focuses on tangible heritage, predominantly urban built tangible heritage, with very little attention to contestation around natural heritage, intangible cultural heritage or rural heritage. Charrería, the focus for this study, is intangible cultural heritage, which is important to Mexican national identity, both historically and contemporaneously. It is practised predominantly (but not exclusively) in rural communities in Mexico, and has links to natural heritage through the centrality of the horse (which

represents both natural and cultural heritage). As such, it offers an opportunity to explore contested heritage in contexts that to date have been largely overlooked.

France is the only other context in which links between horses and UNESCO heritage have previously been explored. Equitation in the French tradition was recognised as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2011, five years before Charrería in Mexico achieved this status. In France, tourism has played an important role in maintaining aspects of this intangible heritage. Nonetheless, in seeking to increase their appeal to tourists, both the physical sites associated with French equitation (primarily the Cadre de Noir de Saumur and the national stud) and some of their associated socio-cultural practices have undergone significant change (Pickel-Chevalier 2021). Ideas of intangible heritage, as crystallised in the expectations and values of UNESCO, align with French values of heritage within and beyond equitation. But Bear, Avieli, and Feldman (2021, 17) argue that these supposedly universal values are implicitly Euro-centric, representing “particular hegemonic Western values and perceptions”, which may not resonate with community values and priorities in the Global South. Therefore, the “fit” between Charrería in Mexico and UNESCO’s expectations about intangible cultural heritage may be a less easy one than that of equitation in the French tradition. In particular, an important tension emerges between the desire to preserve tradition versus the need to respond to changing knowledge and ethical positions around animal welfare.

### **Animals, heritage and Social Licence to Operate (SLO)**

The very language of heritage accreditation exposes its anthropocentric limits. The UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of *Humanity* implies that humanity exists independent of other creatures in the world. That other animals do feature on the list –



horses, several times, but also camels, “livestock” and dogs – illustrates that heritage is a multispecies endeavour (i.e., it involves animals other than humans, often in interaction with humans), even if its meanings, significance and interpretation are based on human interests, values and priorities. Posthumanist insights have yet to permeate heritage studies. But in other fields, from anthropology, to geography, to history, the “animal turn” has drawn attention to the interconnectedness of human lives and experiences with other beings in shared ecologies (Scheidel et al. 2022). The UNESCO listing of Charrería presents it as a human practice, with other animals deprioritised and mentioned only as “livestock” (this refers to cows and bulls), or “wild mares and bulls.” Even the horses that the charros ride are referred to only in passive form: “Trained herders demonstrate their abilities on foot or horseback” (UNESCO 2016). By contrast, the accompanying photographs illustrate the central role of horses, underlining that this intangible cultural heritage of humanity is inherently multispecies.

Horses, as well as cattle, are essential to Charrería and represent the important relationship between humans and horses in Mexican society. We describe the practices of Charrería further below, but they have started to attract national and international attention, and sometimes criticism, on animal welfare grounds (Barraclough 2014). Globally, the last fifty years have seen dramatic shifts in public perceptions about the rights of other animals, the importance of animal welfare and the ethics of human interactions with other species (Miele et al. 2011). These shifts, based in part on increased scientific understanding of animal needs and experiences, have led to public and consumer pressure for changes in relation to meat and dairy production (Alonso, González-Montaña, and Lomillos 2020), zoos and other animal-based attractions (Flower et al. 2021; Warsaw and Sayers 2020), and wildlife management (van Eeden et al. 2019). These changing ideas about animal welfare are also impacting upon attitudes to the involvement of animals in human sport and leisure. Horses are the animal

most commonly involved in human sport, and recent years have seen growing debate about the ethics and practices of equestrian sports (Homes and Brown 2022).

Equestrian sport on a global scale is under increased scrutiny from both animal rights campaigners and the general public in relation to a wide range of practices, from high levels of equine injury and death in the horseracing industry (Wilson, Thompson, and McGreevy 2021), hyperextension in dressage training (van Weeren 2013), to general horse care and husbandry practices (Lofgren, Rice, and Brady 2022). It is in this environment of increased public pressure to safeguard equine welfare that many equestrian sports are having to re-evaluate their practices in order to protect their social licence to operate (SLO) and thus try and ensure their continuation. As an equestrian sport (as well as a manifestation of cultural heritage) Charrería is shaped by these wider debates about animal welfare and ethics in sports involving humans and horses.

SLO refers to an intangible, implicit and unwritten social contract, through which stakeholders and/or a wider community accept the presence or activities of a particular company or industry (Prno and Slocombe 2012). It is not a legislative framework. Rather, it effectively extends to the organisational actors concerned the opportunity to operate without additional external regulation. It emerged as a concept from within the context of the mining industry (Cooney 2017). However, it was extended to industries that have a similarly significant impact on society and the environment, including energy (Richert, Rogers, and Burton 2015), manufacturing (Hoffman et al. 2015) and farming (van Wessel 2018). SLO is inherently fragile, requiring continual renegotiation in the face of new technologies, changes in the regulatory environment and evolving public values and attitudes (Hall and Jeanneret 2015; Moffat and Zhang 2014; Parsons, Lacey, and Moffat 2014). It is these shifting societal norms that are of particular concern in the context of the present article.

A series of high-profile scandals have opened equestrian sports up to increasing public scrutiny across diverse national and international contexts, raising the possibility of greater regulation or even outright prohibition of particular practices (Douglas, Owers, and Campbell 2022). After a competitor was filmed beating their horse at the Tokyo Olympics, global condemnation led to the removal of the equestrian phase from the modern pentathlon (Luke et al. 2023). However, Heleski (2023) suggests it is no longer sufficient to avoid blatantly abusive practices, nor to advance arguments that “we’ve always done it this way.” Rather, there are increasing calls for the interests of horses themselves to be prioritised, even as there is acknowledgment of the practical difficulties of effecting such a shift (Brown et al. 2023). For example, Furtado et al. (2021) suggest that there is a fundamental conflict between competition demands and the basic needs of the horses taking part.

This directs our attention in turn to the underlying power relations involved. For example, in their paper on the issue of whipping within Australian racing, Duncan, Graham, and McManus (2018) suggest that the size and influence of the industry results in a form of “venue exceptionalism” that allows a level of mistreatment that would give rise to prosecution in another setting. Nonetheless, Heleski et al. (2020) point to a “tipping point” in public attitudes, driven by outrage at the high levels of catastrophic injuries (to horses and people) and the slaughter of unwanted horses. These and other practices have led to a measurable decline in the SLO of the racing industry, resulting in an outright ban on jump racing in South Australia.

There is evidence that such problems have the potential to metastasize into other areas of horse-human encounters, including those strongly embedded within the social and cultural

fabric of particular contexts (Douglas, Owers, and Campbell 2022). Thus even UNESCO-endorsed practices like French equitation (Pickel-Chevalier 2021) and the Kyrgyz mounted game of kokboru (Sturod, Helgadóttir, and Nordbo 2020) are facing increasing scrutiny. Charrería is a highly charged encounter between often competing historical and contemporary ideas about animal welfare, but also interspecies risk-taking and power relations. It therefore offers a compelling case through which to explore the ways in which heritage is reproduced but also negotiated, questioned and challenged within the Mexican context and beyond.

## **Methods**

Studies of contested heritage have primarily employed qualitative methods. This is explained by the fact that heritage refers to practices, processes and social and subjective experiences associated with objects, sites and practices, which in turn require the examination of perceptions, attitudes and motivations (Filippucci 2009). According to Liu, Dupre, and Jin (2020), the adoption of qualitative methods also facilitates a deeper understanding of the complexity of dissonance in heritage. With this in mind, the present study adopted an ethnographic approach through participant observation and in-depth interviews.

Observations were carried out by all the members of the research team. However, due to geographical location, it was the first author who led the fieldwork. As a Mexican, he is familiar with the cultural, nationalist and identity values of Charrería. Deeply immersed in the country's equestrian world over the last four years, he understands the values and cultural meanings attributed to these practices. In particular, he has systematically observed Charrería for the last twelve months in the State of Mexico, where the sport is practised in 70% of its territory (Fernández 2019). Considering the ethical principles of social research, specifically

regarding potential harm to participants (Bryman 2012), the names of participants as well as the specific places and dates of events where ethnographic observations were carried out are maintained as confidential.

Observations mostly focused on participants, practices, interspecies interactions and the relationships of sport with other spheres of Mexican society. Fieldwork events included training and sports competitions, as well as important public events. In particular, the interactions between human and animal practitioners were observed in both competitive and non-competitive spaces, positioning horses (and bulls to a lesser extent) as central participants in heritage. During these observations, field notes and photographs were taken as a source of data collection for subsequent analysis. Although the first author led fieldwork, the other two authors (both British with experience of ethnographic research in different equestrian contexts) observed a number of Charrería and other equestrian events in Mexico to enable understanding of the first author's fieldnotes and greater appreciation of the cultural context.

According to Olsen and Timothy (2002), heritage contestation can take place both between different groups and within the same group. It was the latter case that was of interest for this study which focused on the experiences and opinions of those actively engaged in Charrería. Assuming that *charros* and *escaramuzas* (male and female Charrería participants, respectively) will speak only favourably about their cultural practice, and that therefore within this group there is no dissonance, denies the capability of the stakeholders to reflect on, and question, their own actions in relation to their potential changing values. Given that heritage is created, interpreted and configured in response to the values of a certain period (Liu, Dupre, and Jin 2020), it is theoretically and practically relevant to understand the ways in which current global animal ethical values can influence local interpretations of Charrería

as heritage and therefore result in potential internal discordance within charros and escaramuzas themselves. As Liu, Dupre, and Jin (2020, 17) argue, “studies should not only focus on stakeholders with a special emphasis on understanding how their positions and relations are shaped by the contested heritage, but also with consideration for the shifting values and needs of stakeholders.”

Bearing this in mind, interviews were held in 2022 with 10 charros and four escaramuzas who actively participate in Charrería. Through snowball and convenience techniques, participants with varied profiles were recruited. The lead researcher contacted the first interviewees who, as Bryman (2012) states, were available to the study by virtue of their accessibility. These then helped the researchers to establish contact with other potential participants. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation criteria (Hennink and Kaiser 2022). The gender balance among interviewees reflected the predominance of men within the sport. A diversity of perceptions and experiences was sought through variability in sociodemographic profiles. Participants’ ages ranged between 17 and 65 years. Their educational level was also varied, while some participants had only secondary education, others completed higher education. Their occupations included student, taxi driver, riding instructor, farmer, teacher, accountant, administrator, dentist and veterinarian. The diversity of sociodemographic profiles suggests that the sport is present in different socioeconomic sectors of Mexican Society. Based on the discussion of their observations, all the members of the research team participated in the development of the interview instrument. Questions focused on the importance and meaning of Charrería for the participants. They also explored preferences and perceived changes in contemporary sport, as well as different relationships between the humans and horses involved. While cattle also participate in the sport, the instrument focused mostly on horses because they dominate in quantity and their role is more visible and prominent compared to bulls. Also, as will be seen below, humans tend to have

more empathetic relationships with horses. However, cattle inevitably emerged in both interview narratives and observations.

All interviews were audio recorded with the consent of the participants and were subsequently transcribed for analysis. Each interview was carefully examined to identify both the heritage, cultural and identity values attributed to Charrería, and those ideas, cases, illustrations and arguments that effectively questioned Charrería from the perspective of animal well-being. Categories were generated based on the literature, but interviews were also allowed to “speak,” enabling the emergence of analytical categories not reported by previous studies.

## **Findings**

### ***The scene***

Charrería is an equestrian sport that seeks to demonstrate equestrian skills, as well as the handling and control of livestock. This positions the sport as a potential practice of reevaluation and repositioning of multispecies power relations. As a practice regulated by the Mexican Charrería Federation (FMC), the sport has two variants, charros (males) and escaramuzas (females). The charros perform nine *suertes* (events) that seek to demonstrate good horse control and skill in handling livestock (horses and bulls) (see Appendix 1). Team-based competitions are held at local, regional and national levels. *Escaramuza* competitions are based on musical choreographies performed at a gallop by female teams. Horses are the only nonhuman participants in escaramuzas. In both variants of the sport, quarter horses and criollos (mixed breeds) are by far the most common. According to the official regulations, the

bulls must weigh at least 400 kilos for the bull riding suerte; however, in practice, especially in training, this is not always the case.

Charrería is considered the national sport of Mexico. Due to its wide popularity as a sport throughout the country, it is practised not only in officially regulated competitions, but also in informal environments, mostly in rural spaces. Whether in exhibitions, competitions or training, Charrería is frequently part of popular festivals, equestrian events at different levels and official competitions.

Although Charrería originated in rural Mexico, it now takes place in various social and cultural contexts, involving different socioeconomic groups. However, to a large extent, Charrería continues to thrive in agricultural and rural livestock settings across the northern, central, and southern regions of the country. According to Palomar (2004), Charrería remains a sex-segregated and male-dominated practice within Mexican society. Charros are associated with strength, courage, and domination, while by contrast escaramuzas are linked to beauty and femininity (Ramírez 2016). Their relationships with horses and bulls hold diverse social meanings for the charros, serving as a means for them to exhibit their dominance, control, and strength, while also providing a site for negotiating and renegotiating the aforementioned masculine and feminine values (Palomar 2004). These male-dominated dimensions have been reported within other equestrian practices within rural contexts elsewhere in the State of Mexico (Monterrubio, Dashper, and Hernández-Espinosa 2023).

Charrería holds a relevant sporting, institutional, tourism and economic importance within the country. The national championships are organised and promoted by institutions with political power in sports and tourism; these include the FMC, the host State Government and the Tourism Secretariat, as well as the National Sports Commission. For example, the seventy-eighth edition of the National Charro Championship, held in October 2023 in the



state of Zacatecas, broke records for attendance and the number of participating teams and had a significant impact on the tourism industry. A hotel occupancy of more than 60 % in the state, with almost 56 thousand people staying, and an economic benefit of more than 250 million Mexican pesos were officially reported (Zacatecas 2022).

The sport is also practised in the United States. The official national tournament held in Mexico in 2022 brought together charro and escaramuza teams from both Mexico and the United States. The presence and political, social and cultural relevance of this sport in the United States is so significant that it has been considered a transforming agent of Mexican American citizenships and identities in that country (Barraclough 2019). These international relations open up Charrería to a wider range of ethical perspectives, thereby potentially challenging the prevailing model of human-animal relations on which it is based and problematising its social licence to operate.

### ***Charrería as heritage... and much more***

Since 2016, Charrería has been recognised as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. As institutionalised global heritage, Charrería, including all the practices, traditions, customs, values and interactions it promotes, must be safeguarded for future generations. Charros are aware and proud of the global heritage value of Charrería. The heritage and sporting value of Charrería is also officially recognised by the Mexican State. In 1945 the federal government declared Charrería the official sport of the country; this declaration remains valid in modern Mexico, exposing the cultural values on which this recognition was built to contemporary resignification processes. As explored below, it is precisely this dual status - as sport and cultural tradition - that complicates the possibility of introducing legal protections for the animals participating within Charrería and contributes to contestation about meanings and acceptable practices.

Charrería is not the only cultural practice that holds heritage value in the country. Other cultural practices such as bullfighting, *jaripeos* (bull riding) and cockfighting are events that in some Mexican subcultures are usually associated with festivities, art, history and culture and, therefore, are linked to notions of cultural heritage (Esparza Jiménez 2022; Quintero Venegas and López López 2018; Ramírez Barreto 2016). However, unlike these practices, Charrería is deeply associated with the culture, tradition and identity of an entire country. The charro is recognised as a symbol of Mexican culture and traditions, which is why fourteenth September, one day before the commemoration of Mexican independence, has been celebrated as the National Charro Day since 1932 (Lozada 2021). Charros and escaramuzas show great pride in the historical and contemporary status of Charrería. An escaramuza who has participated in national competitions commented,

“we [charros and escaramuzas] are Intangible Cultural Heritage and we are the national sport par excellence... [Charrería] reflects Mexican tradition and culture... and that fills me with pride.”

In the same vein, Charrería has significant institutional recognition and support, which positions it not only as a sport but as a larger structure with broader implications. At the highest level, Charrería is regulated by the FMC, whose mission is

“to maintain, preserve and promote, inside and outside of the National territory, the customs, values and traditions of Mexico in general and of Charrería, as well as to promote the practice of the sport of Charrería and all the activities that are related to it in civic, educational, social and cultural aspects” (FMC 2011).

In addition, charros are considered a reserve of the armed forces, which is why they are present in the parades celebrating Mexico's independence day (Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional 2016). The multiple values that Charrería possesses place Charrería not only as a

sporting, cultural, identity and heritage force, but also as a political and military force. Thus, the economic, sporting, institutional and political importance of Charrería places it as a powerful agent of self-preservation.

Considering the different spheres of Mexican society in which Charrería is present, it is not surprising that Charrería is deeply associated with national identity, Mexican traditions and Mexicanness. Our participants suggested that being a charro is a symbol of national identity and represents, within the country and abroad, the pride of being Mexican. The charro and escaramuza costumes are closely associated with national pride - with the pride of being Mexican. Represented in a charro hat and costume for men, and in long, colourful dresses for women, Charrería costumes are synonymous with Mexicanness. A charro, who by family tradition started in Charrería at the age of three, said “dressing as a charro is dressing as Mexico”. Thus, exposing Charrería to any possible dispute means challenging the cultural, social, economic and political values that build the identity of a whole nation.

Charrería is often an intergenerational practice. For most of our interviewees, the sport has been inherited from parents, grandparents and previous generations. Therefore, the sport holds relevance at an individual level for those who practise it. The collective and individual importance of the sport lies not only in its cultural and national identity value, but also in terms of its family and personal meaning. Additionally, Charrería generates a sense of camaraderie among its practitioners; hence the popular charro phrase “in every charro a brother” (Palomar 2004). It is thus not surprising that Charrería is seen as a lifestyle and that the meanings attributed to the sport are closely bound up with other aspects of the charro/escaramuza’s life: A charro who has competed at state levels commented, “Charrería is my life, it is one of the most beautiful things in my life.” As a result, for any possible

change in Charrería practice, both individual and collective consent of those who participate in Charrería would be challenging and require careful negotiation.

In summary, contemporary Charrería has unique meanings, values and heritage importance, institutionally and collectively legitimised by nationalist ideas and interests that go beyond culture and sport. However, the negotiations and resignifications that Charrería may experience will need to be examined and challenged by structures, institutions, collectivities and individuals who see themselves as stewarding the nationalist, cultural, social, economic and political interests of a nation. The contemporary structure of Charrería, therefore, represents a significant player in the face of any possibility of dispute.

### *Charrería as a concern for animal welfare*

The universal and national value of Charrería as heritage has been widely based on anthropocentric positions. It is human traditions that are upheld and celebrated, and the animals involved are not considered as individual agents with wants and needs but as props to support human actions. However, within the framework of changes in public ethics around animal welfare, the interspecies interactions of Charrería as heritage and sport compel examining power relationships between humans and animals that participate in it. Horses and cattle in Charrería are at the disposal of humans and, in a sport where strength, speed, toughness and the desire to win predominate, animal welfare is constantly compromised.

Although notions of equestrian abuse are culture specific and depend on the equestrian practice in question (Monterrubio, Dashper, and Hernández-Espinosa 2023b), there are practices within Charrería that potentially compromise the welfare of horses and cattle. There is a growing interest in animal welfare and protection in Mexico (De la Torre Torres 2020). The General Animal Welfare Law in Mexico recognises that wild and domestic animals are beings capable of feeling and suffering and therefore have welfare needs; this national law

protects animal welfare. In the State of Mexico, in particular, it is prohibited to encourage animals to attack each other, and to have fights as public or private shows, however, charreadas, bullfights and cockfights are exempt from said law (Estado de México 2006).

In this vein, some interspecies cultural practices that compromise animal welfare have been seriously questioned within the country. Bullfighting, for example, has been questioned from posthumanist ethical perspectives as it involves the suffering and violent death of bulls (Quintero Venegas and López López 2018); the contestation between this practice's cultural value and animal welfare has led to the indefinite judicial suspension of bullfighting shows in the Plaza Monumental México (Mexico City), the largest in the world and traditionally considered the most important in the Americas (Forbes staff 2022). Similarly, proposals for state decrees that consider cockfights and bullfighting festivals as intangible cultural heritage of some states of the country have been invalidated under the argument that they are events that generate animal suffering and agony (Ramos 2022).

Bearing this in mind, charro-animal relations that threaten animal welfare potentially undermine Charrería's current social licence to operate as both contemporary sport and heritage. During our observations, cases of blood in the mouth or on the back of the horse caused by the bit or spurs were documented. Hitting horses and bulls with whips or similar objects is also a recurring practice. Charrería regulations discursively punish these practices during competitions. According to the regulations, elements such as the type of bit (free of punishment attachments) and spurs as well as the size, weight and condition of participating cattle must be inspected during official competitions. However, violent practices are relatively frequent (even normalised) occurrences and inspections do not always take place, particularly during training and non-official events. The use of electric sticks on unbroken

horses and bulls is also a common practice and seen as necessary by many in the sport, as this field note illustrates:

In the bull riding suerte, near the cage where the bull comes out there is a charro with an electric stick, he touched the back of the bull for the bull to come out quickly and rear... then the *terna* suerte came: Two charros on horseback lasso the bull, one by the head and the other by the hind legs. The charros pull in opposite directions until they knock the bull down, leaving him completely stretched out on the ground. The bull ends up giving up and cannot get up from the ground, although he is already freed from the ties. The charros make several efforts to lift the bull, one of them pulls him by the tail, and when unsuccessful, bends and even bites it. The bull finally gets up when they directly put the electric stick on him. (ethnography, August 2022)

However, evolving ideas of animal welfare are beginning to question these sporting practices and in turn the heritage meaning of Charrería. Equine ethological perspectives suggest that horses experience high levels of stress when feeling chased or cornered (Hill 2006), as occurs in *manganas*, a suerte in which an unbroken horse is chased at a gallop, lassoed and brought down. In response, there have been calls in the United States for adjustments to the official regulations for their application in that country. These adaptations penalise charros, for example, for “unnecessarily whipping the mares when herding them or hitting them on the head” (FMC 2023, 100). Although from foreign contexts with different attitudes to animal ethics, these adaptations demonstrate the possibility of structural change and illustrate how changing public ethics in relation to animal welfare may lead to modifications of Charrería practices.

Charrería sport involves risks for both human and non-human participants. Observations, interviews and informal conversations revealed that in both charros and escaramuzas, horses

and cattle can suffer falls that end in fractures. In becoming useless and non-functional beings, horses are rendered a killable commodity. The slaughter of horses in abattoirs, many of them clandestine, has led to activism by Mexican non-governmental organisations against these practices, which are considered to be animal cruelty (Igualdadanimal, n/d). Through the lens of animal welfare, Charrería can thus be interpreted differently than through the lens of human heritage. When a more multispecies perspective is adopted - considering both human and nonhuman interests and experiences - Charrería involves possibilities to rethink the relationships between humans and the participating animals. While for some this may threaten the preservation of traditional Charrería heritage, it may also be a necessary re-evaluation if Charrería is to maintain its SLO both within Mexico and the wider international community.

The interest in animal welfare is not completely foreign to charros. Some participants recognise horses as sentient beings, with the capacity not only to experience pain but also to develop communication and affection with their human companions. They recognise horses not as pets but as sporting companions and, sometimes, family members worthy of care, empathy and respect. A 39-year-old charro commented,

“the love of the horse is extremely exceptional, it is not just an animal, it is a part of you... it is another family member that must be respected and cared for, it has no replacement, he is a friend who goes with you everywhere.”

Additionally, some participants are aware of the mistreatment that the participation of horses (and cattle to a much lesser extent) in the sport can entail and express their disagreement with this. A charro who started in the sport aged six commented,

“I would change the treatment of animals [in Charrería]... there are people who make animals suffer, they shouldn't hit them.”

Participants' concern for animal welfare thus leads to internal tensions for some charros of what Charrería involves for other species. These interpretations of human-animal relationships and, therefore, of heritage reveal emerging and subtle forms of contestation within the same group; it is not an open conflict between opposing social groups (charros and non-charros), but rather nuanced forms of re-evaluation that are emerging within the same group of stakeholders.

The practices of Charrería are thus beginning to be questioned on the grounds of animal welfare even amongst Charrería practitioners themselves. As its traditions are problematised from multispecies perspective, it becomes increasingly evident that it is not only human interests and experiences that matter in this multispecies heritage setting. Within the Mexican context, such challenges are only just emerging. However, as the wider influence of global public ethics on animal welfare becomes more prevalent, such challenges are likely to escalate and the SLO of Charrería may be questioned. This raises the possibility of increased tension and contestation between the desire to preserve the cultural heritage of *humanity*, as inscribed in the UNESCO list, and respect and care for the other animals involved in the sport. We discuss these issues further in the next section.

### **Discussion: Charrería as contested heritage**

Heritage is always open to contestation and challenge over meanings and significance (Liu, Dupre, and Jin 2021), and Charrería is no exception. Its significance as cultural heritage, as integral to national identity, to intergenerational relationships, and to pride and prestige, is evident in the words and actions of the participants in this study. In many ways, Charrería *is* Mexico. It is thus an extremely emotive practice and its status as national sport and symbol is largely undisputed. However, a multispecies perspective on Charrería offers a rather different



interpretation and requires consideration of the experiences of nonhuman participants (horses and bulls) as well as humans, leading to questions about animal welfare and ethical human-animal interactions. When considering the roles and experiences of the non-human participants - horses and cattle - Charrería is a problematic practice that raises serious issues about animal welfare and the ethics of involving other animals in human sport and heritage (see Jonsson 2012).

Similar to bullfighting, *jaripeo* and cockfighting, Charrería is starting to receive some criticism, both within charro groups and from outsider groups. Animal rights organisation PETA (n.d.) describes Charrería as “a series of bullying circus acts” and several states in the United States, including California and Texas, have outlawed “horse tripping” - the act of deliberately bringing a horse to the ground, as features in the *mangana* suerte. This threatens the SLO of Charrería, at least in the United States. Due to the globalisation of sport and social media, these threats are likely to also spread to Mexico as calls increase to safeguard animal welfare.

Some of the participants in our study recognise the need to consider animal welfare, particularly in relation to their riding horses who they consider friends and family members. However, it is notable that this attitude does not extend to the unbroken horses used in some suertes, or to the cattle involved. Indeed, these animals are positioned as tools in human sport and pleasure, rather than as sentient beings who matter in themselves (Dashper 2014). Their worth is reduced to that of objects to be played with, and then sold for small financial gain for slaughter. There is thus a paradox in the interspecies relations within Charrería wherein the charros and escaramuzas often recognise and respect their riding horses as valuable creatures worthy of care and good treatment, but dismiss the other horses and bulls as not worthy of consideration. In Charrería, not all animals are equal.

The tension between preserving the cultural traditions of Charrería and responding -either in subtle or overt ways- to concerns about animal welfare are likely to become more pressing as public attitudes to animal rights and human-animal interactions change (Miele et al. 2011). A male participant who has done Charrería for 31 years said, “not all people agree with the use of animals in the wrong way; the development of the sport demands it, but greater protection is already being given to this type of animals, both horses and bulls.” In the same vein, during one of the observations at a local competition, an escaramuza recounted when a few months earlier a charro horse was beaten by five people at a Charrería event, the case was filmed. She narrated that the video was circulated in the media and a Society for the protection of abused horses in the country managed to confiscate the horse. She added that was a criticism and a strong blow to Charrería (fieldwork, 21 October 21 2023). This threatens not only the SLO of Charrería as a sport, but also the status and preservation of Charrería as heritage. Can heritage be preserved and continued if it is predicated on the abuse and mistreatment of other animals? Attempts to change aspects of Charrería considered problematic on animal welfare grounds in the United States have been met with mixed responses. Although some practices have been banned, many states still allow the full set of suertes and discussions are sometimes framed as xenophobic, even racist, against Mexican culture and Mexican people (Humane Farming Association 2023; Najera-Ramirez 1996). This highlights an important tension at the heart of Charrería and its contestation as both cultural heritage and contemporary sport. The globalised, Global North-dominated values of animal welfare and animal ethics in sport come into conflict with local cultural heritage in communities in the Global South.

This exposes a real challenge between preserving cultural traditions, and responding to greater knowledge and awareness of issues such as animal welfare; between local traditions and practices, and global standards and protections. Monterrubio, Dashper, and Hernández-Espinosa (2023b) suggest that ideas of animal abuse are culturally specific, and indeed local

practices and behaviours need to be taken into account. However, animal welfare is increasingly a global issue (Fraser 2008). Although animal welfare is not currently regulated by a single international law framework (White 2013), there are growing efforts to come to some kind of international consensus. The World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA 2007, 3) proposed a Universal Declaration on Animal Welfare with the overall goal of achieving “an agreement among people and nations to recognize that animals are sentient and can suffer, to respect their welfare needs, and to end animal cruelty - for good”. Although this has not yet been endorsed by the UN, it represents a movement to accept and adopt some global and universal standards for animal welfare. Within this context, all human interactions with animals will come under increased scrutiny. Other equestrian sports such as horse racing are having to adapt some of their practices in the light of pressure to be seen to prioritise animal welfare and to retain their SLO and continue to practise (Hampton, Jones, and McGreevy 2020). It is unlikely that Charrería will be able to use the shield of world heritage status to hide behind when it comes to addressing mistreatment of horses and cattle within the sport.

However, this does not mean that Charrería should be abandoned and consigned to history. Heritage is a living act through which contemporary societies, attitudes and behaviours interact and dialogue with the past. It is thus not fixed, and can - perhaps must - change and adapt over time. Charrería is hugely important to many Mexicans, within and outside the country, and to Mexico as a state. It may be that adaptations of some of the suertes will be needed in order to improve animal welfare, whilst maintaining many of the traditional practices, symbolism and meanings that so many people - Charrería participants and others - value.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored Charrería as a manifestation of cultural heritage, a competitive sport and an arena of interspecies relations, highlighting how increasing tensions between these different facets potentially threaten the sport's social licence to operate. We will now reflect briefly on how the study thereby helps advance debates on heritage and animal welfare in general, and horses' welfare in sports in particular. In so doing, we will also consider its practical implications, limitations and opportunities for future research.

First, the paper has highlighted and problematised the inherent relations between heritage and animal welfare. Without some form of change it is likely that the SLO of Charrería as a contemporary sport will be called into question, not only by non-charro stakeholders but also by Charrería participants themselves. A balance needs to be struck between heritage preservation, human traditions and animal welfare. Given Charrería's social, cultural and political significance within Mexican society, any changes that result would require consent not only of practitioners but a much wider range of stakeholders. One practical implication of this is that international organisations may have a role to play here in helping guide efforts to protect and maintain human cultural traditions and the need to respond to changing awareness and protecting other animals and the environment. In the case of UNESCO specifically, the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage focuses on safeguarding such traditions rather than freezing them in time. It also advocates for community participation in identifying, defining and managing their own heritage. Inclusion on the ICH List may thus be an enabler rather than a barrier to the future transformation of Charrería.

Second, the paper has illustrated how heritage can sometimes clash with changing public ethics, including those who own that heritage, leading to dispute and contestation about the

preservation of some heritage practices. These debates can unfold simultaneously at local, national and international levels: The adaptations demanded by/of US-based charros demonstrate that structural changes can protect SLO in ways that do not necessarily undermine the core character of the heritage practices in question. As above, the possible emergence of a global framework for animal welfare suggests a key role for international (and national) organisations. This in turn points to the need to include diverse perspectives in the way such a framework might be constructed, to ensure that the voices and experiences of people (and animals) from the Global South are taken into consideration.

Third, by considering heritage as a shared multispecies phenomenon, we have demonstrated that a less anthropocentric approach potentially expands our conceptual understanding of heritage itself. A multispecies perspective underlines its living and evolving character, and particularly the way intangible heritage is permeated by power relations that impact upon people and animals alike. In so doing, we highlight the potential usefulness of adding species alongside more established (and intersecting) critical categories like race, gender and class.

This study has focused on the significance and implications of other species' involvement within human-defined heritage within a specific cultural and geographic setting. Increasing international mobility and global debates about animal welfare are already impacting on the way Charrería is understood and practised within central Mexico. Future research could therefore usefully focus on other examples of multispecies intangible heritage elsewhere in the world. The development of this wider empirical base would in turn open up ideas about how to centre more effectively the experience of the animals themselves within our analyses.

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