Challenges and Perspectives of African Heritage

African Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in the Globalization Process

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda

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My name is John De John De Coninck. I work for a Ugandan NGO. It's called the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU). I know, for some of you I don't look very Ugandan, but actually I'm one of them.

Hello everybody, my name is Emily Drani. I also worked at the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda for the past 14 years, ending last year, as the executive director but also a co-founder with John. We co-founded this organization mainly with the aim of promoting cultural heritage and its relevance to contemporary development.

The NGO that we founded has been involved in quite a number of interventions to introduce and heighten the appreciation of culture in development. So we're not seeing culture and development as separate concepts, but one and the same. Time has moved on, culture is often seen as something conservative, but even primitive in some contexts. So there is a case to be made that culture is still relevant because there's not a lot of knowledge about documented information, about culture in development. We've also made an effort to engage in contributing to pro-heritage policies. So we've contributed to the National Policy on Culture, as well as the Museums and Monuments Policy, but we've also been invited to contribute to the national development plans.

As we founded the Cross Cultural Foundation of Uganda, we came across the notion of ICH, Intangible Cultural Heritage, or as UNESCO now prefer to call it, "living heritage". The work of UNESCO in the field of promoting and safeguarding ICH has been absolutely critical in the last few years, and since it was ratified in 2003, I think it's 180 states across the world that ratified this Convention. It is the most successful Convention of UNESCO's. CCFU, our organization, has been very proud to be associated with its implementation because for some years we've been accredited as an NGO to the Convention. We've also developed training materials, we've also done consultancy work for UNESCO, so it's been a very productive relationship. In Uganda, there are a number of elements that have been inscribed under the lists of the Convention. There are six of them, five of them have been inscribed under what is called the List of elements in Need of Urgent Safeguarding because they are threatened, because the sustainability cannot be ensured and one under the Representative List. One example among these elements is a dance and a music that comes from one part of the country where a particular type of trumpet is being used. Until recently, there were only two or three very old men who knew how to play these trumpets. Then the element was recognized, it was safeguarded, the government asked for a little bit of support from UNESCO, and the art has been revived by making sure that young people are now being trained to use these trumpets. Generally speaking, one can say that in Uganda, there is little recognition that Intangible Cultural Heritage must absolutely be safeguarded. It is vital for the future of the country.

The problem is that the traditional transmission mechanisms from one generation to another of the skills and practices and other dimensions of Intangible Cultural Heritage are withering away. We find in Uganda there are also some religious groups that tend to feel that culture is something that is unhealthy, that should be disregarded, that does not belong to modern man or modern woman. And these are powerful groups that tend to associate culture with witchcraft and other negative elements. There is a feeling that culture, contrary to what the Convention of UNESCO says, is actually a

brake on development. So we are operating in this context where we need to constantly advocate, as Emily was saying, for the importance of culture, for the linkages between culture and development and promoting documentation, promoting publicity about those interesting examples of where people are actually making an effort to safeguard their ICH or their living heritage.

Emily was mentioning the community museums. They are about twenty five of them. They are voluntary initiatives by families, communities that want to preserve their heritage for the younger generations. There are initiatives in schools to promote the heritage of youngsters. There's also a realization that traditional crafts can bring money, can bring employment, but also in daily life you can't wipe out people's culture and heritage. So for instance, when there is a dispute in a particular village, the role of the cultural institution or the role of the clan is still recognised in bringing a form of justice that is very different from the form of justice that you go to look for in a court of law.

Many of our young people, especially because of information and communication technology, they're exposed to so many other diverse cultures. There are also lots of new materials on the market in terms of what you use when you have cultural practices. Traditional instruments for music are being replaced by modern instruments. In terms of ICH, globalisation has been great in terms of opening up so many options, but where the transmission is weak, I think it has actually weakened it even more because some of the practices and the instruments and the materials that were used have been overtaken by modern ones.

One of the areas that we thought we should also talk a bit more about is our work in education. This stems from the concern that many communities felt this disconnection between the youth because they're in school in modern education systems that don't include culture and their heritage. That motivated us to start heritage clubs, mainly targeting young people and changing the attitudes they have towards culture, seeing it as an opportunity to create, innovate, to have a sense of themselves, of their identity. With support from UNESCO, CCFU was able to work with four universities in Uganda and together with a team of lecturers, come up with a degree course. Now they looked at the different courses that are offered in our universities here and where culture fits more organically, but also where it's lacking, and they came up with a course that is comprehensive.

Unfortunately, because of COVID, they've not been able to roll this course out, but once we finish drafting the course, we have public lectures to test the interest of students, but also to introduce the concept of ICH and living heritage and culture.

There are a number of issues that we had to take into account. One was attitude towards heritage. Culture was a part of the curriculum. It's not part of the content, it's the attitude of the teachers, attitude of the students that needs to be changed to see culture as a resource. In Uganda, we have sixty five ethnic groups. Some have been dominant historically and others have been marginalized historically. So there's always a concern about: are you going to dominate the minority further or what exactly is the agenda? So we try to be neutral in the appreciation of cultural diversity, linking culture to academic subjects and showing that they add value. So if you're speaking about conservation and you talk about traditional medicine or sacred sites, then you make

a clear connection that there is a reason why people who are involved in culture would also want to make sure that the environment is protected. Learners at university level appreciate that the communities have a body of knowledge that they need, and they're able to work with them to generate that knowledge, to document it, to have it shared and publicized, but recognizing them as the source.