

Transboundary cooperation and forms of assistance

Dr. Ndagala's talking notes 27/11/2006

My intervention this afternoon is meant to point out to an important and, probably necessary form of cooperation in dealing with intangible heritage. It has to do with heritage whose prevalence or occurrence transcends national boundaries. The national boundaries of many African countries cut across language blocks or divide communities that constitute cultural blocks. In such situations, there arises the need for cooperation in various forms when it comes to preserving the heritage of the “dissected” entities.

We have such examples in Tanzania that I would like to share with you:

1. Language: The Luo people are found in Mara region of Tanzania and all the way across the border into Kenya's Nyanza Province. There are Luo speakers in Uganda too.
2. Dance: Nyasa people found in Tanzania and Malawi along the eastern and western shores of Lake Nyssa, respectively. These people have a captivating meticulous dance, which in Tanzania is called Mganda. A similar version of the dance known as Karela used to exist in the Copper belt of Zambia. Any attempts to document and list this dance would greatly benefit from transboundary consultations and cooperation.
3. Rituals and ceremonies: The Maasai people are found in Tanzania and occupy an area that spreads all the way across the international border into Kenya in the Districts of Kajiado and Narok. One of the most important cultural institutions of the Maasai is their age-set organization. An age-set groups all boys circumcised in the same “period” into a ritually bound unit of age mates for life. Age grades, on the other hand, are permanent categories which males enter individually at birth and move through as members of their respective age-sets circumcison.

The period of circumcison is opened in Kenya by the Keekonyokie section of the Maasai (the Maasai are divides into a number of sections) through embolosat or emouwo ol kiteng ceremony. All boys circumcised in the same period form an age-set and remain 'worriers' or ilmurran until they get to a ceremony called olng 'esher that transforms them into elders. This ceremony is performed in Tanzania near the Kilimanjaro International Airport by the Kissongo section for all Maasai. This ceremony which brings together thousands of people lasts two to six months. This ceremony can only be held at the same place because:

- it provides perfect space for the ritual symbolism
- It is (was?) big enough for the pastures of the livestock needed to feed the participants
- It is big enough for the construction of the ritual villages
- It has a river that provides the much needed water
- it has the chalk, red ochre and the specific trees needed for ritual housing and the lighting of ceremonial fires

Much as this area is in Tanzania it 'belongs' to all Massai and its crucially important for the preservation of this intangible cultural heritage of the Massai of East Africa.

The reason I have mentioned these examples is to highlight the fact that the documentation and listing of certain heritages may call for inputs from more than one

national authority. This may involve the sharing of information and exchange of lists to identify similarities and overlaps.

Sharing of best practices

- In what ways were the custodians of the heritage involved?
- How were the different problems solved?
- How were resources generated?

Protection is not only documentation and listing, but also, and more importantly, practice. The Maasai cannot practice their *olng 'sher* unless there is easy movement across the administrative boundaries. Moreover, there cannot be preservation of the ceremony unless the physical space on which the latter takes place is protected.

The trans boundary cooperation I am talking about is not money dependent. It is dependent on creativity on the part of the culture professional, political will and the willingness to share information and experience.

As Africa works towards greater integration, the cross boundary heritage provides opportunities for stronger ties in the other sectors—political and economic.