

Distribution: limited

UNESCO/PRS/CLT/TPC/SPL/3  
PARIS, 15 April 1987  
Original: French

SPECIAL COMMITTEE OF TECHNICAL AND LEGAL EXPERTS  
ON THE SAFEGUARDING OF FOLKLORE

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS  
OF THE SAFEGUARDING OF FOLKLORE  
IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

7 MAI 1987

---

This document contains a study by Mr Pierre Sammy-Mackfoy, Inspector General of Education in the Central African Republic, writing in a personal capacity. The opinions expressed in this study do not necessarily reflect those of the Unesco Secretariat.

CPY-87/CONF.208/COL.1

## WHY SHOULD NATIONAL FOLKLORE BE PRESERVED?

### I. INTRODUCTION

Unesco's initiative to restore folklore to its place of honour is highly commendable. This effort will not only make Member States more aware of the importance of folklore at national level, but will also, at the level of individuals and groups, give fresh impetus to the promotion of folklore as something of intrinsic social, economic and political value.

Symptoms of inertia in the development of folklore today are due primarily to difficulty of choosing forms of expression when faced with differing, and sometimes conflicting, cultural trends.

This is epitomized in the situation created by the invasion of modern technologies, which are a threat to the development of folklore and, indeed, to its very existence. We are witnessing the development of two cultural worlds whose frontiers, though still poorly defined, are becoming increasingly clearly marked as the conflicting trends gain strength.

These cultural worlds are split into two very distinct geographical areas.

In countries such as the Central African Republic, a new form of cultural expression is developing in cities and urban centres, and is deeply influenced by modernism: widespread use of radio and television, modern music, dances, so-called 'pop' rhythms, the plastic arts, or even systematic borrowing from foreign languages for communication.

This modernist trend bears the stamp of external influences and an educational structure which alienates young people more and more from the traditions of their environment.

The other cultural world coincides for the most part with so-called rural or semi-urban areas and concerns the illiterate population.

This second world considers itself, rightly or wrongly, to have been more or less abandoned, in view of the lack of interest shown by the public authorities. It has a spontaneous and unstructured mode of existence, and its survival seems to be left to chance since there are no policies to promote it, support it or provide for its organized administration.

Nevertheless, a more careful examination reveals that this second cultural world, the traditional world, is by far the more vibrant and dynamic, as well as being the primary creator of the values of our cultural context. It is a pledge of our authenticity.

Here are to be found the most captivating chants, the folk songs, the lively traditional techniques in arts and crafts, the architecture, the age-old knowledge that is the strength of our healers, etc.

Not only is tradition firmly rooted in an essentially rural population, but it constitutes an inexhaustible source of inspiration for modern forms of culture. Far from yielding to modernism, folklore is growing stronger and blossoming as it proves itself to be a powerful means of escape from the everyday and the living expression of the underprivileged strata of society.

It is deeply imbued with the spirit of place and as such should be sought after and acknowledged as the lifeblood of national culture.

Since folklore is a powerful means of asserting national identity, its preservation and development must necessarily be taken into account in a country's development.

For a full grasp of this issue, folklore must be studied from all angles: social, economic and political.

This is what we shall attempt in this study, which is nevertheless bound to be incomplete and limited by our personal experience.

## II. THE MANY FACES OF FOLKLORE

### A. The social aspects of folklore

This study makes fairly frequent reference to the Central African model, solely with the intention of illustrating our analyses with a few practical examples.

It is well known that the common denominator of African countries, especially those situated between the tropics, is that they are economically restricted and are faced with various problems due to nature and circumstances.

Insufficient stress, however, is placed on the fact that these countries also have in common their rich and varied folklore.

If we take the case of the Central African Republic, located in the heart of Africa, economically handicapped by its landlocked position, we can marvel at the vitality of its folklore, its rich traditions and the diversity of its cultural heritage. This wealth is a social and economic as well as a cultural source of strength and potential, since folklore is part of the living fabric of a nation. It can be seen in everyday activities: farming, hunting, fishing, gathering, birth, death, religious observance, etc., besides contributing to human development, it serves above all to establish closer links between groups which share affinities.

If we attempt to describe the salient aspects of Central African folklore, we find first of all that it is a body of physical, gestural, oral and intellectually creative forms of expression founded on tradition. These may comprise music, dance, religious rites and beliefs, legends, tales and proverbs and community games.

The considerable ethnic diversity of music and dancing make them a powerful means of bringing together the different social groups in the population. Music and dance accordingly cement the bonds of national unity while at the same time they are an incitement to reach beyond differences.

In the Central African Republic, folk dances and songs can be either spontaneous or organized, and they obey rules governed solely by tradition and circumstance. This, for example, is true of ritual dances invoking the spirit of the ancestors and calling for their protection or blessing. On this occasion, the village elders, older women and young people who have completed their initiation mingle as one, without any distinctions of class, age or sex. This enables the younger people to benefit from the knowledge and experience

of their elders. The same applies to practices surrounding death, birth or marriage. These are occasions for celebrating the reunion of long-lost friends and relatives and for outbursts of joy or sorrow in which all can share.

Lullabies sung by women are not only intended to stop babies from crying or sending them to sleep. They are also a powerful emotional exchange between mother and child. As was so pertinently stated by the Secretary-General of the ACCT<sup>1</sup> on the publication of an anthology of lullabies from Central Africa:

'Singing a lullaby in Africa is not a mere routine activity. It is an occasion when the singer tells of the artistic and spiritual riches of the African soul... Lullabies sing the virtues of ancestors, parents, relatives and the race. They describe the beauty of landscapes, villages, hills and streams'.

In other words, folklore, in the form of lullabies in this instance, can be a powerful means of fostering love and attachment for one's native land.

And what of the griots, who are in fact the living archives of Africa and the memory of the African people and its history? In many communities, griots have been the means of handing down moral, cultural and military values from generation to generation, thereby instilling in young people a sense of belonging to a group of which they are proud. Griots are sometimes said to be the balm which soothes the anger of kings and abates the pride of warriors, recommending wisdom and prudence to all, and in some cases reconciling the opponents in family quarrels. Griots play an all-important social role, for they benefit the entire community.

Folk dances are not only for entertainment or for relaxing after hard work, but also for surpassing and projecting oneself into the future and the world of the imagination.

Associated with these primary forms of folk expression, namely, songs and dances, rituals and religious practices do even more to hold groups together and unite them in a common destiny. Thus, when twins are born, big festivities are usually organized in the village, to which parents and relatives, friends and allies are invited.

Similarly, death rites are conducive to forgiveness, reconciliation and the forgetting of ancient feuds which sometimes go back several generations. Funeral rites or ceremonies to mark the end of the mourning period, accompanied by the appropriate songs, dances and drumming, convey enigmatic messages which bring the living into contact with the dead and send the initiated into a state of trance. The same applies to blood alliances, sealing for all eternity the destiny of thousands and thousands of men and women who originally had nothing in common. The rituals celebrating this alliance are so rich and complex that no one in the two groups or clans concerned would think of violating its rules. Like agricultural, divinatory or marriage rituals, rituals concerning blood alliances have been a powerful catalyst for group cohesion as well as national unity.

Another aspect of folklore, now acknowledged to be in the public interest, concerns divinatory rituals which are sometimes used in the modern legal

1. Agency for Cultural and Technical Co-operation.

system to bring out the truth in a complex case where Cartesian logic is inapplicable.

Traditional religious ceremonies are not intended solely for communion with the spirit of ancestors: they also have the power to bind all members of a community in an act of solidarity in the event of disasters, sickness, misfortune or witchcraft. These ritual practices permit a smooth transition or an appropriate adaptation to religious practices imported from the Western world. The outstanding advantage of such an adaptation is that, in the long term, imported religions are fully integrated into the community while taking local cultural values into account. Today, this is true of the liturgy and hymns, which have become intermingled with the sources of local folklore. This integration gives new religious practices their universal character and concerns nationals as closely as people from other countries. It does much to attenuate the 'foreign' aspect of religions introduced into the country.

Together with songs, dances and rituals, oral literature has an undeniable social impact. Thus, tales, proverbs and riddles are an integral part of the education and training of young people, while the 'great palaver', a sort of informal forum, allows older and mature men to refine their wisdom and share their experience with the young.

Passed on by griots, courtiers or mentors, oral literature ensures that traditions and hence social ethics will survive through the ages. It introduces young people to a real or imaginary world with which they are familiar and which steepens them in the authentic values specific to their civilization. Oral literature is the unrivalled medium for moral precepts and rules of conduct governing individuals and groups. It stimulates children's cultural awareness and develops their memory while exercising their intelligence.

The profusion and variety of oral literature, as well as the often enigmatic method used by initiators, develops in children a feeling for effort, sacrifice, beauty and poetry, a spirit of creativity and respect for the rules governing society.

Far from being weakened by modern communication techniques, oral tradition is still a powerful force at the local level and ensures the continuity of rules and customs. Finally, it forms the backdrop to all African thinking, while reinforcing national unity in a country such as the Central African Republic where a single language, apart from French, is spoken by all.

An area which belongs to folklore but which still receives insufficient attention from government authorities concerns popular or community games which date from time immemorial. These games belong entirely to oral tradition and obey rules passed on by word of mouth and from generation to generation. As in days gone by, they play a major role in forging links between neighbouring villages, urban neighbourhoods and groups of individuals of the same age. They take a variety of forms, and all help to foster friendship, comradeship, solidarity, team spirit, modesty, courage and sportsmanship. These games usually oppose the representatives or champions of two villages and draw large crowds, culminating in singing, dancing and various exploits in which the former opponents join forces, carried along by the same emotional impetus. Most widespread among such games are traditional wrestling, long-distance races, javelin-throwing and swimming. Long after the contests have ended, popular rejoicing continues late into the night. Any pretext is good enough for dancing and festivities.

In Africa, folklore plays a dominant role in all national festivities without exception, and is the cornerstone of all organized events.

#### B. Economic aspects of folklore

Today, the cultural dimension of development is universally acknowledged. In this regard a Unesco expert has said:

'Cultural development not only accompanies economic development but underpins it. Development cannot have conflicting aspects which evolve separately and strain in different directions'.<sup>1</sup>

In a country such as the Central African Republic, folklore is the very essence of culture. It is the age-old form of expression whereby the people give vent to their joy, suffering and innermost feelings. Today, folklore is still a factor to be reckoned with in national life, so much so that its economic impact is quite considerable.

At a certain period in our history, external administrative and religious constraints imposed on folklore in an attempt to stifle it had a disastrous effect on the economy and demography. Indeed, measures taken by the colonial administration against folk dances, funeral ceremonies and various rituals considered to constitute a disturbance of the peace, whether at night or at other times, eventually deprived the population of its one remaining resource which enabled it to face up to the rigours of the system philosophically and with good humour. These measures spelt death for the countryside and the villages; young people drifted into the towns, thereby starting a rural exodus which was to increase in scale and severity. The villagers were deeply frustrated, and their hearts were no longer in their work, since their songs and drums were no longer there to help them summon up their courage and surpass themselves in their trials and tribulations.

This led to a drop in the production of cash crops such as cotton and oil-bearing seeds.

An equally negative effect on folklore was produced by the mistaken interpretation of precepts from imported religions. In half a century, an entire region (Mbomou) lost virtually all its rich folklore of songs, dances, popular festivities and rituals as a result of religious fanaticism.

In another generation or two the population in this region will have lost the very roots of its identity.

Elsewhere, traditional songs and dances, when provided with a suitable framework of political and administrative support, can give rise to a prosperous industry, thanks to a whole system including recording, the press, mechanical aids, organized production, and the sale and distribution of magnetic tapes, films and records. Such an industry, whether national or regional, makes it possible to offer original musical products for sale abroad and to contribute something new and different to other peoples. Hence a melting-pot of cultures in a spirit of intercultural fellowship. Folk songs and dances are also a bottomless source of inspiration for modern music. The repertoires of a great many modern music groups in the towns have been enriched with tunes and rhythms derived from folklore. National ballets are

1. Jacques Renard, Unesco - Technical Report PP/1977 - 78/4. 131.5.

another area in which the cultural and economic dimension of folklore comes into its own. Not only do the songs, dances and rhythms of the various ethnic groups blend into a harmonious and dynamic whole, but they bring foreign currency into the country when ballets are performed abroad or when they promote tourism.

At a time when the winds of reform are blowing throughout education systems, folklore is a primary source of inspiration for national literature (tales, legends, riddles, chronicles, etc.). This makes for a varied output of educational material, adapted to the realities of the environment and costing little. Discovery of the traditional literary world is a very important part of the education of children and teenagers.

Promotion of traditional songs also calls for the improvement of musical instruments which can advantageously replace or supplement imported instruments.

Traditional community games can also become national attractions and prove profitable if properly organized. This is true, for example, of 'Senegalese wrestling', which draws as many crowds to the stadium as a football match.

Finally, statuettes and figurines have undoubtedly done most to enable Europe to discover African art. Before being degraded and turned into objets d'art sought after by tourists and collectors, masks, statuettes and figurines were primarily the material focus of a powerful folklore. During incantations, prayers or ritual dances, the Yanda or Dagui 'priest'<sup>1</sup> would cut himself off from the secular world by covering his face with a mask. This mask has now become a commercial article, to be found in museums and also in art centres.

It is clear, then, that folklore, besides being a source of entertainment and a reserve of cultural energy, is also indispensable to the realization of human potential and to socio-economic development.

### C. Political aspects of folklore

Folklore undeniably helps to break down the barriers between ethnic groups and regional specificities. It is an effective means of combating tribalism. Minorities make themselves known and assert themselves through their rich and original folklore which is often sought after to grace national occasions. Healthy emulation allows each social group to display its wealth in terms of folklore and contribute its store of culture to the common heritage on which national identity is built. And national identity is a harmonious blend of all local specificities.

By taking from folklore their own distinctive forms of thinking and self-expression, all countries seek to be authentic and to combat cultural alienation in a manner which is highly beneficial to their people.

Cultural exchanges, in the form of the performance of national ballets abroad or cultural encounters at international level, are all a means of self-assertion for a people and a nation. They are part of the process of exchange and interdependence so dear to the humanists of today.

---

1. Yanda and Dagui: gods of ancestors in the Central African Republic.

Folklore can play a leading political role, both inside a country and beyond its frontiers, provided that it is properly organized, structured, planned and enhanced: provided, in a word, that there is a coherent and dynamic cultural policy.

#### CONCLUSION

When seeking to enhance the value of folklore, it is important to bear in mind that it is not inert and changeless. Folklore is dynamic and alters with overall changes in society. It grows, develops and gains complexity in time and space, extending beyond its original setting to reach other population groups and other peoples.

There is a need, then, to work out an appropriate policy to preserve folklore. Such a policy would include systematic cataloguing of traditions and including folklore in the school curriculum.