

**REGIONAL CONSULTATIVE MEETING ON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**  
**BEYOND BORDERS: SAFEGUARDING THROUGH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION**

**Diffuse Heritage and Diffuse Communities.**

**1.0 Introduction**

Since the inception of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, in this case the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the need to promote peace and unity amongst the peoples of the world, while recognizing their distinctive attributes as members of the global human society, has continued to gather momentum as the dream and ultimate aspiration of the United Nations fraternity. In this endeavour, UNESCO, through its various intergovernmental and non-governmental entities, has developed international standard setting instruments as well as programs and projects for the enrichment of humanity within the context of sustainable development.

Inspired by its inaugural maxim that peace starts in the minds of men, as well as other fundamental instruments relevant to the social, economic and political rights of humankind, UNESCO, in its 32<sup>nd</sup> Session of General Conference adopted the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Paris on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 2003.

Amongst other concerns, this Convention recognizes the importance of a peoples' intrinsic disposition as a fundamental resource for the development of cultural diversity and promotion of sustainable development amongst communities. In this regard, the processes of globalization and social transformation, and the conditions they create, are identified as a glaring threat to the intangible cultural heritage of humanity and in effect to sustainable development.

**2.0 Intangible Cultural Heritage**

'Intangible Cultural Heritage', according to Article 2 of the Convention means *the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their heritage.* In this

definition, the convention, bestows upon the communities groups and, in some cases, individuals the exclusive function of identifying elements of their intangible cultural heritage. It recognizes them as the creators and bearers of their intangible cultural heritage. As creators and bearers of the intangible cultural heritage, communities possess the custody of the various tenets of their ICH elements. They are better placed to explain the essence and the significance of those intangible cultural heritage elements hence would effectively prescribe the most appropriate means of safeguarding the elements. Indeed the communities' active involvement and informed consent is sought in the process of identification and safeguarding of their intangible cultural heritage.

The Convention highlights the dynamic nature of the ICH owing to their constant recreation by the communities in response to the changing environment, interaction with nature, historical experience and other related factors that may impact on the overall maintenance and transmission of the element from generation to generation. In both the Convention and its Operational Directives, its acknowledged that the intangible cultural heritage of communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals does provide them with the symbol of identity and a guarantee for continuity in the ever changing and challenging socio-cultural, economic and political matrix of human life.

To this end, the convention embraces interventions that promote intercultural dialogue amongst communities, groups and individuals at the local, the national and the international levels. In effect, the convention endeavours to promote mutual respect amongst communities as well as promotion of cultural diversity and human creativity while upholding the objectives and principles of the international human rights instruments. Overly, the communities, groups and individual practitioners are granted the highest place in the hierarchy of players that propel implementation of the 2003 Convention for safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. In other words, the communities, the groups and the individuals who create and live their intangible cultural heritage cannot be viewed in isolation from their ICH but rather in solidarity with it.

### **3.0 Cultural Heritage and Communities**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization does not attach a stringent definition to the term 'community' possibly due to its diverse and phenomenal applications across the board. To a great extent, however, the term community would apply to a network or group of people with a common denominator, background or aspirations especially arising from their ethnicity, geographical habitation or even religious or cultural acquaintances. In the spirit of this convention, there is the general reference to groups and individuals which gives further flexibility to creators and bearers of intangible cultural heritage worldwide without insinuation of any exclusion.

Nevertheless, communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals are the undisputed creators and proponents of the broad spectrum of intangible cultural heritage worldwide. They are inspired or compelled by their long-term interaction with nature and the environment as well as their historical experiences, such as the missionary activities, worldwar1 and 2, slave trade, civil war, famine, epidemics, colonization etc or merely through conditional influences occasioned by phenomenal occurrences such as voluntary or involuntary migration, nomadic life, deportation, etc.

Whichever maybe the cause for the movement of the communities and for the creation of specified ICH elements by the community, it is common practice that the communities remain attached to their ethos, social attributes and cultural expressions inherited from their previous acquaintances. They may also espouse new cultural trends prevalent in the new environment. These cultural elements are created primarily to guarantee the survival and sustenance of the community and ultimately as their symbol of identity and continuity hence their transmission from generation to generation.

#### **4.0 Diffusion of Communities and Heritage**

Over the years communities around the world have continuously relocated from one form of habitation to another taking along with them huge reservoirs of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. This heritage is packaged both in their intrinsic and extrinsic forms with profound bearing on the environmental backgrounds within which they were created and flourished. In practical sense,

such heritage in transit gets exposed to new circumstances which would positively or negatively impact on the viability of the element making it stronger or weaker. The changing environmental infrastructure and the new social framework could cause the immigrants to adapt to new cultural traits, create new innovations or recreate their old expressions as an adjustment to cope with their new physical or social realities of life.

In some cases, migration by communities may be motivated by the desire for more conducive settlements within which they would enhance their livelihood thus making it more probable for their heritage to flourish. In this way the intangible cultural heritage of the communities are strengthened through broad dissemination and greater visibility. Indeed immigrant communities around the world have used their opportunity in the Diaspora to disseminate their languages thus effectively broadening the scope of viability and visibility of their intangible cultural heritage. In practical terms, diffusion of communities can be said to have a dual effect on the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, both sides dictated by the significance of the heritage on one part and the prevailing circumstances in the new environment on the other part.

## **5.0 Diffusion of Communities in Eastern Africa**

Historians, Anthropologists and Geologists continue to portray Eastern Africa as the 'cradle of mankind' owing to the discovery of the oldest human fossil in the region. While this may be held in doubt or even dispute, the migration trends into Eastern Africa have continued to offer outstanding landmarks that point to explicit indicators explaining the movement of communities into Eastern Africa from within and outside Africa. The cultural traits of the communities which include the fundamental manifestation of congruent language elements, vividly point at clear relations between language groups namely; the Bantu, the Nilotes, the Cushites, the Semites; and the host of ethnic communities associated to them.

The 2003 convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage recognizes the significance of languages as an aspect of the oral traditions domain that is instrumental as the vehicle for transmission of intangible cultural heritage

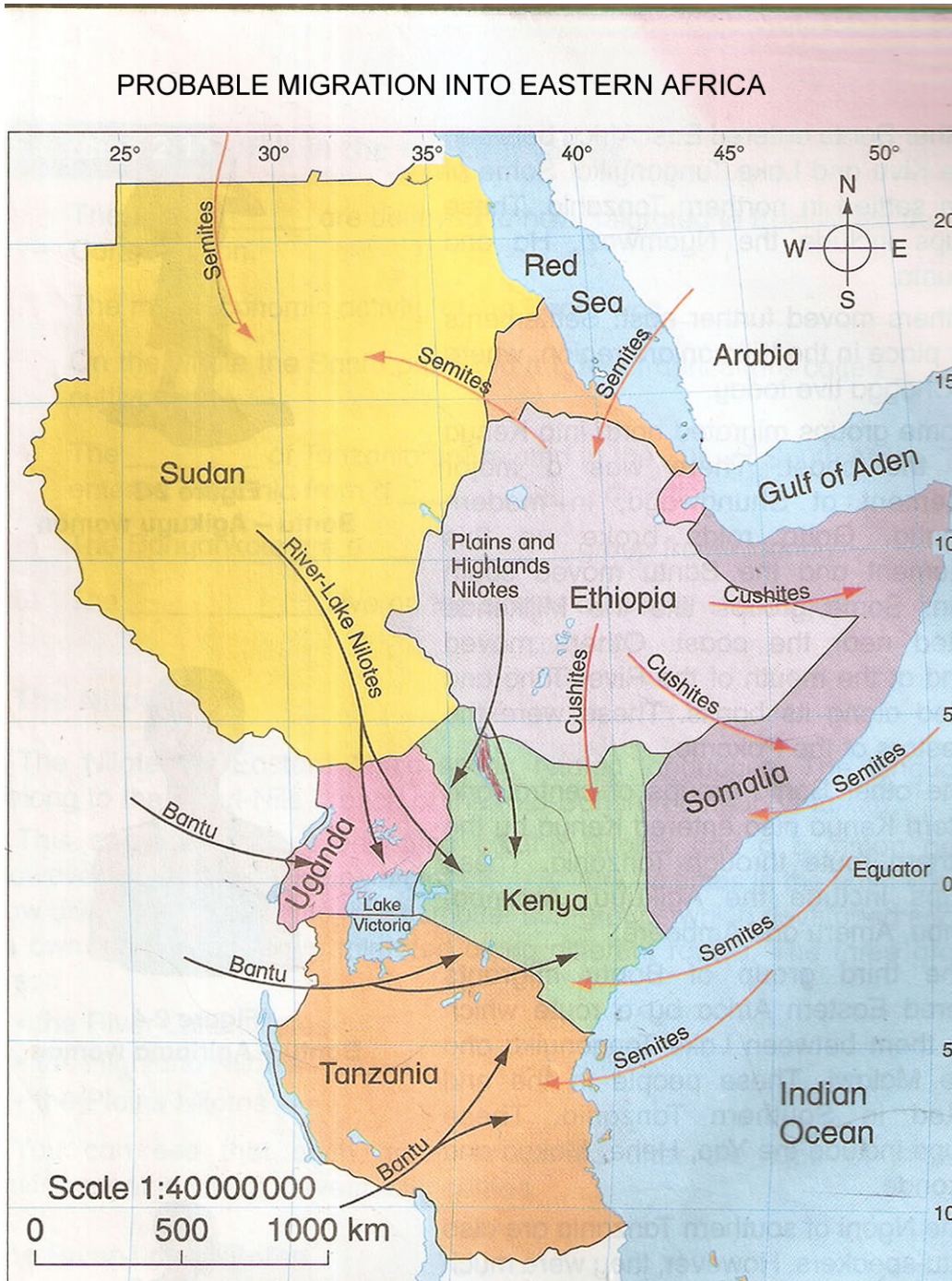
worldwide. Although there may appear to be some distinct differences amongst the communities outlined in the migrations into Eastern Africa, the basic identity traits that unite them seem to be explicitly outstanding.

The Bantu Speaking communities, mostly cultivators, moved into Eastern Africa from Central Africa and Southern Africa in three significant migratory routes. One group used the northern part of Lake Victoria; the other set of communities used the southern part of Lake Victoria while the third group of communities used the corridor between Lake Tanganyika and Lake Malawi. The movement of the Bantu speaking communities was mostly triggered by the search for fertile land and escape from invaders who were competing for resources. These communities included the Baganda, Banyarwanda, Banyankole, Samia, Kuria, Sukuma, Ha, Nyamwezi, Abaluhya, Gikuyu, Kamba, Meru, Embu, Mbeere, Mijikenda, Chagga, among others spread across Eastern Africa especially in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. There are no Bantu speaking communities settled in Somalia or Ethiopia as they were often repulsed by the harsh semi-arid conditions of northern Kenya and the uncompromising Galla warriors of Somaliland.

The Nilotes were categorized in two major occupational groups; the Highlands and Plains Nilotes and the River-Lake Nilotes. Both combinations were originally pastoralists but with distinct variations in the application of their traits. They include the Kalenjin (Nandi, Kipsigis, Elgeyo, Tugen, Marakwet and Pokot), the Maasai, the Samburu, the Turkana, the Sabaot, the Teso, the Karamojong, the Endorois, the Njemps as well as the Shilluk, the Nuer, the Dinka, the Alur, the Lagbara and the Luo who have since greatly changed their culture and adapted to the lifestyle of the Bantu speaking communities.

In the process of migration, the communities experience tremendous change which impacts on the viability of their heritage. Indeed some ICH elements get to adapt to new dimensions which would be serving completely new functions. The convention for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity recognizes this phenomenon and provides for mechanisms of safeguarding ICH through multinational interventions while enjoying the prospects of international cooperation.

The map below shows the diffusion of the communities in Eastern Africa:



## **6.0 Conclusion**

Within the framework of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, the communities, groups and individuals concerned have been granted the privileged opportunity to share their heritage with the international fraternity.

This opportunity is made available to States Parties and communities notwithstanding any compelling circumstances that the community might find itself engrossed in. Indeed, the provision of international cooperation does make it feasible for communities and States Parties to obtain collaboration from other States Parties that might be interested in the same ICH.

When this is comprehensively implemented, the resultant scenario will be a world full of cultural extravaganza that appreciates respects and collectively celebrates diversity while recognizing the contribution of human creativity in the process of engineering sustainable development.

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