CASE STUDY 50

Rite of the Khalifan Kings

#### Introduction to the element

The Rite of the ‘Khalifan Kings’ is an element of the ICH of Sorobria, which has been inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. The rite is celebrated annually on January 13 by the villagers of Schtrouk (Central Sorobria). The ritual forms part of the traditional Sorobria Christmas and New Year’s carnival. The New Year procession involves local people and is led by seven young men in ritual costumes known as the Khalifan Kings. The procession meanders through the village, enacting a traditional play, and receiving gifts and good wishes from the local residents. The Kings’ visit is believed to be a good omen and a sign of prosperity. The Kings have torches (a symbol of the fertile fire) that are lit at night and are thought to shine mysteriously and solemnly, while the local children follow the Kings. Once the performance is over, children also express their best wishes to the owners of the house and receive awards (usually candy). The holiday usually ends with a traditional dinner with plentiful local dishes.

#### Inscription and its effects on the element

The inscription of the ritual on the UNESCO Urgent Safeguarding List has enhanced the interest of the mass media and of numerous experts in this ceremony. On January 13, 2010, right after the inscription, Schtrouk village was visited by a large number of journalists, other visitors and foreigners who wanted to feel the ancient magic of the celebration. Local people had never seen so many visitors before. Such attention from the press and other people has increased the activity and interest of the local community in its heritage. Real interest has also appeared among the younger generation of Schtrouk residents. The ritual received a new impetus to life. In 2011, it was put forward for an Award of the President of the Republic of Sorobria by the Ministry of Culture. On January 8, 2011, an awarding ceremony took place. The State Programme for Developing Sorobria’s Culture for 2010–2015 provided some safeguarding measures, including the organization of an annual festival of traditional culture in Schtrouk village, the adoption of school programmes on preservation of cultural heritage, the edition of some publications concerning the rite, etc.

Today, as before, the ceremony ‘Khalifan Kings’ is sacred for many residents of the village. The ceremony concludes the period of holidays after the strict Christmas Fast (according to orthodox tradition) and signals the beginning of a new year. The villagers believe that it is very important to keep all elements of the ceremony – its schedule and rules. Today the older generations of performers of the rite still live in Schtrouk and closely watch that the ceremony is properly executed and correct the younger generation on the right way to perform the rite and its value. They note that in the past the ritual was executed with greater religious and emotional fervour than today, for different reasons. The elders remember that in the 1960s, there were 5 or 6 groups of ‘Kings’ in the village, who could visit almost all families during the festive night, as their visits are believed to be a sign of prosperity for every family in the coming year. With inscription, a few elders are beginning to visit some families, and this has been a very welcome revival of their role in society.

Following inscription of the ‘Khalifan Kings’ rite, many local people have also started showing a keen interest in the organization of the holiday. Some of them helped to make new costumes (the costumes were made in the local Crafts Centre) for the Kings, others helped to accommodate numerous guests who came to visit Schtrouk at the time of the holiday. According to interviews of the local residents given to the media, they are very proud of their heritage and underline that this ritual is unique; it exists only in their village and nowhere else. Many former residents of the village, who emigrated years ago, try to come home during the holidays and take part in it.

The inscription of the ‘Khalifan Kings’ rite has also given a new creative urge to its development and promotion. Many representatives of the mass media, including foreigners, visited Schtrouk on January 13, 2010, when the ritual was on. National TV and radio produced a series of programmes on the rite in that period. In September 2010, within the framework of the European Heritage Days, an exhibition of the ICH of Sorobria was held at the National Library of Sorobria. ‘Khalifan Kings’ rites was recognized in the opening ceremony. Since 2010, the bearers of the ritual have also been constantly invited to various festivals and folklore events in Sorobria. During the Sorobria Folk Festival ‘Beraginya’, the bearers of the Khalifan Kings were presented with a UNESCO Certificate by the Chairman of the National Commission of the Republic of Sorobria for UNESCO.

The safeguarding of the ‘Khalifan Kings’ rite is one of the main priorities of the State Programme for Developing Sorobria’s Culture for 2010–2015. In addition, the State has developed a policy on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, under which the ‘Khalifan Kings’ rite is protected and financial support to the bearers, adoption of the school programme on studying the local culture and handicrafts, and the development of the local House of Handicrafts as a centre of local traditional culture, are included.

The local inhabitants identify the ceremony ‘Khalifan Kings’ as their own heritage and are proud of their culture and traditions. They carefully protect it and try to keep to all established rules of its enactment, underlying its sacred value. When some TV personnel asked local people to perform the ‘Khalifan Kings’ rites in November so that they could record it in advance, the local people refused to participate, having explained that it was sinful and that they could not infringe the rules. Such behaviour underlines respect for traditions and is observed even by youth, and it highlights the viability of the rite and its value. This situation was actively discussed in the mass-media and by experts and bearers during a workshop and further debated by heritage experts and local and district departments of culture.