

The First Step to Safeguarding Eritrea's Intangible Cultural Heritage



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Needless to say, culture is important, especially in Eritrea, as it been historically the foundation of a united nation. It is actually what Eritreans are most proud of and tirelessly talk about. However, during the second half of February 2018, the issue of culture has been getting a different attention in connection with intangible heritage. It became the talk of the city, thanks to the news of a workshop that was held from the 19th to 28th of February. The news alone has somehow stimulated some thought provoking ideas and curiosities amongst the inhabitants of Asmara.

This time around, young Eritrean experts are working hard alongside stakeholders and organizations to treasure their culture and make sure to pass it down to future generations. Therefore, Asmara hosted a workshop for capacity building in preparing nomination files and making requests for international assistance for the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of Eritrea.

We talked to Karalyn Monteil, culture specialist for UNESCO, after she officially opened the workshop.

We welcome you to the workshop Mrs Monteil. Can you please introduce yourself to our readers and tell us what this specific visit of yours is about?

My name is Karalyn Monteil and I am the program specialist for culture at the UNESCO Regional Office for Eastern Africa. So I cover thirteen countries from

Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia, Sudan to Tanzania and then across the Indian Ocean islands.

I started working with Medhanie and some others from the Asmara Heritage Project in 2011- 2012 when I was still based in the UNESCO headquarters in Paris and I started supporting them with their efforts to subscribe Asmara as a World Heritage. In 2016, when I moved to Nairobi, I was finally able to actually come and visit.

I am here now to officially open this workshop. Which is the last phase of a project that we've carried since 2015. UNESCO has this portfolio of conventions. In 2013, UNESCO adopted a convention on intangible cultural heritage, which means all of the things that make up a community's identity. The way people, braid their hair, dance, play music, their lifestyle and just everything else that makes a community what it is. This convention focuses on preserving it. Which doesn't mean keeping it in a bottle but insure its transmission down to generations and look for ways to show them to the rest of the world.

So you know about Asmara since a long time ago?

I am no new guest. Of course I'd heard a lot about Asmara. So I knew what to expect. I was excited to see this modernist city but I don't think the depth of it impacted me until I saw it for myself and it was exceedingly inspiring and exciting to see Asmara. As a city it is not only the architecture that impresses you but also the way everything is being reserved and respected. And... such a clean city! I was in charge of museum programs in Africa so I did travel a lot for my work for about 8 years. I have visited a lot of African countries and cities. Livingston in Zambia and, maybe, Rwanda, as a country, were probably the closest to being clean but then when I came to Eritrea it passed them all. And I kept complimenting everyone.

What is your impression about the culture of Eritreans?

As far as the culture the diversity of it is impressive. What impressed me the most during my first visit and what keeps marking me every time I come is the harmony between the diverse ethno-cultural groups. It is impressive and rare to see the diversity of a people as the main source of harmony. Coming from Kenya, for example, where I am based, the ethnic and tribal identity become the cause for discrimination. Then I come here, and I see it being a source of strength for the people of Eritrea. So I think when you are asking about first impression the complementarity between the diversity and the unity of the ethno-cultural groups is praiseworthy.

As an expert in the field, what can you tell us about the technical handling of the project ICH in Eritrea?

I have met with different ministers and officials of culture of different countries in Africa. In Eritrea, what marked me the most was how educated and qualified the people of the Eritrean Commission of Sport and Culture are. They hold high degrees in various fields of culture but the rare part is that they are practitioners. Most of them are either musicians, theater experts, photographers or just writing something. Therefore, academicians and practitioners, and that is really something I don't see a lot. You don't always see revered ministries. And I know, there isn't a culture ministry yet in Eritrea and I hope to see it soon, but the Culture Commission is doing great. On the way I'd like to mention how important the foundation of a culture ministry would be to Eritrea in order to oversee a sustainable development of culture because the potential is great.

'Sustainable development for culture', you even talked about it in your opening speech for the workshop. Can you please elaborate it for us?

A lot of countries, and not just in Africa, don't look at culture as a driver for economic development. UNESCO looks at culture as a tool for peace keeping. Nevertheless, culture is indeed a grand driver of economic development. Through UNESCO we have a portfolio of conventions called International Legal Instruments. They are basically guidelines for how to protect and promote world heritage. What we do by promoting these is turn culture in the interest of locals and be promoters for economic growth at a national level. Culture attracts foreigners and so it can be a source of income and generate money for education, health, infrastructure and more.

Sadly, a lot of countries don't put culture in their plans for national development, and it is something that I am really trying to convince countries of its importance. One of the efforts I am making in East Africa is to get cultural indicators. I am trying to get statistics showing the impact of culture on economic development. I did a study last year collecting data on employment through culture, visitors to cultural attractions and more. I made a regional proposal and my number one goal now is to have it funded so that we can move to capacity building in the different countries. I hope to convince governments to allocate more funds for culture. This is a good plan because it'll attract donors and investors.

You just told me that you conducted research last year on this specific aspect of making culture a driver for economic growth for African countries, at least

those in the region under your office's supervision. Were the results encouraging?

No. Look at the region I am covering. I have South Sudan, I have Somalia... They are countries in conflict. So, honestly, I didn't find a strong label. I found few countries that showed interest. Out of the thirteen countries I am covering only few have started focusing their attention on the topic.

Vis-à-vis UN's development goals, ranging from ending hunger to fighting climate change, do you feel that culture is by any means relevant to such goals?

Yes. Just look at all the indigenous knowledge embodied in the intangible cultural heritages of many countries' practices, rituals and traditions. There is great knowledge that communities hold. A lot of them can be beneficial to all of us if brought to light for international knowledge. We can talk about sustainable development, traditional judicial way of resolving conflicts, sustainable agriculture and fishing. The list can go on and on. So I think there are lessons we can learn from ancient traditions and help preserve, sustain and develop them.

A lot of people think there is a conflict between preserving and developing. Sometimes developing something might seem to mean changing the whole lot to best fit contemporary technology. What would your opinion be?

It might look like it but with clear plans and regulations we can sustain and develop heritages at the same time. This is something I saw when I first came to Asmara as I have for a while work with the Asmara heritage team. I learned then about the regulations they have to preserve the city. Like replacing a tile on the side walk and using the traditional molds for that to ultimately keep the esthetic look which is done by vibrant regulations. Therefore, if the management standards are high there are no problems.

Is there anything that perhaps I missed and you'd like to add before we end our interview?

I want to compliment the yearly National Festival of Eritrea held every August. That is an exemplary way of passing down tangible and intangible heritages. Once a year, Eritreans gather at the festival and learn about their traditions. It has been also an easy way for outsiders to learn and enjoy the diversity and harmony of Eritrea's ethnic groups. The National Festival is really an eye-opening experience for Eritreans, which goes in line, of course, with what we do

at UNESCO, safeguarding and transmitting indigenous cultures to young generations so that everyone knows about them and passes them down to future generations.

I have fallen in love with Eritrea ever since I first set foot here. Every time I go back after spending some time here all I talk about to my colleagues, family and friends is Eritrea, Asmara, the culture, climate, cappuccino, the harmony and warmth of the people. It is a place I really love and want to come back to every time I leave. So thanks for being such a beautiful community, it is always a delight to be here with you!

Eritrea Profile