Strengthening the Local Cultural Policy in Rural Zimbabwe

Issue 1. Newsletter

From the Director’s Desk

We, as Amagugu Heritage Trust and its operating arm, Amagugu International Heritage Centre (AIHC) have reached an important milestone in the history of our existence as an arts, culture and heritage facility. Established in 2010, AIHC was born out of a vision to be a centre of excellence in the effort to document, preserve and promote the arts, culture and heritage.

A faltering start was made as far back as 2004. However, in 2010 notable progress was achieved and, by 2012, the Centre opened its doors to school pupils, college and university students, tourists and local visitors. Infrastructural development was and continues to be shouldered by the director and founder of the centre who is passionate about the need to document and preserve the arts, culture and heritage.

Cultural offering at the Centre includes, inter alia, the making of crafts such as pottery, basketry, leather craft and wood craft. The Centre’s thrust and unique niche is that of participation in the various activities; visitors are afforded the chance to get a feel of the various cultural experiences on offer.

The first grant that the Centre, located 60 kilometers outside Bulawayo along the Maphisa/Kezi road, received came from Hivos in 2014. The fund was used to develop murals which were expertly executed by experienced artist Bheki Ntshali from Bulawayo. The 27 panels, all depicting pre-colonial aspects of the Ndebele way of life, are now an important teaching tool to both the young and the old. On the pillars are posted drawings that capture important Pan-African aspects of African Thought.

Recently, construction work commenced on the performance and conference gazebo/hall, a project that, it is hoped, will be completed before year end. However, the most important and history-making venture is one that Amagugu has embarked upon since the beginning of May 2016. Towards the end of 2015 we were honoured by UNESCO when, after submitting an application, we got funding under the International Fund for Cultural Diversity (IFCD), the funding arm for the 2005 Convention for the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

Our project seeks to develop cultural policies for the rural areas following the crafting of the National Policy on the Arts, Culture and Heritage
which is now at cabinet level. It is our conviction that the national policy requires, if it is to be meaningful and relevant, cascading down to the level of rural districts and wards, areas under the jurisdiction of rural district councils. At this grassroots level, appropriate policies and programmatic interventions can go a long way towards improving the status of the arts, culture and heritage in the four rural districts and then offer appropriate, sustainable and meaningful cultural policies and programmatic interventions that will elevate the status of the arts, culture and heritage, not only in the four districts under study, but in other rural areas of Zimbabwe as they share a lot in common with the four districts in which the project is being implemented.

This the first in a series of newsletters, both on-line and hard copies that will keep stakeholders, policy makers, funders, artists and arts, culture and heritage managers appraised of progress as the project is implemented.

Accordingly we present to you the first hard copy newsletter which will be followed in July and August by on-line publications.

UNPACKING THE FIELD OF CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS: JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CHOICE OF THE FOUR DISTRICTS

One characteristic of nature is its pervasive diversity of natural species, in terms of both flora and fauna. Humankind, through his intellect, interacts with the environment in different ways resulting in the diversity of cultural expressions. Research relating to our IFCD project was undertaken in four different districts of Matabeleland South, namely Mangwe, Matobo, Umzingwane and Beitbridge. The choice of the four districts was not fortuitous. Rather, it was informed by the cultural diversity resident in the chosen districts.

In some instances each district is home to more than one ethnic group which has its own distinct culture and heritage as a result of its unique interaction with nature. Magwe District is home to the Ndebele, Kalanga and Tswana groups. Matobo District has Kalanga, Ndebele and a sprinkling of Babirwa groups. While Umzingwane District is predominantly Ndebele, Beitbridge on the other hand is home to the VhaVenda, BaPfumbi, and Shangani and Babirwa groups. Given such cultural diversity within each district, it comes as no wonder that Matabeleland South has been described as a Rainbow Province.

Culture gives a community its identity; it is a source of pride and inculcates a sense of esprit de corps. The diverse historical and cultural experiences have resulted in cultural diversities that are responsible for the kaleidoscope of cultural expressions, which expression should be protected and promoted. The 2005
Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions seeks to achieve precisely that.

Reference to cultural expressions suggests that there is a basic and fundamental culture which gets expressed in different ways. That culture is best described as the community’s worldview, cosmology, philosophy or just their beliefs and values. Essentially, this is about a community’s knowledge and understanding of nature and the universe. The question then is, how is that culture expressed? There are many ways in which this is done. Performances are one such form of expression. Drama and theatre, music and dance, performance poetry and storytelling all offer platforms and media through which a community’s culture finds expression. Where cultures differ, their expressions shall equally differ as these reflect the underlying culture.

Visual arts are another form of cultural expressions. These include painting, drawing, wood and stone sculpture, decorative motifs on crafts executed through basketry, pottery, leather craft, house wall decorations, inter alia. A close scrutiny of these various forms of cultural expressions gives some indications of the cultures that they represent. A dance may, in this regard, be viewed as a community in motion. “Ye shall know them by their cultural expressions.” Cultural expressions give a unique identity or signature to a particular group. What is otherwise tucked away in the mind finds some exit through cultural expressions.

The literary arts likewise are a form of cultural expression rendered through writing. Creative writing in particular expresses the culture, values, ideals, morals, ethics and, more importantly, the worldview of a particular community. Inevitably, our project seeks to determine the status of these cultural expressions with a view to finding ways of enhancing their status largely through crafting of rural cultural policies and accompanying programmatic interventions.

**Strengthening Local Cultural Policy in Zimbabwe Project Launched**

Amagugu International Heritage Centre launched in May 2016 the ‘Strengthening Local Cultural Policy in Zimbabwe (SLCPZ)’ Project.

[Image of children dancing]

Funded under UNESCO’s International Fund for Cultural Diversity (IFCD), the project seeks to map the rural creative industries and support development of cultural policies and strategies in four districts namely Matobo, UMzingwane, Mangwe and Beitbridge. The project commenced with a baseline survey in the four project districts. Leading the research was Dr. Charlton C Tsodzo, an arts and culture consultant.
The baseline survey entailed meeting and interviewing various artists and cultural groups that include sculptors, wood carvers, weavers, musicians, dancers, writers, actors, movie directors and poets in a bid to understand their experiences in the arts and culture sector. The research team also met key stakeholders in the rural arts and culture landscape such as Government departments, officials from the four rural district councils and traditional leaders.

Rural artists revealed that they are facing a lot of challenges which include financial exclusion, poor coordination and collaboration, lack of industry promotion, limited markets as well as poor and often times non-payments for services rendered. Another glaring challenge is the low participation of young people in the arts sector due to the poor returns prevalent in the sector. This presents a threat to the sustainability of traditional arts in rural communities.

However, an interesting dynamic also emerged where some rural arts groups especially in the performance category that include music and drama are mainly interested in expressing their cultural and traditional beliefs instead of the monetary value of the arts.

It was also universally observed across the four rural district councils that local authorities have limited appreciation of their role in supporting sustainable growth of arts and culture in their areas of jurisdiction.

Pottery products on display at a craft market in Beitbridge

The baseline survey will undergo a review in June and is scheduled for launch in September.

CALLS TO PROFFESIONALISE RURAL ARTS SECTOR

Participants at the baseline review workshop have called for the professionalization of the rural arts sector as a means of improving the perceptions of the industry among artists and general populace.

The baseline validation workshop, held at the Churchill Arms Hotel in Bulawayo on 29 June 2016, is a follow-up to the baseline survey that was conducted by Amagugu International Heritage Centre in
partnership with UNESCO in the IFCD-funded project – Strengthening the Local Cultural Policy in Zimbabwe.

Speaking at the workshop, participants who included government officials, representatives of arts organisations, and rural and urban craft persons from different genres said it was important for rural artists to operate professionally so as to earn respect and make more money from their trade.

“The professionalization of the industry will go a long way to ensure that artists get more money because their product quality would have improved”, said Mr Lovious Khumalo, Matobo district youth officer in the Ministry of Youth, Indigenization and Employment Creation.

“We realize that professionalization will lead to product quality standards being set by the respective industry board hence all artists will have to meet the quality standards of their association.”

The participants at the workshop said the current setup where rural craft persons have to register with different institutions for the same thing was killing the arts industry as most of the amounts needed for registration were prohibitive. As such, 63% of the respondents whom we interviewed during the baseline survey said they were not registered with any institution. Most cited lack of funds for registration while some said they did not know where to register. Lack of professionalization of rural arts sector is seen as the main reason behind poor products, prevalent low remuneration and non-affiliation of artists.

Amagugu director, Mr Pathisa Nyathi said as long as the rural arts sector is not operating professionally, it cannot be regarded as an industry.
“People have been saying that there is a rural arts industry but what qualifies an industry to be called as such does not exist on the ground as yet,” said Mr Nyathi. “There needs to be certain standards set and if those standards are being followed then we can start talking about an industry.”

Participants said there was a need for government to increase co-ordination among departments so that artists get accreditation with one institution instead of the prevailing scenario where there are many interested parties, e.g. Department of Parks and Wildlife Management, ZIMRA, ZIMURA, respective RDCs, EMA and National Arts Council of Zimbabwe (NACZ).

In their proposal, participants said that all rural craft persons and artists should be registered and licensed at local level with one designated institution which would automatically place them in an association according to their arts genre. This will, in turn, allow for quality standards being set and monitored.

The government was urged to go a step further by promoting traditional crafts by offering them as courses in institutions of higher learning across the country.

Recommendations raised by workshop participants were noted and will be released as part of a book that is being written by Amagugu in conjunction with Dr. Tsodzo and is set to be out this September.

CULTURAL INDUSTRY SURVEY BOOK TO BE RELEASED

Amagugu International Heritage Centre is set to produce a book that details the status of the cultural industry in Zimbabwe’s four districts of Matabeleland South. The book, whose input is being drawn from a creative cultural industry baseline survey held in May 2016, will be launched in September. The baseline survey was conducted in Matobo, Umzingwane, Mangwe and Beitbridge districts under the UNESCO IFCD-funded Strengthening Local Cultural Policy in Zimbabwe program.

Preliminary baseline findings were reviewed and discussed during a baseline survey validation workshop in the City of Bulawayo on the 29th of June 2016. Participants at the workshop included RDC officials from the four districts, officials from the Ministry of Youth and Employment Creation, Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, representatives of rural craft persons and groups from diverse arts genres, and Bulawayo-based arts and culture organizations.

Findings by Dr. Charlton C Tsodzo who is the lead consultant for the project, showed that the poor investment in the Arts and Culture sector by the government and the private sector was the root cause of poor gains experienced in the rural arts industry. Eighty seven rural craft persons were interviewed across the four districts in the baseline. The baseline revealed that the rural craft persons had little or no assets and as such could not obtain any funding to support their businesses. Art sector reliance on foreign tourist arrivals as the main market had heavily disadvantaged the sector as tourist arrivals in the country had
drastically dropped over the years. Meanwhile, the local market has limited buying power and has not sustained the arts sector. The majority of the arts persons interviewed earned less than US$30 a month. This is saddening to note as 80% of the respondents stated that they relied on the proceeds from their crafts as the main source of income.

A lady displays her craftwork in Beitbridge. Although women produce beautiful baskets and other craftwork, they realize very little by way of profits

A woman from Engen Craft Centre in Beitbridge showcases some of the items on sale at her stand
Lack of business management training and limited market information was revealed as another factor hampering the realization of profits in the rural cultural industry. In this tech-savvy generation where business has transitioned from brick-and-mortar to online, rural artists are losing a huge chunk of the market as most do not see the importance of mobile telephony in moving their businesses forward.

The participants reiterated that these findings were a true reflection of the situation on the ground. They recommended that the way forward was for the arts sector to be perceived and regarded as an industry with the potential to create employment. Government should make budgetary allocations that support the sector to grow into a million dollar revenue industry. Amagugu director Mr Pathisa Nyathi said the findings will be availed to all arts organizations and individuals and should inform rural arts and culture policy formulation.

Marketing a big challenge for rural artists

James Ncube is a very talented wood carver in Matobo District, perhaps one of the best. He has been carving for more than 20 years and sells his wares at Ejikweni Craft Centre at Matobo National Park. His pieces are resplendent and evoke a feeling of nostalgia to one who has been to Zimbabwe or any ordinary Zimbabwean. He carves traditional African pieces such as the big five and platters decorated with same.

His hands are rugged, they have seen many years, and so have his tools. He smiles exuberantly as we approach him. His smile slowly vanishes as we let him know that were here for a research, and not sales.

“I haven’t made a sale in 3 months, things are really hard nowadays,” says Mr Ncube. “Long back we used to make a good living from this trade, but now there are no tourists coming our way. We have lost out on a lot of revenue. Even the few tourists who pass through here do not stop by our craft shop to buy”.

Mr. Ncube’s sentiments are shared by his colleagues at the Craft Centre. With a membership of 83 craft persons, we found less than 30 at the Centre. Centre members said others had stopped coming due to lack of sales being realized. Some of the members travel more than 24 kilometers on foot to get to the Centre. Some pay US$2.00 for transport daily yet make no profits. Furthermore, they rent the space at the Matobo National Park for $20 per head per annum. It is clear that they are making a loss.

The environment at which they are operating is also not conducive for 83 people. There are no ablution facilities at the Centre. There is also no access to water. There is no sign as one approaches the park that there is a craft centre ahead. Asked whether they knew any laws pertaining to their art work, the members of Ejikweni said they only knew about the Environmental Management Act (EMA) as officials from EMA frequently visit them to talk about environmental management. They have not met any person from the Ministry responsible for the arts nor do they have knowledge about any arts promotion laws that work in their favour. They are in the dark concerning the Ministry responsible for the arts and its role in promoting arts and culture in the country.
Mr James Ncube being interviewed during the baseline survey in May 2016

Members of Ejikweni Craft Centre working while Mr Pathisa Nyathi (second from right) takes notes from the discussion.
Ejikweni craft members talk to Dr Tsodzo about their crafts which include traditional baskets woven by women and the Big Five wooden curios carved by men.

The immediate question then becomes: how can markets be unlocked for the local artists by the government departments that relate with them?

Head of the Matopos National Park, Mrs. Musakwa said there is only very little that they could do as parks to assist the members of the craft centre to make more sales. She suggests that they could make more money if they become more innovative.

“We have the centre running this as part of our community relations efforts,” said Mrs. Musakwa. “We try to advise them to improve their crafts and be innovative so that their products become more attractive. Some of them have been carving the big five for many years and they are not offering anything new.”

As we got to other craft centres and met more craft persons in Matobo, Beitbridge, Mzingwane and Mangwe, it became apparent that Mrs. Musakwa was right. Although rural craft persons display much craftsmanship and skill and produce beautiful artifacts, they have stuck to the traditional designs and materials. This may be good as a preservation of culture; it is a shot in the foot as most purchases are increasingly being made for aesthetic value not the cultural sentiment.

Another reason from the lack of incomes has been the dependency of the sector on tourism. Tourists from abroad were for many years the main market for the goods but now that tourism collapsed and is being resuscitated, local craft persons have to focus more on the local market.
Amagugu director Mr Pathisa Nyathi stresses a point to Dr. Charlton Tsodzo at Egedini craft centre during the baseline survey. The craft centre was left unmanned by crafts persons, another way in which rural craft persons are losing income. Some of the articles on sale at the craft centre cost as much as $1800.

Pricing is another issue that needs to be dealt with. The local market has obviously been unable to absorb local craft, either through lack of appreciation but mostly due to pricing. It is important that the local artists price their product in a way that caters for the local market. The cheapest article at the craft centre is at $10. For the local person whose buying power has been reduced due to the prevailing climate, that is a lot of money to part with. Prices seem to be set at face value instead of pragmatically.

The local district councils however have a role to play in promoting the industry. Many craft centres across the four districts are in near shambles and little efforts to promote the arts have been made. In some offices, there was no designated official for the arts and culture sector, with the portfolio sitting in different offices as the need arose.

Amagugu through the IFCD funded project- Strengthening local cultural industry in Zimbabwe (SLCPZ), will help the four RDCs of Mangwe, Matobo, Mzingwane and Beitbridge to draft local cultural policies that will see the arts sector being clearly structured and a supportive environment being created. Hopefully, rural craft persons like Mr Ncube will start to see profits being generated as a more structured, stakeholder-driven marketing initiative will be taken.
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