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Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in South Africa

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Abstract: This paper will present how the South African government has put in place mechanisms to safeguard intangible cultural heritage (ICH) simultaneously at national, provincial and local levels and also how local communities and other organisations play part in this regard. This discussion will take the perspective of heritage resources conservation and management as provided by the South African Heritage Resources Act no. 25 of 1999.

The roles of national, provincial and local government in safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the context of South Africa

Introduction

The South African government passed legislation known as the South African Heritage Resources Agency act no. 25 of 1999 for the management of heritage resources or national estate at national, provincial and local levels. This saw the establishment of SAHRA as an organisation from what was previously known as the National Monuments Council.

SAHRA as an organisation, together with its Council, is charged with the responsibility identification, conservation, protection and promotion of heritage resources at national level. At provincial levels the Provincial Heritage Resources Agencies (PHRAs) were established for the management of heritage resources and within local municipalities heritage units were to be established for the management of local heritage resources.

Safeguarding of ICH at various governmental levels and stakeholder involvement

Section 3 of the South African Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) identifies heritage resources or national estate to be of various sorts or types. For the purpose of safeguarding ICH the act identifies the following as part of the national estate worthy of conservation: “places or objects to which oral traditions are attached or which are associated with living heritage” including “a place or object which is culturally significant or has other special value because of its strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons” (NHRA, section 3). As a result, according to the NHRA, the management of heritage

resources is limited to sites and objects of cultural significance. Consistent with the Act SAHRA has a mandate to identify and manage both sites and objects associated with oral tradition or living heritage.

As a result of the various types of heritage resources identified by the act SAHRA has established various units to deal with this situation. These units are heritage objects unit, archaeology unit, burial grounds and graves unit, architecture unit, grading and declaration unit and lastly the living heritage unit. This latter unit deals specifically with what one would term as intangible cultural heritage. However, one has to acknowledge that Intangible cultural heritage permeates across boundaries or divisions. As a result, this unit works in cooperation with all the above mentioned units of SAHRA in the conservation of living/intangible heritage aspects of the tangible heritage resources.

Intangible Cultural Heritage or living heritage can be dubbed with many interpretations but it mainly refers to memories that people, communities or various groups hold in their minds and various traditions or rituals they practise for various reasons may it be social, cultural or spiritual. According to the NHRA, Living Heritage refers to intangible aspects of inherited culture, such as:

- Cultural Tradition;
- Oral History;
- Performance;
- Rituals;
- Popular Memory;
- Skills and Techniques;
- Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the
- Holistic approach to Nature, Society and Social Relationships.

The living heritage unit within SAHRA is based at a national level and it operates through liaison with international, national, provincial and local government offices. Its main focus is on the conservation of intangible aspects of heritage resources. Its operations include having inputs in heritage impact assessments undertaken before developments, identification and grading of sites for the purpose of declaring them as national and world heritage sites and policy formulation for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. In this, various local communities, NGOs, government departments and international structures are key stakeholders in the various activities and programmes undertaken by the unit.

In March 2007 the SAHRA heritage unit was appointed by the ICOMOS SA to serve as a secretariat for its ICICH (International Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage). One of the key milestones set by the ICICH was to formulate a doctrinal text for the development of a charter for intangible heritage in order to create a framework for best practice by site conservationists and to entrench the area of intangible heritage as a legitimate specialisation in the conservation of heritage sites. These measures will also serve as a guideline for developers and others whose operations impact upon heritage sites.

While at a national level, recently, SAHRA has been afforded the opportunity to participate in the policy review process driven by the National Department of Arts and Culture (DAC). The scope for the management of living heritage remains fairly limited within the framework of the current National Heritage Resources Act of 1999

(NHRA). The deficiency of instruments and inadequate operational directives for safeguarding makes it difficult for living heritage to be conserved in accordance with its conservation needs. However, this opportunity to add input to the DAC policy review anticipates that the new Act will provide adequate and appropriate tools to enhance the management of living heritage in South Africa.

The Richtersveld Cultural Landscape: A potential World Heritage Site

As a key stakeholder, SAHRA has been involved in the process of evaluating the heritage site and nomination dossier for the tentative listing of the 'Richtersveld Conservancy Area' as a potential World Heritage Site. The SAHRA Northern Cape Office, the Grading and Living Heritage Units, have collectively joint expertise with several stakeholders - including the Nation Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, the Provincial Northern Department of Arts and Culture, and Nama community of the Richtersveld - to facilitate the process of the listing of the 'Richtersveld Conservancy Area' on the World Heritage List. The Richtersveld presents a diverse and unique heritage – both natural and cultural heritage. Initially the site was identified and selected mainly for its rich and endemic concentration of biodiversity. However after several consultative meetings with stakeholders including SAHRA, it was decided that the cultural heritage values of the site should be included and strengthened within the nomination dossier. In particular the intangible values associated with the traditional Nama practices of land management and use, constitute a significant facet of the cultural heritage of the site. At the evaluation meeting in October 2006, in the Richtersveld, SAHRA had the opportunity to comment on the cultural heritage elements of the site and also urged that the site must first be declared a national heritage site before it can be considered for world heritage status. Drawing from the resolutions of the South African World Heritage Committee meeting, held in Kimberly in February 2007, the site stands a good chance for world heritage status and has been recommended for gazetting.

Lake Fundudzi

Initially, the submission for the grading and nomination of the sacred Lake Fundudzi as a potential Grade 1 site (national heritage site) placed high premium on the geological properties of the site, thus giving prominence to a single cultural attribute of the site and leaving the rest out. However after several consultative meetings, including the SAHRA grading committee meetings, it was resolved that Lake Fundudzi should be considered also on the basis of its rich intangible heritage which amplifies the worth of the site, as a potential national heritage site. The intangible values associated with the historical sacred lake contribute to the broader understanding of the history and culture of the diverse communities and groups of South Africa. The submission has been strengthened with relevant information and it is ready for consideration by the SAHRA council members.

The First Nama Church

The Living Heritage Unit and Northern Cape SAHRA Office in association with the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Commission), have recently embarked on the process of identification, assessment and promotion of the protection of the Nama heritage with particular focus on the First Nama Church, in Port Nolloth (Richtersveld Area). In summary the First Nama Church is considered to be a physical manifestation and

living proof of a unique merger of the Nama and Christian belief systems. In its threatened state the Nama Church represents a diminishing heritage of one the first indigenous inhabitants of South Africa. This heritage is worthy of conservation for the present and future generation, as it contributes to the broader understanding of diverse South African culture and history.

To date research is ongoing to ascertain the historical validity of the church in terms of its provenance as well as the current cultural attributes associated with it.

Heritage Celebrations – 24 September 2006

It is customary to observe the 24th September as the official day for heritage celebrations in South Africa. Heritage celebrations are not necessarily a centralised national government initiative but these are decentralised activities with broad access to public involvement and engagement at grass roots levels. Often every community is encouraged to prepare and host cultural activities around their heritage in celebration of this special day. On 24 September 2006, the Living Heritage Unit and CRL Commission, in association with the Nama community of Port Nolloth, celebrated the Nama cultural heritage. In particular, the celebrations were centred on the promotion of the marginalised Nama language and cultural practice such as the Nama traditional ‘*Stap*’ dance. The active transmission of these cultural practices and expressions to the younger generation is of paramount importance for the sustainable safeguarding of Living Heritage.

The Nama traditional ‘*Stap*’ dance has recently been honoured at an International Japanese Contest on revitalisation of intangible cultural heritage.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy to comment that the various examples provided above are activities undertaken by the living heritage unit of SAHRA in cooperation with various stakeholders and communities. However, other organisations and communities outside the above mentioned platform still carry on with their individual activities to safeguard their intangible cultural heritage. These include the Department of Science and Technology, which has an Indigenous Knowledge System unit (IKS) which is involved in scientific research into IKS or ICH. Various museums around the country are beginning to emphasise the role of ICH in their exhibitions and other works. There is also an organisation called IKSSA (Indigenous Knowledge Systems of South Africa) which is working with the government in safeguarding ICH, and the National Heritage Council which funding various heritage projects including ICH projects. This situation is due to the fact that South Africa is currently in the process of drafting its legislation regarding the management and safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. This is all in anticipation of a more coordinated and integrated approach to safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage

References

1. Annual report: SAHRA Living Heritage Unit. 2007 (by T. Manetsi)
2. The National Heritage Resources Act no.25 of 1999.