

INDIGENOUS COSMOLOGY OF CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Richard Akoto, Knight Piésold & Co. Denver, CO. USA

Abstract

Cultural heritage is the tangible and intangible values such as, ways of life and cosmic views obtained from forefathers and maintained presently with the intention of passing them on to progenies. Values such as intrinsic spiritual aspirations and beliefs are often considered intangible cultural heritage, while objects such as artifacts and historic structures are considered tangible heritage [2, 8]. To identify and evaluate the significance of project impacts on cultural heritage, understanding intangible values is a requisite. This important relationship is, however, insufficiently dealt with in the literature. This paper attempts to bridge this gap by explaining intangible cultural heritage values and also outlining approaches to assessing and protecting them and the tangible values.

Key words: cosmic views, tangible and intangible values, negotiation, implementation

For the purpose of assessing impacts of a project on the cultural heritage of a people, the cosmic views of the group must be understood. Cosmic views of a culture are the totality of what a group believes about itself: what it is made of, where it comes from, where it is going, what controls its life, position of individuals in society, purpose of life and the interrelation of all these aspects. Cosmic views are usually inherited from predecessors.

Cosmic views in Indigenous Cultures

Three main concepts are identified as central to understanding the cosmic views of indigenous peoples. These are belief in the immortality of the soul, fatalistic views and the role of ancestors.

One of the central tenets of indigenous cultures is the belief in the immortality of soul. For most indigenous cultures, because the soul does not die but rather transmigrates from human to animal or plant or higher spirit forms, and because the soul is capable of living in natural entities such as rivers, mountains, the earth, etc., both the animate and the inanimate are revered [7]. Therefore, in indigenous cultures a forest of trees, for example, should not be cut down because a project, which seemingly has no relevance to the community, is being undertaken in the area. It is however accepted that soul forms such as plants and animals could be terminated to enhance the survival of the current earthbound higher soul – human. This cosmic view is an important reason why a project must always be made relevant to indigenous communities.

Further to the belief in the immortality of soul are the fatalistic views to which indigenous communities ascribe¹. Individual and community life, it is believed, must be accepted as it comes: what will be, will be! Family and community ties must be held sacred. Time is considered un-influenceable, and should not be hurried: things will happen, in the way, and at the time they are intended by higher spirits, whether humans hurry or not [1].

A third component in intangible cultural heritage is the role of ancestors in the life of indigenous peoples. Ancestors are dead members of the community who have lived honourable lives by preserving and/or enhancing the status of the community. It is believed that these ancestors become spiritual beings with the power to affect the fortune of the living for good or bad [6]. Bad

¹ This may not apply to all indigenous communities. The ideal is generalized here for the purpose of understanding certain cultural behaviors.

fortunes range from simple bad harvests (crop or animal) to mass extermination of communities. Good fortunes could be the opposite. Ancestors can be appeased, thanked or appealed to by designated elders, who through incantations, pouring of libation and/or propitiatory sacrifices communicate current wishes. Ancestors and their spiritual abodes are considered sacred.

Manifestation of Cosmic Views

Cosmic views are manifested in the manner in which a people conduct its life. The table below identifies some of the ways cultural values are manifested. The significance² of these manifestations and instruments that could be used to assess them and their negotiability are summarized in the table.

Manifestation of Culture	Significance	Assessment Instruments	Negotiable
Ancestral Worship	Intrinsic spiritual ³ contentment Communication with ancestors Healing	Traditional Knowledge Community Consultation	NO
Cultural Activities (e.g. dance, funeral, harvest festivals, special days, etc.)	Intrinsic spiritual contentment Emotional contentment Life and life cycle sustenance Healing	Traditional Knowledge Community Consultation Historic Knowledge	NO
Hunting & Farming	Life and life cycle sustenance Economic value (e.g. trade)	Traditional Knowledge Community Consultation Historic/Archaeological Knowledge	YES
Family & Community Ties	Spiritual contentment Emotional contentment Life and life cycle sustenance	Traditional Knowledge Community Consultation	NO
Time Concepts	Regard for nature Spiritual and emotional contentment	Traditional Knowledge Community Consultation Historic Knowledge	YES
Historic/Natural Structures	Intrinsic spiritual value Aesthetic value Architectural Historic/Scientific value Economic value (e.g. tourism)	Local, National & International Regulations. Traditional Knowledge Community Consultation	YES
Artifacts	Intrinsic spiritual value Aesthetic value Historic/Scientific value Archaeological value Economic value (e.g. tourism)	Local, National & International Regulations. Traditional Knowledge Historic/Archaeological Knowledge Scientific Knowledge	YES
Special Sites (e.g. sacred groves, graveyards, battlefields, special event sites, etc.)	Intrinsic spiritual values Emotional contentment Healing Economic value (e.g. tourism)	Local, National & International Regulations. Traditional Knowledge Historic/Archaeological Knowledge	YES

² Significance is used here to denote the basis for estimating cultural value.

³ Spirituality is the harmonious connection between the living and supernatural spirits that control life. This includes peaceful co-existence with the physical (natural) and the unseen (cosmic) environment.

Evaluation and Management Tools

Tools are instruments that inform decision making, and include approaches and methods that can be used to evaluate and mitigate impacts and implement management processes. To appropriately evaluate cultural heritage, a body of knowledge is required. The body of knowledge together with the *significance* attached to cultural values forms a major component of the evaluation tools. Other components of the tools are negotiation and implementation approaches.

The following are identified as sources of knowledge for cultural heritage evaluation:

- Traditional Knowledge
- Historic Knowledge
- Archaeological Knowledge
- Scientific Knowledge
- Local, National and International Regulations
- Community Consultations

These sources of knowledge could be used by proponents and other stakeholders during the screening, scoping and impact assessment phases of a development project. They could also be used during the mitigation and monitoring processes for educational, training and other management purposes.

Negotiation

The purpose of negotiation is to build consensus, i.e. agree, on a course of action. Human relations often require that ways be found so that things wanted are acquired, while parties relinquishing part or all rights to these things do not feel cheated or dominated. Consensus can be built by [5]:

- defining the issues at stake clearly (e.g. a shrine is in the way of a mineral exploration project)
- identifying qualified participants in the process (e.g. local elders, regulators, proponent, historians/scientist, NGO's etc.) and
- agreeing on the decision making process (e.g. collaborative/consultative decision making, final decision by regulators, etc.)

Non-negotiable Values

Certain aspects of cultural heritage may be considered non-negotiable values. These are the aspects that are directly linked to the basic concepts of cultural heritage and which, when left un-negotiated would normally not affect the project, but rather enhance the community's sense of identity and cultural integrity. Ancestral worship, community activities/festivities and family ties are identified as non-negotiable. These values themselves need not be altered. Issues relating to them, such as spending company time in cultural festivities may however, need to be addressed. Proper work procedures and education can resolve most of the common conflicts.

Negotiable Values

Aspects of cultural heritage that are considered negotiable for the purpose of impact assessment are those that depend upon, or could depend upon, the non-negotiable values. Negotiable values of cultural heritage could be identified by current lifestyles and cultural

dynamics. The basic concepts of cultural heritage remain ingrained in the psyche of indigenous peoples and continue through the generations. However, cultural heritage is not static, it evolves: additions are made and certain values wane in importance. Wars, diseases and natural disasters can influence positions and interests of a people to adjust their world views and belief systems [3]. Spread of scientific information can enhance the understanding of phenomena that previously led to superstitious behavior. Exposure to other cultures can modify indigenous ways of life. For example, in North Baffin, *Inuit* youths currently prefer caribou meat with pop to just caribou meat and in *Sukuma* communities of Tanzania, nowadays, children are requesting explanations for actions of parents and other adults⁴.

For efficient assessment and mitigation, it is important to identify which trends have developed in the recent past and which ones are developing among indigenous communities that proponents can negotiate in mitigating project impacts. For example, if hunting is losing its attractiveness to the communities for sustenance, could proponents provide an alternative source of sustenance? Most indigenous peoples accept that country food may not always be obtained and are ready to substitute alternatives.

Tangible resources of cultural heritage such as, historic objects or natural features are objects in which, it is believed, ancestral spirits reside or through which they could be invoked [6]. Since the basic precept of valuing these resources as significant is foremost, the intrinsic spiritual value they possess, and the fact that spiritual gratification lies in being at peace with these ancestors, would it not be reasonable to pacify ancestors to allow the relocation of certain sites and objects when their current locations hinder project activities? Such negotiations are not uncommon: certain communities in Ghana have allowed construction projects involving diversion of rivers and streams, building on sacred sites etc. to be undertaken after libations and other rituals have been performed⁵. For physical structures and objects, the aesthetic, historic/archaeological, scientific and economic values could be preserved by proper mitigation and management procedures.

Sustainable Implementation

After consensus has been built on how to deal with both tangible and intangible cultural issues, the agreed upon action will have to be implemented. Sustainable implementation includes the following actions and approaches [4].

- Education and Training
- Staffing of Implementation Team
- Cultural Heritage Protection Plan
- Complaint and Grievance Management

Conclusion

In this paper basic cultural heritage beliefs have been identified, and valuation approaches examined to provide practitioners with an understanding as to why certain non-physical concepts and physical objects may be considered by indigenous peoples as cultural heritage values. The tools for evaluating components of heritage values and mitigation methods for impacts on them have been outlined.

⁴ Personal experience in North Baffin communities (December 2007/March 2008), and in the Shinyanga Region of Tanzania (October 2005)

⁵ Personal experience in Hohoe, VR Ghana (1979 – 80) during the reconstruction of Danyi Bridge.

References

- [1] Bhattacharji, S 1982. Fatalism — Its roots and effects. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*. Volume 10, Number 2 / June, 1982
- [2] Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO, October 2003.
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001325/132540e.pdf>
- [3] Diamond, J M 1999. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. Norton Paperback, New York N.Y
- [4] Knight Piésold & Co. 2007. *Stakeholder Engagement and SEIA/SEAP Training*. Lima, Peru.
- [5] Lax, D and Sebenius, J 1992. "The Manager as Negotiator: The Negotiator's Dilemma: Creating and Claiming Value," in *Dispute Resolution, 2nd ed.*, edited by Stephen Goldberg, Frank Sander and Nancy Rogers, (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1992), p. 49-62.
- [6] Nassau (Rev.) R H 1904. Polytheism-Idolatry <http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/fiwa/fiwa05.htm> last accessed March 17, 2008
- [7] Nassau (Rev.) R H 1904. Spiritual Beings in Africa--Their Classes and Functions
<http://www.sacred-texts.com/afr/fiwa/fiwa07.htm> last accessed March 17, 2008
- [8] The World Bank, Operational Policy 4.11 – Physical Cultural Resources, July 2006.
<http://wbIn0018.worldbank.org/institutional/manuals/opmanual.nsf/8d1a4edd930ec366852567fa00106d34/61a8fc9168e4c7fe852571b6006cdb54?OpenDocument>