

Session: How are Aboriginal Values and Traditional Knowledge Reflected in EIA?

African ghost stories and the oral heritage museum

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**Abstract**

During the course of collecting cultural heritage baseline data for large development projects, practitioners working with local communities will often encounter and document intangible oral heritage. From experiences gained on African mining projects in Liberia, Guinea, Central African Republic and Malawi, the stories of ghosts, witches and reincarnation offer remarkable insights into the spiritual belief systems, both historic and current, of these oral cultures. Whilst the stories hold a fascination for those involved, their retelling is limited to the impact assessment process and containment within an ESIA report. This repository is hardly the most suitable medium for their long-term preservation. To mitigate their potential loss and in an attempt to attain posterity, there needs to be a centralized means of transcribing such stories so that they are available for future generations. An online museum of oral heritage is proposed.

**Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to open a discussion about how to make best use of oral histories and intangible cultural heritage collected in the field by practitioners working in accordance with IFC Performance Standard 8 (IFC 2012). The information and stories gathered are unique to the communities involved and almost always have not been written down before. As people move and migrate away from their home villages, the future trend for the retelling and survival of these recollections diminishes.

By way of illustration, below are four project examples of stories collected by me from Africa and as far as I am aware no one else has written these down.

**1. Liberia: the river monster, ghost village, and witch creek**

The small village of Jawajai lies close to the border of Sierra Leone in Liberia and is the cultural centre for the surrounding communities. Here, *sande* (female) and *poro* (male) association rituals are carried out, such as initiation ceremonies and rites of passage. These activities and the secret places where they are performed are hidden from the young and uninvited, and the village elders are their custodians.

Close to the village and adjoining the Marvoe river is a *sande* bush site, known by the women as *Gumah Beyah*, which is used for prayer and ancestor worship. An old story recalls when a young man was told not to fish in this part of the river but went alone one day and decided to try and catch fish. He cast his line and something took the bait, but as he tried to land it, the creature got bigger and bigger, coming out of the water and over the head of the fisherman. In his panic,

he let go of the line and subsequently went mad. Tradition is now that this section of the river, a very deep part, is never fished.

Within an area of dense forest, several kilometres distant from the village, lies the site of Old Jawajai, the ghost village. The location is believed to be the ancestral homeland of the people of Jawajai, who settled here several hundred years ago. It was abandoned as the founder relocated his people to be closer to the Marvoe river, on the banks of which the current settlement lies. Within the forest, the vestiges of ancient graves can be seen, considered to be those of ancestral elephant hunters and today is a place where important sacrifices are made in honour of the dead. A distinct sense of place befalls the site; an affiliation between the people and where their ancestors once lived and are buried.

En route, the villagers crossed the *Wijuasien*, the witch creek. Here they recounted the origins of its name. In the olden days, when people who were suspected of witchcraft died or were killed, their gall bladder, considered to harbour the witch, was cut out and thrown into this creek, prior to the deceased, afflicted person being buried. The people believed in reincarnation and feared the witch might return with its original powers intact and continue harming the villagers.

## **2. Guinea: the ancestral fish pool**

In the south-east corner of Guinea, close to its borders with Liberia and Ivory Coast, lies the village of Foromota. During aquatic resource baseline surveys near to the settlement, it was necessary to capture and record the fish species present within the surrounding rivers, streams and pools. The customary process is to string up two holding or stop nets, one upstream and one downstream, across the watercourse in the chosen survey sample area, and then to use a technique called electro-fishing (sending an electric current through the water) to stun the fish and enable them to be collected.

From the surface a pool of water that was fed by the River Zié could be seen to contain a large number of fish of various species. However, the village elders who accompanied the ecologists made it known that these fish were sacred. They believed the fish were the reincarnations of their ancestors and as such were protected and revered by the community. Indeed, the fish were cared for and given food by the villagers. Obviously, electro-fishing was not going to be a technique the village elders would welcome being used in this instance. The aquatic team thought on their feet and with the consent of the elders, made use of a waterproof video camera attached to a pole, and inserted this into the pool, from which they collected their baseline data.

Upon completion of the filming, the team showed the video results to the elders who became particularly animated and excited at the sight on the screen of one particular catfish, *Clarias buettikoferi*. The fish, which they instantly recognised, was believed to represent the incarnation of the deceased former chief of the village.

### 3. Central African Republic: the ghosts of warriors

In the small village of Lengo, near the town of Bakouma in Central African Republic, an elder, Pascal Siolo and a local historian met to discuss various aspects of the local cultural heritage, including the oral account of the founding of the settlement and the tribal groups involved.

Siolo revealed that a nearby lateritic rock carving site was known locally as *Baro-Kpenga*; *baro* being body armour (a breastplate) and *kpenga* a type of throwing knife. The subsequent visit to the site to record these carvings or *gravures* was accompanied by the village chief, who was able to identify the pictorial representations of these fighting tools, as well as animals and human figures, including one with a bird's head. Siolo conveyed that the site was sacred and haunted, and it was the villagers' belief that the custodians of the site were the ghosts of ancient warriors. Visitors were not allowed to mention the name of the site whilst there as this would bring illness to them and the village, and the rains would fail; to unbewitch such a person required a goat to be sacrificed and eggs and red clothing offered to the warrior spirits in order to beg for their forgiveness. Siolo also revealed that there was also a great chief called Gambo, whose surviving spirit is a malevolent force. If you want to kill your enemies on the battlefield Gambo is called upon to provide ruthless assistance.

### 4. Malawi: the pool of the elders

The Mulanje Mountain Forest Reserve lies in the south of Malawi, close to the border with Mozambique, and is a popular tourist destination, especially with walkers. The spiritual aspect of the mountain includes oral reports of local people disappearing and then reappearing several hours or days later with no knowledge of where they have been. Those visiting the area are advised not to upset the spirits or they may be vengeful. Its highest peak, Sapitwa, translates as "don't go there".

*Dziwe la Nkhalamba* (pool of the elders), which is fed by a waterfall, is one of the tourist attractions at the base of the mountain at Likhubula. It is believed to be connected to spirits. The following story was recounted by one of the porters that guide tourists around the mountain area.

One day, a group of students visited the pool. Some of them decided to cool themselves off and went for a swim. One had a camera and decided to go up at the head of the waterfall to take pictures of his friends in the pool. As he did that, his feet lost grip (believed to have been caused by the spirits) and he fell into the pool from the full height of the waterfall. One of the group who was swimming reacted quickly to what had happened and grabbed his friend to pull him out. This would-be rescuer was one of the strongest boys in the group but according to him, as he pulled his friend he felt an incredibly stronger pull countering his (this was attributed to the spirits). It was so strong that he himself felt being pulled along with his friend under the water and he had to let go of his friend to save himself.

The photographer disappeared into the pool and all attempts to recover him failed. The local police sought the help of professional scuba divers from Mangochi but even they could not trace the boy's body. Three weeks later, the body was found on the edge of the pool after it had been 'released' by the spirits.

## The oral heritage museum

The impetus for this paper is the quandary of how to retain these and many other stories, recollections and histories gathered from around the world for posterity, and indeed if they can and should be. The current medium for their retelling is more often than not limited to a highly edited 'grey literature' appendix within a technical report, with a very narrow audience interested primarily in the relevant project and its potential impacts. Once the product is delivered, the information and data it contains becomes, in effect, lost.

The idea proposed in this paper is for a centralised repository for these data; an oral heritage museum that can be accessed by future generations.

At one end of the spectrum the format could simply comprise an online searchable gazetteer referencing when and where baseline data took place, organised by countries, states, counties, departments, for future researchers and interested parties to consult, who could then seek to obtain copies of the relevant baseline reports and transcripts. Further along the spectrum it could include downloadable copies of the relevant data, reports, GIS and other files (e.g. audio recordings, photographs). This would undoubtedly run into issues of ownership, copyright, confidentiality, data storage and maintenance.

A number of challenges arise, similar to a physical museum, which need to be considered:

- Permission:* from the communities, from the developer, from other stakeholders, how the data is disseminated, referenced and published;
- Accessibility:* limited to the technically and financially advantaged, excluding many of the communities who provided data in the first place;
- Custodianship:* to identify an organisation best suited to handle the data and to be responsible for it in perpetuity; and
- Adaption:* how best to encourage the data collectors to disseminate their information and make it available.

Indeed, are these challenges so insurmountable that the idea is defunct from the start? Are we to view ourselves only as practitioners, the data collectors and assessors, and not to concern ourselves with such matters?

To counter such thoughts, an online repository for archaeological 'grey literature' in the England and Scotland has been successfully deployed through the *OASIS* project: *Online Access to the Index of Archaeological Investigations*. Since 2004, *OASIS* has amassed and enabled the sharing of c.18,265 archaeological reports to the wider community (most of which have been uploaded by the practitioner) and the number continues to grow.

One final thought: the stories in this paper have the potential to survive in the published proceedings of this conference.

## References

International Finance Corporation, 2012, *Performance Standard 8 - Guidance Note 8: Cultural Heritage*

<http://www.oasis.ac.uk/england/>

<http://www.archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archives/view/greylit/>