Indigenous Knowledge and Sustainable Development

Editors:
Tom Kwanya, Peter Matu

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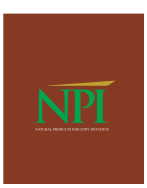

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51. A Review of Intangible Cultural Heritage Elements of Isukuti Artefact and Ritual among the Isukha Community, Kakamega, Kenya

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Abstract

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is a priceless indigenous knowledge treasure globally, and its full use has cultural and socioeconomic development value as espoused in Sustainable Development Goals 4, 5, 8, 11 and 16. ICH is manifested through oral traditions, expressions and language, performing arts, social practices, cultural spaces, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices about nature and traditional craftsmanship. Intangible cultural heritage is fragile and requires urgent safeguarding, yet its transmission remains neglected. The paper reviewed Isukuti artefacts and rituals as intangible cultural heritage in the Isukha Community, Kakamega, to promote and facilitate their use to attain SDGs 4, 5, 8, 11 and 16. The objectives were to identify the SDGs linked to Isukuti artefacts and rituals, establish enactments of Isukuti rituals and artefacts, and ascertain the challenges of Isukuti artefacts and rituals as intangible cultural heritage among the Isukha community. Theoretical triangulation of symbolism and semiotics, functionalist perspective and cultural evolution approaches were employed. The methodology adopted was a descriptive qualitative approach and content analysis. It focused on Isukuti artefacts and rituals by observing and interviewing knowledge holders and practitioners. For truth value in qualitative research findings, crystallisation, authenticity and integrity were maximised. Findings show that Isukuti artefacts and ritual endangerment and fragility can be mitigated. The heritage has contributing potential to the achievement of SDGs such as cultural preservation (SDG 11), promotion of gender equality (SDG 5), economic growth through tourism (SDG 8), education and awareness (SDG 4), and peace, justice and vital institutions (SDG 16).

Keywords: *Intangible cultural heritage, sustainable development, Isukuti, Kakamega, Kenya*

1 Introduction

Takase (2018) asserted that the goal of SDG 11 is to preserve and maintain the world's natural and cultural assets. Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) distinguishes people and communities regarding their history, nationalities, languages, ideology, and values (Kim et al., 2019). ICH is the legacy of physical property and intangible attributes of a group or society inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed to future generations (Okumu, 2016). According to Lenzerini (2011), ICH constitutes the following aspects: one, all immaterial manifestations of culture, and two, the variety of existing heritage. Cultural manifestations and events directly affect all aspects of local economic activity (Teixeira et al., 2023). The cultural heritage of a community is based on the cultural traditions and history of a community, which is thus significant in building national sovereignty (Otiso, 2023). This paper reviewed documentation on two ICH elements of Isukuti artefacts and rituals in Isukha Community, Kakamega County. There is a growing concern that the young

generation is slowly engulfed by modernism and abandoning what they perceive as boring indigenous knowledge. This threatens Isukuti artefacts and rituals as elements needing urgent safeguarding through transmission for preservation. Understanding communities' cultural practices has the potential to create harmony through intercultural dialogue, as laid in SDG11.

The context of this study is the Isukha community. Administratively, Isukha is located in Kakamega East Sub County of Kakamega County with six wards. The community's total population is 167,641(Kenya Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Isukha means first or forward, and the people are called Abiisukha. The Isukha people are divided into sixteen (16) clans (Kibigo et al., 2019). Agriculture is the main economic activity, with 80% of the population involved in small-scale subsistence farming activities and cash crops of tea and sugarcane (Kavulavu et al., 2020). Isukha community is the home of isukuti dance and bullfighting (Kiiru & Mutonya, 2018).

2 Literature review

The literature review zeroed in on historical research via written records and archives to trace the history and evolution of artefacts and rituals, structures and forms, significance and context, rites of passage, and spiritual significance.

2.1 Isukuti artefact

Kiiru and Mutonya (2018) note that early Christians, primarily Quaker Protestants, disliked traditional music. Contrary to the Catholic mission established in Mukumu village in 1906, which supported the development of the isukuti dance genre. Then, the head of the Mukumu mission, in its early days, used to organise the local youth for dance sessions on Sundays after service. The impact of these dance sessions was so significant that the community elders stated, "Isukuti started there. In common with the observation in Chacha (2007), they trace the etymology of isukuti during a Luhya party where white men were guests and treated to the entertainment of the artefact and the ritual. In the end, the guests said, "It is good". The locals translated this to mean "Isukuti." Since then, the ritual and artefact have been called "Isukuti". According to UNESCO (2018), Isukuti is an essential cultural expression among the Isukha and Idakho communities and a symbol of unity in the family and society. The ritual expresses the community's aspirations, philosophy about life and death, fears and hope. Isukuti is a repository of the community's history transmitted from generation to generation (UNESCO, 2023). The isukuti is both an artefact (the drums) and a ritual (the dance). Isukuti rituals and artefacts are rooted in tacit knowledge that is difficult to capture as it resides in the context (practitioners and bearers). Kimutai et al. (2014) emphasise using information communication technology (ICT) to preserve Africa's culture. Isukuti elements must be embraced, appreciated, promoted and protected as articulated through the National Policy on Culture and Heritage (GOK 2009) and in its commitment to the Convention for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage (CSICH).

Figure 1: Isukuti drums

Source: Kenya Department of Culture (2013)

The features of the Isukuti artefact comprise three hollow pieces of carved wood drums, namely Isukuti Isatsa (Man), Isukuti Ikhali (Woman) and Isukuti Mwana (Child). These drums are made from *mukomari* (Cordia Abbysinica), *mung'oma* (prunus africana) or *murembe* (erithrina) species of trees. Materials that make up the Isukuti artefacts are wood chopped and chipped from either Mukomari, Murembe or Mung'oma trees. With observation in Lisimba (2022), the carving of the log leaves a hollow canal on one end (head) covered with the hide of a lizard, referred to in the local dialect as *Imbulu* (matobosaurus validus). This hide is skillfully fastened using small wooden *muhande* tree pins for original sound. The drums are sun-dried for a week to be ready for performance. Furthermore, getting *Imbulu to* hide 'Saurus' in Latin translation for lizard is hard. It requires hunters with trained dogs to lay an ambush on the reptile near river banks (Lisimba, 2022).

In enacting the artefact, Salazar (2023) noted that Isukuti is hung over the shoulder and played by rhythmically striking the lizard's hide (*Imbulu*), covering the head end of the drum with fingers and palms. Enactment of Isukuti is witnessed daily across the various clans and villages that constitute the Isukha community. The practitioners and bearers hold constant informal consultative meetings about the enactment of the element. This contributes to the artefact's viability and safeguard measures (UNESCO, 2023). Occasions for using the artefact include child naming, initiation, burial and wedding. Other spaces included installing leaders, religious functions, sporting events and public congregations (UNESCO, 2018). Experience of this artefact is without discrimination as everybody can enjoy diverse styles, irrespective of age or sex (UNESCO, 2023). Kiiru and Mũtonya (2018) point out specific priests' liking for Isukuti dance as a user; hence, they were permissive of Isukuti mainly as a form of pastime or entertainment. This finding concurs with the assertion by Lusambili and Okoth (2022) that the artefact has recently been introduced into the Catholic mission through the spirit of Vatican Council II (1962-1965). The advocacy was to use local languages and instruments instead of foreign songs and instruments. Cultural clubs in schools and institutions of higher learning use Isukuti artefacts. Other users include but are not limited to over 50 dance groups spread in rural and significant towns in Kenya, apprentice and master players, practitioners, bearers and the community (UNESCO, 2023).

Among the challenges facing the artefact, UNESCO (2023) posits prohibitive regulations

over animal species like the dik-diks (*Shiseri*) and monitor lizards (Imbulu) that are a source of hides used on the artefacts. Practitioners and bearers have had to go as far as Naivasha in search for hides of dik-diks run over by vehicles. Lack of funds and the necessary materials to make the instruments and costumes also present an obstacle. Moreover, the counterfeit art of playing Isukuti being experienced today has adulterated the original beats of the 70s and 80s through contemporary fusion and the regulatory restriction on monitor lizards' (*Imbulu)* hide harvesting (UNESCO, 2023). Integrating Isukuti artefact and ritual as a resource in development initiatives for attaining SDGs is necessary. For the young generations to be aware of the cultural legacy and pass it on to future generations, teach-back must occur regarding ancient rituals and artefacts, which can be a crucial component of the local CBC curriculum. To achieve this, it is necessary to strengthen the link to SDG 4: Quality Education. Besides, SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and biodiversity loss. This has a direct correlation to the challenge of Isukuti artefact materials.

2.2 Isukuti ritual

Isukuti dance is not just performed for its cultural significance but as a repository of the history of the community that is transmitted and re-used from one generation to the other. The ritual symbolises unity as it attracts masses, strong family bonds (symbolised by the three drums), and a strong call offering peace in the community. (UNESCO, 2023). Isukuti ritual has a home for integration in SDG 11 to benefit the Isukha community. Informal integration of dance in the school's co-curricular activities has positively impacted the viability and further links to SDG 4: quality education. UNESCO (2014) requires state parties to take safeguarding measures to strengthen the viability of its elements on the list of ICH in need of urgent safeguarding. Pato (2018) emphasises the role a dance serves in the community, especially when women are together or talk about life in general. Isukuti ritual derives its name from the drums used in the performance. The drums are played in a set of three: the big drum (Isukuti Isatsa-Father), medium drum (Mutibo-Mother) and small drum (Mutiti-Child). The set is accompanied by an antelope horn and assorted metal rattles; *bikhuli* (jingles), *and bisili* (metal gongs); whose 1980s professional players of Museno in Isukha southward like Shamwama, Shindu, Shitakhwa, and Balini all deceased without successor save for surviving Shihachi, *imbati* (trumpet from antelope horn) and *Shisiliba* (trumpet from water buckhorn). The ritual constitutes the structural complexity, and free movements (*mwinuyo)* depict it as a cultural expression of great aesthetic value. UNESCO (2018) notes that the enactment of the ritual has been ongoing as knowledge and skills are passed from one generation to another through lineage. Enactment of the Isukuti ritual has improved tremendously from 96 apprentices in 2018 to 240 in 2023. It is performed almost daily in the clans and villages where different occasions occur. Because the Isukuti ritual renders itself suitable for any social function, it is performed in weddings, sports, burials, naming, initiation, some religious events and almost all gatherings (UNESCO, 2023). Isukuti ritual has a social and cultural significance at all stages in the life cycle, including birth, initiation, marriage and death.

2.2.1 Shiselelo - Wedding

Abiisukha defines marriage as a covenant between a non-related mature man and woman for procreation.

Marital and love songs

Adom (2020) noted that African music occasionally expresses moral judgments and identifies

moral depravity and injustices in many African spaces. Obaje (2018) asserts that African music also includes any sound produced by Africans with their mouths, popularly known as the "African Voices".

> *Sheselelo songs included yikolakola yikolakola mukhana yikolakola uloli muyayi wewe imbeli, yaka namaua kanatola khunjila, nubutinyu aeee, and nubutinyu khulekha henyu khutsia haundi aeee and konga butswa mukhana weru konga butswa eeeeeee.*

Dance

Shiselelo dictates the free dance styles on offer irrespective of who (age or sex) is present and ready to participate. *Lipala* dance involves moving both feet rhythmically, holding the waist and the forehead (Mueni & Omollo, 2015). Values are in the songs; the songs articulate the philosophy and values of the community and make commentaries on social issues, nature, and life (UNESCO, 2018; Obaje, 2018).

2.2.2 Khura - Burial

Isukha people bury the dead in their ancestral homes. The community do not consent to their dean being buried elsewhere.

Songs

Adom (2020) notes that African music occasionally expresses moral judgments and identifies moral depravity and injustices in many African spaces. Obaje (2018) asserts that African music also includes any sound produced by Africans with their mouths, popularly known as the "African Voices". Night vigil songs included*, Unanjili kahili, mukumu kwa yele mukumu kwa yela hangoand Mbee mukoye mbohele mala munda.*

Dance

The *Shimambo* dance is performed when a middle-aged man or woman dies. Isukuti players are invited to entertain the bereaved. During the singing, people chant comforting songs to the accompaniment of *lwika* (horn) (Senoga-Zake, 1986). *Shilembe* dance is performed for the death of old males who met the following attributes: fought in any war(s) and made a mark, killed a fierce animal like a leopard or was a leader of exemplary characteristics.

2.2.3 Khukulikha - Naming

This ceremony played a very significant role in a child's life. The ritual songs and dances associated with it defined the sanctity of life.

Songs

Adom (2020) notes that African music occasionally expresses moral judgments and identifies moral depravity and injustices in many African spaces. Obaje (2018) adds that African music includes any sound produced by the Africans' mouths, popularly known as the "African Voices". Naming songs included *"mwana wamberi nishikhoyero and ing'ombe yikuri baba".*

Dance

Khukulikha occasion dictates dance style irrespective of who (age or sex) is present. In the *Lipala* dance, a person moves both feet rhythmically, holding the waist and the forehead (Mueni & Omollo, 2015). Values are in the songs; the songs articulate the philosophy and values of the community and make commentaries on social issues, nature, and life (UNESCO, 2018; Obaje, 2018).

2.2.4 Shishebo - Initiation

In Isukha, three stages of initiation were done for young male adolescents.

Songs

Initiates went round the village singing and dancing Isukuti tunes. *Shishebo* songs included *woooyi baboli ulimusatsa baba woooo, musatsa niyatukha yasinjila watinya and bamuhali baria khushebwa wooi mbwambo bakwa mmatsi.*

Dance

Shishebo occasions dictate the dance style irrespective of who (age or sex) participates. For example, the three initiation songs here symbolise a male warrior of valour. They are derogatory for cowardice, which denotes the community's message through songs to the initiates and other commentaries on social issues, nature and life (UNESCO, 2018; Obaje, 2018). In the *Lipala* dance, a person moves both feet rhythmically, holding the waist and the forehead (Mueni & Omollo, 2015).

Over the years, there have been challenges of gradual disappearance from the death of knowledge holders and abandonment of the practice (UNESCO, 2018). First, the Isukuti ritual trainee apprentices fail to graduate into master players as some exit the groups in search of greener pastures (UNESCO, 2023). Second, the county regulatory restriction on monitoring lizards' (*Imbulu)* hide harvesting is an endangered species. Third, although learning institutions, including schools and colleges, transmit Isukuti dance and playing skills through school drama festivals, this is not continuous. The ritual heavily relies on the college's and schools' annual event calendars. Fourth, because so many Isukuti rituals happen almost daily, it is impossible to structure the capturing of all enactments. Fifth, there is inexhaustive documentation of some of the activities because Isukuti is not an institutionalised cultural element (UNESCO, 2023). Sixth, Namli (2018) confirms that it ravages cultural spheres like intangible cultural heritage. Seventh, there is an emerging trend of counterfeit art of playing Isukuti due to contemporary fusion. Unfortunately, the output of this fusion does not match the original beats of the 70s and 8os that had the beauty of form (flavour-*bun*dle and body moves-*m*inute).

The ritual depicts cultural significance via cultural preservation (SDG 11- Sustainable Cities and Communities): By preserving rituals like Isukuti, we preserve the cultural heritage of communities. According to Takase (2018), the goal of SDG 11 is to preserve and maintain the world's natural and cultural assets. Pursuing this objective promotes and appreciates artistic genres. Promoting Gender Equality (SDG 5- Gender Equality): In many traditional rituals, there are specific roles for men and women.

Analysing and changing these roles ensures that both genders are properly and equally represented in line with SDG 5 (Eden & Wagstaff, 2021). Economic Growth via Tourism (SDG 8) - Decent Work and Economic Growth): Kiiru (2020) notes that people are no longer theorised as passive objects of the tourist gaze but as active subjects who consciously build representations of their culture for tourists. Isukuti ritual, for example, can draw tourists and provide a source of income for the artists, community, and nation. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions (SDG 16) points to what Whitehouse (2021) calls rituals that bond families because family is an essential locus for ritual life in most settled societies. Such rituals frequently foster social cohesion, fairness, and dispute resolution. This is accomplished by acknowledging indigenous forms of governance and peacemaking techniques. Consequently, the transmission of the ritual through seminars and training sessions is impacted by

incorporating the ritual into school programmes as local content guarantees viability.

Occasionally, Isukuti songs express moral judgments and identify moral depravity and injustices in many African spaces. Obaje (2018) asserts that African music also includes any sound produced by Africans with their mouths, popularly known as the "African Voices". Some of the Isukuti folk songs include but not limited to *mwana wambeli nishikhoyelo, Ing'ombe yikuri baba ilahumila shimoli, nzakhulola busala ikambi khombekhu* (general entertainment), *unanjili kahili, mbee mukoye mbohele malaa munda*, *bayokha bene naboo tsingoiko…haa nukhutsi ntingoi, iminyo ikonanga hena munzu yahuya…. and mukaa mulala shimbuya…… (land tilling song)"*

Figure 2: Isukuti Dance

Source: Kenya Department of Culture (2013)

Kiiru (2021) contend that communities continue with contemporary identities and increased interest in culture, including its effect on dance practices. The study of Isukuti ritual performance as a valued heritage of the Isukha community needs to take into account its accessibility, context, and recurrence *of Isukuti dance.*

Certain traditional features associated with the Isukuti ritual have a striking similarity. Obaje (2018) refers to these features: the role of each drum, the harmony of the drums, the meaningful values in the songs, and the flavour and spirit in the synchrony of the performance. Songs articulate the community's philosophy and values and comment on social issues, nature and life (UNESCO, 2018; Obaje, 2018). The following dances are discussed as a popular aspect of the Isukuti ritual and tied to particular occasions. Mueni and Omollo (2015, note the *Lipala* dance, where a person moves both feet rhythmically, holding the waist and the forehead. *The Shimambo* dance is performed when a middle-aged man or woman dies. Isukuti players are invited to entertain the bereaved. During the singing, people chant comforting songs to the accompaniment of *lwika* (horn) (Senoga-Zake, 1986). *Shilembe* dance is performed for the death of old males who met prescribed attributes, fought in any war(s), made a mark, killed a fierce animal like a leopard, or was a leader of exemplary characteristics. It is believed shilembe gave birth to the present bullfighting (GOK, n.d.). Carr (2023) avers that the cultural significance of dancing is all too often undervalued, and significant dance practices are vulnerable to being irretrievably lost.

3 Theoretical framework

The origins of Isukuti artefacts and rituals can be found in the society's sociocultural practices, religious convictions, and worldviews. The study employed, firstly, symbolism and semiotics Peña Alves (2020) that dealt with symbolism inherent in Isukuti and associated artefacts, drumbeat, dance moves and song meaning. Secondly, the functionalist perspective of Dinh et al. (2021) assessed Isukuti's purpose within the community, for example, social, religious and political functions. Thirdly, the cultural evolution and continuity approach by Brand et al. (2019) sheds light on the adaptability and resilience of elements under study, how Isukuti has been evolving, and how changes are incorporated and consistent.

4 Methodology

Mishra and Alok (2022) averred that descriptive research assists in obtaining the characteristics of a particular problem. The conceptual perspective of the study was based on qualitative research that included designs, techniques and measures that do not produce discrete numerical data. Merriam and Grenier (2019) observed that data in qualitative research is in the form of words rather than numbers, and these words are grouped into categories. According to Klenke (2016), ontology addresses the first question: "What is the nature of reality?" Qualitative researchers endorse a relativistic ontology that is always inter-subjective, socially constructed and shaped by context. The study adopted a descriptive qualitative approach and content analysis focused on Isukuti rituals and artefacts through observation and interviews of knowledge holders and practitioners. Historical research was also applied using written records and archives to trace the history and evolution of the artefact and ritual. For truth value vide reliability and validity, the study employed crystallisation, authenticity and integrity of qualitative research findings (Miles et al., 2014)

5 Findings

The enactment was twofold: Isukuti artefact that delved into its features, materials, when to use, and users and linked to SDGs and Isukuti rituals via occasions, songs, dances and challenges. For the 2018 reporting period, enactment showed two workshops with 76 participants, 50 cultural groups registered, and collaboration between the Department of Culture and the Ministry of Education for local content. Besides, introducing special awards has enhanced enactment and artefact raw materials through the planting of 2000 seedlings project. The enactment of the Isukuti ritual and artefact for the 2023 reporting period shows that every group continually trains their apprentices, with approximately 240 apprentices per year. Further enactment has been achieved through annual National Schools and College Drama and Music festivals. Challenges affecting Isukuti ritual and artefact include globalisation, the Counterfeit art of playing Isukuti, the low retention rate of trained apprentices, and limited research, particularly the independent relevance of *basil* (metal gongs), a facet of Isukuti ritual.

Additionally, formal documentation, commercialisation of the Isukuti ritual by the practitioners and bearers, and persistent financial constraints affect the elements. Due to the daily occurrence of the ritual within clans and villages on varied occasions, there is a need to strengthen research and documentation. The study found resilience in the locals' perception of the Isukuti ritual, aesthetic inspiration, cultural identity, and sense of home. Moreover, there is a high correlation between Isukuti artefact materials and SDG 15. Finally, the Isukuti ritual and artefact heritage is a century old in the Isukha community (Lusambili & Okoth, 2022).

6 Discussions

Protecting and promoting traditional knowledge and cultural expression framework is necessary to effect Articles 11, 40, and 69 (1) c of the 2010 Constitution. Such steps will help institutionalise the linkage of SDGs 4, 5, 8, 11, and 16 for Isukuti artefact and ritual benefit at the local, county, and national levels for sustainable development. Furthermore, an analysis of the national inventory of the ICH 2018 and 2023 UNESCO periodic reports pointed out myriad persisting limitations to Isukuti artefacts and rituals. This need to find sustainable homegrown mitigation. Mainstreamed use of Isukuti artefacts and rituals for education and knowledge transfer in the community is long overdue.

Promoting SDGs can take on a unique and memorable dimension when Isukuti artefacts and rituals are incorporated into development activities. Increasingly, there are demands to make strict IK development strategies and programmes. To fully utilise IK's potential to empower communities and foster a feeling of ownership over development processes, it must be meticulously recorded, conserved, archived, and applied to all development activities. IK's nature threatens its survival if its favourable ecology is destroyed or depleted.

7 Implications

IK must be carefully documented, preserved, stored, and applied in all development interventions to unleash its power to empower communities and foster a sense of ownership of the development processes. This recognition of IK as a significant resource for development is coupled with other related factors. Additional implications include preserving cultural heritage, promoting cultural understanding, tourism opportunities, contextual interpretation, cultural appropriation concerns, reaffirming identity, potential for evolution and academic interest. Besides, the study gives additional impetus to county policy on culture and heritage to mainstream culture in education and to have inclusive societies to ensure that culture is a driver and enabler of economic development, particularly access and benefit sharing (ABS).

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