

The Time is Now for a Ministry of Culture in Uganda!

1. Introduction

With a view to establishing the desirability or otherwise of re-establishing a Ministry of Culture in Uganda, the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda (CCFU), a local registered NGO, has conducted interviews with a number of key informants in the culture sector. This paper presents a synopsis of their responses, as well as the results of a review of relevant secondary sources of information.

2. A Ministry of Culture: not a new idea in Uganda

Government established a Ministry of Culture and Community Development after independence. The Department of Culture therein “was charged with the responsibility of ensuring the preservation, promotion and development of Uganda’s cultures”¹.

This was the time when several laws were enacted that have shaped the country’s cultural sector, such as the Copyright Act of 1964 (replaced in 2006 with the Copyright and Neighbouring Rights Act); the 1965 Uganda National Culture Centre 1965 Act and the Historical Monuments Act of 1967 (which first established the Department of Antiquities).

In the 1970’s, the Ministry of Culture and Community Development was seen as pivotal in placing culture at the forefront of Government action, as exemplified by the Government troupe, the “Heartbeat of Africa” which became (regrettably perhaps) synonymous with culture.

In the 1980’s, changes occurred, often as a result of external influences. The Ministry was re-named Ministry of Youth, Culture and Sports. The Department of Antiquities and Museums was transferred to the then Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities, as “it was envisaged that the transfer would enhance the value and importance of cultural tourism in the tourism industry”.² Several informers felt that this was a key event that eventually weakened the culture function within Government as it split the responsibility for cultural affairs among two ministries.

Meanwhile the visibility of the Culture function at the “parent” ministry was reduced when “gender” took pre-eminence, primarily under the influence of foreign donor funding flows, leading to the “loss of a philosophical outlook on culture”³. From the 1990s, culture was relegated to a “department” within the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, just as “Antiquities and Museums” found their home as one of 4 departments in the Ministry of Tourism.

3. No Ministry of Culture: does it matter?

The consequences of the split and lack of visibility given to culture within Government institutions have been various.

- a. Symbolism and presence: the lack of a substantial ministry in charge of culture conveys a powerful message of lack of interest in Uganda’s culture – this implicitly reinforces the perception that culture is either unimportant or irrelevant to the country’s current context – culture is then seen as unconnected to development, and reduced to the performing arts, as when dancing troupes are mustered to welcome foreign heads of state. This lack of presence can also foster the perception in some quarters that culture is “backward”.
- b. A neglected role of culture in nation-building and harnessing cultural diversity: without a Ministry of Culture, opportunities to utilise the country’s cultural resources for nation-building and managing its diversity are not exploited.

¹ According to the National Culture Policy – see p 1.

² Kamuhangire, “The Transformation of the Ugandan Cultural Heritage Sector” ca 2004

³ Interview, Mr. J. Walugembe

- c. An artificial distinction between tangible and intangible heritage: the current separation of the culture functions across two ministries, in addition to inefficiencies, promotes a perception that tangible heritage is somehow divorced from intangible heritage. This undermines a holistic understanding of culture and its wealth.
- d. Freezing culture to its colonial and post-colonial expressions: rather than actively supporting new forms of cultural expressions, Government's inactivity leads by default to a situation where much of the official culture sector is the product of a distorted colonial infrastructure (National Theatre, National Museum).
- e. Inefficient service delivery and poor resourcing: as the authors of the Second National Development Plan note: "*The Social Development Sector is characterised by inadequate funding, "grossly understaffed", with a broad mandate (and by) functional constraints - amalgamation of functions (labour, gender, culture, probation and social welfare, community development, social rehabilitation, youth work and social gerontology) to the extent that some functions are subsumed under others which lead to ineffective service delivery*"⁴ Currently, service delivery in the culture sector is limited to managing the National Museum, providing a stipend to cultural leaders and spearheading celebrations, such as World Culture Day.
- f. A limited ability to meet international obligations: The East African Treaty affirms that "*The Partner States shall promote close co-operation amongst themselves in culture and sports, with respect to the promotion of cultural activities, including the fine arts, literature, music, the performing arts and other artistic creations, and the conservation, safeguarding and development of the cultural heritage of the Partner States including, historical materials and antiquities*"⁵ Uganda, unique among the partner states not to have a Ministry of Culture, is struggling to meet this obligation, as well as others, such as those linked to UNESCO conventions.

4. Re-establishing a Ministry of Culture: what advantages, what risks?

Should a Ministry of Culture be re-established, what would be the advantages?

- a. Recognising the central role of culture in defining Ugandan identity: culture should be seen as "cross-cutting", informing national identity and any national agenda and indeed "*providing a platform for our civilisation to thrive*"⁶. Without this recognition, Government's work will continue to depend largely on foreign concepts and to bypass the immense resources provided by Ugandans' rich cultures in shaping our national agenda.
- b. Affirming our sovereignty: cultural activities are currently often dependent on foreign sources – a Ministry of Culture would provide moral and some financial support and leadership to the culture sector.
- c. Providing support to key national projects: where culture *is* currently supported by Government (such as in promoting local languages and, to some extent, cultural tourism), these do not benefit from direct, unified Ministerial support – a Ministry of Culture would provide much more effective support than is currently the case with scattered un-coordinated activities.
- d. Enhance development through culture: internationally, culture is increasingly recognised as a key element for economic and social growth. A distinct Ministry of Culture could provide leadership in harnessing the resources of cultural industries, in spurring the growth of cultural tourism and employment, and in supporting Uganda's education sector in a way that is in tune with Uganda values and heritage.
- e. Pooling resources currently scattered across two Departments; resource mobilisation and making savings: the current distribution of responsibilities across two departments in two different ministries breed inefficiency, with overlaps, competition for resources and lack of clarity as to which ministry is precisely responsible for what. A single Ministry in charge of Culture would lead to savings and to better exploiting partnerships and financial resources available internationally.
- f. Meet our constitutional provisions: the Constitution recognises the right to culture (Art. 37) and the role of the State in promoting culture, languages, and in protecting heritage (National

⁴ p.224

⁵ Article 119

⁶ Interview, S. Rwangyezi

Objectives 24,25). This is currently only partially being undertaken – a Ministry of Culture would give renewed impetus to fulfilling these obligations.

Could the re-establishment of a Ministry of Culture also have negative aspects and how could these be mitigated?

- a. An empty, ill-resourced administrative shell: the culture sector will have to remain vigilant and ensure that “its” Ministry delivers on its mandate, at least in part thanks to the pooling of government resources currently provided in a scattered fashion. A substantive Minister at the cabinet table will at least have a seat to fight for increasing resources to the sector.
- b. An economistic approach to culture: culture can easily be seen as a commodity. While culture has an important role to play in promoting economic well-being, this cannot be its sole reason for Government support. The culture sector will need to ensure that culture is not “commoditised”.
- c. A directive approach to culture: the Ministry will play a facilitative role and is not envisaged to directly fund cultural events or expressive arts institutions. While tensions may well develop on certain topics (cf. censorship and the “public good”), a Ministry of Culture would still provide for the existence of an informed interlocutor.
- d. Fostering a sub-national vision: the re-establishment of a Ministry of Culture provides an opportunity for Government to promote a vision of culture that reflects the country’s diversity in unity, giving voice to central government’s policies and views on cultural affairs.

5. Uganda is alone in the region without a Ministry of Culture

Uganda is unique in the region in having no Ministry with at least the name “Culture” in its title:

- Burundi: Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture
- D.R. Congo: Ministry of Culture and the Arts
- Ethiopia: Ministry of Culture and Tourism
- Kenya: Ministry of Sports, Culture and the Arts
- Malawi: Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture
- Rwanda: Ministry of Sports and Culture
- Tanzania: Ministry of Information, Culture, Artists and Sports
- South Africa: Department (Ministry) of Arts and Culture
- South Sudan: Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports
- Sudan: Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports
- Zimbabwe: Ministry of Rural Development, Preservation and Promotion of Culture and Heritage

6. What form could it take?

A frequent suggestion was made that a “Ministry of Culture and Sports” be established, given the inter-connexion between the two. With regard to culture, this Ministry could be structured as follows:

- a. Cultural Policy Department (create and maintain a conducive policy environment that enables development and investment in the culture and heritage sector, harmonising policy initiatives in relation to culture and heritage)
- b. Heritage Preservation Department (preservation of tangible and intangible heritage; support to museums, sites historical buildings, UNESCO- and national recognised intangible heritage elements and sites)
- c. Cultural Tourism Department (development of cultural tourism infrastructure, services, support to private sector, cultural entrepreneurship and employment creation)
- d. Cultural Education and Indigenous Knowledge Department (support to curriculum development, nation-building projects, research, documentation, languages support, public awareness and publicity)
- e. Cultural Infrastructure Department (support and liaison with cultural institutions, support to UNCC, cultural centres, libraries)