

## East Africa Culture and Arts Festival (JAMAFEST)

“Culture and the Creative Industry: The Engine for Unity and Employment Creation  
8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> September 2017

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### Critical Analysis of Ethical Cultural Issues in Science and technology in East Africa: The case of cultural practices in Uganda

Presented by

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda



In simple terms, science is the systematic method or body of knowledge in a given area<sup>1</sup> while technology is the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes. It is the collection of skills, techniques, methods and processes to support the production of goods and services<sup>2</sup>. Ethics is the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group of people<sup>3</sup>. This is usually the basis of determining what is right or wrong in a given society.

Cultural practices are a manifestation of worldviews, values, beliefs, principles and norms of a given society and examining them in isolation often leads to misconception. Thus in an attempt to analyze ethical issues in various cultural practices in Uganda, it is necessary to understand the cultural context within which these practices are enacted, the viewpoint on what may be considered ethical as well as factors that reinforce prejudices and negative stereotypes about culture.

#### Culture

There are a number of contested definitions of culture, however for purpose of this paper, culture may be defined as a set of values, beliefs, principles and norms that inform our worldviews, ways of life, identity, knowledge systems, oral traditions and traditional practices. Culture is dynamic and change may be triggered by internal reflection and reinvention by the practising community or may be instigated by externally-derived trends and phenomenon such as globalization, advancement in technology and other associated modernization. World over, communities inherit and transmit traditional structures and systems to sustain elements of culture that are considered to be important. According to UNESCO, our intangible cultural heritage is constantly recreated by its bearers, continuously evolving from manifestation to manifestation and while being transmitted from person to person and from generation to generation. Thus, oral traditions, cultural rituals and practices, associated knowledge and skills, governance systems and structures have been passed down generations through traditional transmission mechanisms. In all cultures in Uganda, there are cultural practices and associated ceremonies that relate to science and technology such as birth, marriage, traditional occupations (fishing, farming, pastoralism, potters, iron-smiths, and gatherers), processes (food processing and preservation), health care (traditional medicine, initiations such as circumcisions), traditional governance (e.g. coronation practices), social interactions and death. Although their visibility differs from one culture to the next, they all contribute to a sense of identity and social cohesion.

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<sup>1</sup> The Free Dictionary

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia,

<sup>3</sup> Merriam - Webster

Many of these practices have specific people who are designated to perform particular cultural practices such as spiritualists, herbalists, traditional birth attendants, bonesetters, and mental healers<sup>4</sup>, while others are involved in preparation and protection of cultural resources. These bearers are motivated by the need to reinforce cultural identity, social status, economic benefit, peaceful coexistence, and beliefs in the living dead and future generations. The cultural logic<sup>5</sup> - a process of interpreting each other's actions; hypothesizing the motivations and intentions, and understanding the motivations behind people's actions and behind other mysterious phenomena – needs to be understood in order to critically analyze a cultural practice.

### **Background on science and technology and the cultural context in Uganda**

Uganda as a country is a colonial creation with ethnic boundaries respecting international boundaries in only a few places and a culturally divided 'protectorate' serving the aims of colonial control. Just like other African countries, pre-colonial Uganda had some level of advancement in science and technology especially in regard to health care (caesarean section performed and documented in 1879 by R.W. Felkin<sup>6</sup>, roles of traditional birth attendants), traditional medicines and treatments (by elderly women and traditional herbalists), food processing and preservation (pounding, cooking, drying, smoking or salting), exploration of minerals such as the smelting of metals in Mwenge Western Uganda as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century<sup>7</sup> among others.

Uganda is also well known for its rich cultural diversity with over 65 ethnic groups<sup>8</sup> with distinct worldviews, ways of life, belief and governance systems, oral traditions and languages<sup>9</sup>. Most of these groups are governed by elders, clan leaders, chiefs and in some cases, kings who have the mandate to provide for and protect their communities. The social organisation and social contract between the people and their leaders revolved around kinship<sup>10</sup>. These leaders have roles and responsibilities that perpetuate certain practices for political, social, or economic benefits and therefore understanding the relevance of a practice, its rationale and history, who perpetuates and benefits from it, and its implications in respect to an individual or community's sense of wellbeing is essential.

The Constitution of Uganda<sup>11</sup> recognizes "*cultural and customary values that are consistent with the fundamental human rights and freedoms, human dignity and democracy...which may be developed and incorporated in all aspects of Ugandan life*". Objective XXV gives the State and citizens the mandate to preserve and promote public property and Uganda's heritage. The National Culture policy (2006) aims at and elaborates on the need to promote culture and enhance its contribution to community empowerment through cultural industries, research and development, performing art, indigenous knowledge, language and literary art, cultural beliefs, traditions and values and cultural sites and monuments.

While these national legal instruments recognize the importance of cultural practices linked to cultural identity and expression, they also provide limitations in respect to functions of cultural leaders, their power and access to resources. Many of these laws and policies are influenced by western viewpoints resulting in the measurement of ethical acceptability against rights-based and modern frameworks

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<sup>4</sup> CCFU (2011) – Culture and Traditional medicine

<sup>5</sup> Enfield, N.J. (2000). The Theory of Cultural Logic. How Individuals Combine Social Intelligence with Semiotics to Create and Maintain Cultural Meaning. First Published March 1, 2000

<sup>6</sup> Felkin, R.W (1884) Notes on Labour in Central Africa. Edinburgh Medical Journal, Vol.20 pg 922 - 930

<sup>7</sup> Iles, L. (2013) The development of Iron Technology in Precolonial Western Uganda. Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa Vol.48 issue 1

<sup>8</sup> Constitution of Uganda 1995. Third Schedule, Article 10 (a). The Republic of Uganda.

<sup>9</sup> The Constitution of Uganda recognizes 45 languages.

<sup>10</sup> Njoh, A. (2006). Tradition, Culture and Development in Africa. Historical Lessons for Modern Development Planning. Ashgate. University of South Florida, USA.

<sup>11</sup> The Constitution of Uganda (2005). Objective XXIV of the Constitution. The Republic of Uganda

founded on western cultures and worldviews. Given the ill-fit of cultural practices and these frameworks, the former are often perceived as primitive and irrelevant.

### **Ethical issues: universality or cultural relativity?**

As earlier pointed out, ethical issues refer to a problem, situation or practice that requires a person or organization to choose between alternatives that must be evaluated as right (ethical) or wrong (unethical), based on moral principles that reflect what is considered right or wrong<sup>12</sup>. Ethics are informed by cultural values which range from integrity, honesty, fairness, equitable and equal benefit, social justice to social responsibility, among others. These values are born out of social, political, economic or environmental contexts that in turn influence modern day development thinking and practice.

The current global leaning towards universal human rights and democratic governance are a reflection of principles and values founded on western (ethnocentric) cultures. While the text of the Declaration of Universal Human Rights was formulated by representatives of western Christian traditions and drawing ideas from Buddhist, Islamic and Hindu traditions, some authors argue that human rights are not fully compatible with existing cultural tradition and that they represent a complete break with any of these traditions<sup>13</sup>. Although human rights do not oblige human beings to step out of their culture, there is a tendency to dismiss traditions as backward and superseded by modernity. Thus, on the one hand, ethical considerations may be from a standpoint of universality of rights, which holds the position that moral values are the same for everyone.

Cultural relativism, on the other hand, suggests that there is no singular truth upon which to base ethical or moral behavior, as our interpretations of truths are influenced by our own cultures. It recognizes the possibility that what is ethical to one group will not be considered so by someone living in a different cultural context. According to cultural relativists this means that there is no singular truth on which to base ethical or moral behavior for all time and geographic space. Cultural relativism fosters tolerance because the basis for making moral judgments between cultures is sensitive to the existence of differences in beliefs, values and norms. Thus, in making a critical analysis of ethical issues in various cultural practices in Uganda, it is useful to establish from which perspective and position one interprets ethics.

### **Some other factors that inform our conceptualization of ethics in Uganda**

In Uganda there are factors that have had a significant influence on what may be considered ethical or not, one of which is religion. *Ugandan traditional religion, similar to many African communities, is inextricably linked to the culture of the people and understood as an integral part of life in which every aspect was knit together into a coherent system of thought and action, giving significance and meaning and providing abiding and satisfying values*<sup>14</sup>. However with the advent of Christianity in the 1880s, African traditional religions were demonized and dismissed as paganism. According to the 2014 Census, 84% of Uganda subscribe to Christianity. Although the Catholic Church has adopted acculturation - an inclusive approach in which indigenous languages, traditional dress and music are integrated in liturgy and religious ceremonies, there are still Christian sects that continue to demonize culture and cultural practices using their ethical standards of what is right or wrong. Some religious institutions have dismissed and denounced culture as satanic paganism, narrowly defining it as negative cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, witchcraft, and widow cleansing and inheritance. Only 1% of Ugandans

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<sup>13</sup> Katherina Wegner (..)The Universality of Human rights and Different Cultures and Traditions. Conference of European Churches. Church & Society Commission.

<sup>14</sup> Source : "The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions", (Editor: Department of Global and International Studies University of California Mark Juergensmeyer Professor of Sociology and Director, Santa Barbara), p. 537, Oxford University Press, USA (2006), ISBN 9780199727612 [1]

describe themselves primarily as practitioners of traditional local religions, although it is not uncommon to find that cultural religious practices persist among many people who identify as Christian or Muslim. As a result, many Ugandans may subscribe to the culture of Christianity and forfeit their own, using foreign viewpoints to pass harsh judgement on practices that do not fit in with modernity.

During the colonial period culture was 'branded' as backward, with prominent cultural rites and rituals characterised as witchcraft or paganism to be discarded as 'uncivilised'. Laws prohibiting certain cultural activities such as traditional religious beliefs which were regulated under the Witchcraft Act, 1957. The 1966 post-independence abolition of traditional kingdoms and cultural institutions and the restoration of these institutions by the 1995 Constitution, reflected the thinking of the colonial administration which rendered culture irrelevant. Thus, development thinking and practice, governance, and education in Uganda continues to be heavily influenced by western knowledge and globalization, in which culture and cultural practices do not compete favourably with other bodies of knowledge.

Education has also influenced ethical behaviours in Uganda. The Ugandan indigenous communities had and still have their own moral standards of behavior to an extent taught informally often times at the fire place. However, today's society has both the indigenous standards of behaviour and the standards introduced by western education or civilization and philosophy through globalisation. These two different standards of behaviour today provide guidance on what is ethical or not. These double sometimes contradicting set of ethical principles is a source of confusion to individuals, institutional and public ethical practice. The traditional is sometimes viewed by the world as being backward yet they formed a strong society that had its own ethical values and principles.

While these factors influence the conceptualization of ethics in the public sphere, some cultural practices have remained resilient and evolved to respond to changes in the environment. Some of these practices complement, in principle, externally-informed bodies of knowledge in respect to religious, political and social principles, while other contradict and cause controversy.

There are a number of ethical concerns in science and technology and include respect for intellectual property rights and the actual use of technology or the skills.

### **Some cultural practices that may raise ethical issues**

Some cultural practices such as traditional introduction and marriage ceremonies, naming, installing an heir, last funeral rites and blessing ceremonies, food festivals, often do not raise significant conflicting ethical concerns. There are however some cultural practices that are controversial because their performance or consequences are perceived as a violation of human, women or children's rights. Female Genital Mutilation<sup>15</sup> widow inheritance, wife sharing, wedding night practice (sexual coaching by the paternal aunt), and forced traditional circumcision all raise ethical issues regarding human rights to bodily integrity, freedom of choice, dignity and health especially in respect to reproductive health and potential contraction of HIV/AIDS and other diseases but yet have a wealth of knowledge that could be tapped for development. Other cultural practices that may raise ethical concerns include extraction and spreading of body parts of fallen kings and chiefs (extraction of nails, jaw bones, distributed of human body parts to mark geographical territory), throwing away bodies of the dead to be ravaged by wild animals (without burial) as well as cruel animal sacrifices.

But what lenses are we using to describe and understand the cultural practices mentioned above? What informs our perception of what is ethical or not? Have these evolved over time to reflect new ethical considerations given the dynamism of culture? The above description of cultural practices is influenced

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<sup>15</sup> FGM is a practice that has raised much concern and was banned in Uganda in 2010 but continues to be practised in north eastern Uganda. UWONET report indicates an 80% prevalence of this practice despite the ban.

by an externally biased viewpoint, which often tends to exclude the viewpoint of the practising communities and how this has responded to changes in the environment over time. There is limited, if any, attempt to understand the cultural logic of cultural practices by examining the cultural context, the people's worldview, the foundation of a particular practices manifested in its rationale, history, cultural meaning and social function, value-base and reinforcing systems and structures.

The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda<sup>16</sup>, which is premised on the conviction that the positive aspects of culture can be harnessed to bring about sustainable, social and economic transformation has developed a "Culture in Development" approach, which enables the objective examination of controversial cultural practices. This tool<sup>17</sup> advances values of mutual respect and tolerance, legal pluralism, objective analysis of culture, consultation and negotiation for sustained transformation. CCFU also provides training for development partners to better understand the cultural context and utilize cultural resources to advance their development agenda.

In conclusion, while universality of rights dominates global development discourse and practice, these rights do not exist in a vacuum and are intended for the benefit of all human beings. Human beings are influenced by their culture and cultural context. Ethics too are derived from cultures whose values and principles determine what is right and wrong. It is therefore important to realize that the outcomes of a critical analysis of ethical issues in cultural practices will depend on which parameters are used to determine what may be considered ethical or not. Understanding a cultural practice in its entirety will support interventions that could lead to modification and lasting transformation founded on values of mutual respect and tolerance. Being cognisant of the potential conflict between human and cultural rights<sup>18</sup>, universality or cultural relativism, western and traditional worldviews, as well as competing religious agenda versus traditional religious beliefs, will allow for an objective analysis of cultural practices. The existence of pluralistic societies with multiple layers of ethical and moral standards could serve as sources of new and diverse knowledge that could potentially deepen the appreciation of ethical issues in various cultural practices in Uganda.

***Appeal:*** *Let us not create instruments that destroy our heritage (cultural practices) without giving it due consideration*

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<sup>16</sup> The Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda [www.crossculturalfoundation.or.ug](http://www.crossculturalfoundation.or.ug) is a registered, not-for-profit NGO, dedicated to promoting the recognition of culture as vital for human development that responds to Uganda's national identity and diversity

<sup>17</sup> See attached tool: CCFU CiD Manual, 2013, "Dealing with Cultural controversy- 7-step process of analysis"

<sup>18</sup> Cultural Rights are enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 27) which provides for participation in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits

## Dealing with Cultural controversy- 7-step process of analysis

