

Bigwala gourd trumpet music and dance, bark-cloth making and Empaako naming system are some of the traditional practices.

BY BAMUTURAKI MUSINGUZI

There are half a dozen traditional practices from Uganda that are inscribed on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Last year, the practices were the first National Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) exhibition.

What are the practices?

They include: Bigwala gourd trumpet music and dance; barkcloth making; male child cleansing ritual; the Koogere oral tradition; the Madi bowl lyre instrument and music; and the Empaako naming system.

Bigwala gourd trumpet music and dance is special because it is a royal musical heritage of the Basoga, performed during installation ceremonies and symbolising unity and authority. A set of five or more monotone gourd trumpets are blown in combination, accompanied by drum players, singers and dancers. Song lyrics narrate the history of the Basoga, focusing in particular on their king. The five gourd trumpets are: empla, enana, endasasi, endesi, and endumilizi.

"These trumpets represent Busoga royal music. Today, the music is performed at royal events, weddings and many others. These five trumpets represent the different sounds of this music from the endumilizi with the lowest sound to the empla with the highest sound," Mr John Lugolole, chairman of the Bigwala Cultural Group based in Namalemba Sub-county, Bugwera District in eastern Uganda, tells *Saturday Monitor*.

He adds: "Our biggest challenge we are facing is that when we plant the gourds they are attacked by pests when they are at the flowering stage. We are getting rid of the pests by spraying pesticides on the plants."

What is bark cloth making?

This centuries-old practice of crafting cloth from the Mutuba tree (*Ficus natalensis*/Fig tree) is deeply embedded in Buganda's rituals and artistic expression. "We use the knife (*omwambe*) to carefully harvest the outer bark of the Mutuba tree. The banana stalk (*omuzin-gonyo*) is then used to remove the bark so as not to damage it. We then cover the tree with banana leaves to protect it from the sun or rain for three days," Mr Thomas Lubega, the head of the cultural and tourism office in Mutuba Mukaga, says.

He adds: "The top of the outer bark is removed. We may then boil the bark to get the best bark cloth. We then embark on the process of gently beating the inner bark with grooved mallets known as *omukomagiro* and *ensaamo* to make it thin and flexible." The material is dried and later decorated, ready to be used for cloth and various purposes.

"We start this process of making bark cloth in your home, some members of the public falsely perceive it as a religious shrine. Bark cloth making is not satanic at all. Today, bark cloth is expensive, and it is used to make handicrafts, modern garments, and traditional ceremonies," Mr Lubega clarifies.

He adds: "Our biggest challenge today is that the Mutuba or Emituba trees are

What living traditions in Uganda stand out?



Mr Francis Agaba Akiiki, the baby's grandfather, pronounces his names to him during an Empaako naming ceremony in 2014. PHOTO/FILE

PRESERVING CULTURE

Uganda Community Museums Association (UCOMA) organised the first National Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) exhibition last year. UCOMA is a non-governmental organisation that brings together over 36 community-based museums across the country. It was established in 2011.

scarce. The trees do not have a market so people cut them down for firewood and burning charcoal."

What does the male child cleansing ritual entail?

A practice among the Lango people in northern Uganda, the ritual cleanses young males, marking their transition to adulthood. "This ritual is the cleansing ceremony for the boy child whose genitals were accidentally touched by his mother while still in house immediately after birth which rendered him impotent," Mr Benjamin Okii, the leader of Okii-Bua Clan in Lango, discloses.

He adds: "Tradition dictates that when a boy is born he should be kept in the house for three days before being brought out in the sunshine. Within those three days the mother has to be careful not to touch the genitals of the boy. Otherwise, the boy may be rendered impotent."

Traditional shoes made from buffalo or cow hides known as waro are worn. Today, Mr Okii reveals, "the shoes are made from car tyres".

He also discloses that the *odero* (winnowing tray) is used to cover the head of the boy and mother when they are coming out of the house to ease themselves during the three days of the ceremony.

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The *gwata* (calabash) is used for eating food and drinking water. The *tol kworo* (rope from the Kworo tree) is tied around the hands of the boy.

"We used to tie the umbilical cord around the hands of the boy in the past, now we use the *tol kworo* rope." There was the *nyig itodi* necklace made from the seeds of the *itodi* wild banana species tree. "The seeds represent the boy who is a human seed, and he should flourish in life. The necklace is dressed around the neck of the boy while in the house for three days," Mr Okii notes.

What about the Koogere oral tradition?

It's a cycle of narratives from the Basongora, Banyabindi, and Batooro communities of western Uganda, celebrating female leadership, wisdom, and moral values.

At last year's maiden National ICH exhibition, the artefacts were presented by the Kagore Community Museum.

um under the Kagore Foundation Uganda (KFG) in Fort Portal City. They included: *ekyanzi*, *ebisayi*, *engata*, *akai-bo k'owwani*, *entebe*, and *omukeeka*, among others.

The foundation derives its name from Koogere Rusijamiryango Atwooki, a renowned female leader in pre-colonial Bunyoro-Tooro history. Appointed as

county chief of Busongora, she exemplified leadership, hard work, and peace, leaving a lasting legacy in the region.

KFG continues to promote cultural preservation and community empowerment. It is dedicated to safeguarding and harnessing cultural resources, both tangible and intangible for development.

The Curator of the Kagore Community Museum, Ms Gertrude Kabaganda, says: "Koogere was the first female Saza Chief of Busongora. She was the first female leader 1,500 years ago. She was so famous and ruled from Busongora up to Bokedea in eastern Uganda, stretching to Ituri in Democratic Republic of Congo and Karagwe in Tanzania. What we are displaying are cow hides and milk items because Koogere was very wealthy with a lot of cattle."

What makes the Madi bowl lyre instrument and music noteworthy?

It's an emotive, poetic musical form among the Madi people of West Nile, often played in communal gatherings to pass down wisdom and cultural memory. The Manager of the Madi Community Museum, Mr Jonathan Agwe Aliko, says the *odi* (bowl lyre) is normally played during the naming ceremonies, traditional marriages, good harvest celebrations, and political rallies.

"The *tumi-aco* (traditional hoe) is used to clean around our traditional altar. A

three-legged stone called *tumi*. This hoe is among the items for bride price," Mr Aliko tells *Saturday Monitor*.

The *utu* traditional sieve is used for making traditional brew. The *ebu* (iron ore) is used to make traditional hoes. The *biri* traditional music instrument is used during the *Mure* traditional dance. The *aula* is worn on the left hand when performing the *Mure*. "The *Mure* is a very important dance through which the *Madi* can be identified. The dance is used to pass on important messages. It is also performed after the burial of an elder of 70 years and above," Mr Aliko further reveals.

What about the Empaako naming system?

According to Engabu Za Tooro (Tooro Youth Platform for Action), Empaako is a naming system whereby children are given a special name called Empaako from among the twelve names shared across the communities of the Batooro, Banyoro, Batagwenda, Batuku and Banyabindi found in Western Uganda in addition to their given and family names.

The Empaako include *Okaali* that is reserved for a king, *Apuuli*, *Araali*, *Bbala* and *Acaali* exclusively for men while *Akiiki*, *Adyeri*, *Amooti*, *Ateenyi*, *Atwoki*, *Abbooki* and *Abwoli* are shared among both sexes. Addressing a person by his or her Empaako name is a positive affirmation of social ties.

Engabu Za Tooro says Empaako plays the following three important roles in one's life: (1) Greeting. In greeting, the two address each other using Empaako. One asks Empaako only on first interaction. (2) Neutralising anger and tension. Greeting or addressing by Empaako to a person one is in conflict with, sends strong message of compromise, peace and reconciliation. The members of the bearer communities believe that Empaako mysteriously evaporates from the memory of the two people whose relationship gets strained, only to be recovered at reconciliation.

(3) A form of address in all positive subjective conditions of human interactions like; expressing respect and honour to a parent, an elder, a leader, spirit medium and gods; expressing affection to a companion, a lover, a tender minor, a sick or suffering, a missed or dead dear one; appealing for favour from human or superhuman powers; and expressing thanks and bidding farewell.

Therefore, while Empaako is given along with surname, the two serve completely different roles. The surname is only for official and impersonal address.

Are the cultural practices still alive and well in Uganda?

According to the Uganda Community Museums Association (UCOMA), once thriving and widespread, many of these traditions had reached near extinction, surviving only through a few remaining knowledge bearers. As a result of the safeguarding efforts supported by Unesco, these elements are being revitalised, though they remain fragile and not widely understood by the wider public.

Does Uganda pride in any other significant but non-inscribed practices?

Yes, it does. From the Bagisu of eastern Uganda there is the *Imbalu* male initiation rite as well as their indigenous food preparation (*Malewa*), traditional governance, and worship systems. Amongst the Baganda in central Uganda there are drum-making processes, clan systems, and spiritual beliefs.

Elsewhere, from the Kigezi highlands the best bits include: music and dance traditions like *Ekizino* and *Kakitaari*, local beer-making, and healing practices.