

**THE ‘CULTURE HUT’ CONCEPT: A CASE OF DANDA AND CHIMEDZA SCHOOLS IN
ZAKA DISTRICT**

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ABSTRACT

The research looks at the ‘culture hut’ concept and its potential contribution to education in Zimbabwe. The researchers used the interview and observation techniques extensively in data gathering. Interviewed were cultural officers, teachers in charge of culture in the schools and the Great Zimbabwe National Monuments Director to give their views on the ‘culture hut’ concept. Observations entailed the researchers visiting selected schools in Zaka District of Masvingo Province that have ‘culture huts’ and getting into the huts to observe first hand. Observations included looking at the materials used in the construction of the huts as well as artifacts collected and displayed in them and writing copious notes on them. The researchers note the usefulness of the ‘culture huts’ in an attempt to preserve African cultural heritage, especially in the face of globalization and note their potential as a rich source of educational material if well used. However, the researchers note that their characterization as ‘culture huts’ is misleading since we feel that culture cannot be ‘bottled’ or ‘containerized’ and therefore the term ‘culture huts’ may be seen as a misnomer. Instead the term ‘mini-cultural museum’ could be closer to what the so-called ‘culture huts’ are doing. Quite a number of the artifacts in the ‘culture huts’ are no longer used in most people’s day-to-day life for them to be legitimately called ‘cultural’ per se. The popular definition of culture is that it is a way of life of a people not the life of a people as lived in the past. For example, how many people in Zimbabwe use a wooden pillow?

Keywords: culture, material/non-material culture, policy, acculturation, globalization

Introduction

Zimbabwe has the Ministry of Education, Sports, Arts and Culture, which shows how seriously the issue of culture is taken. Concerted efforts at preserving this culture, which makes Zimbabwean culture unique among other Africans cultures have also been made, resulting in the drafting of a cultural policy which clearly defines what Zimbabweans value as eternal truths that should be passed on from generation to generation. This cultural policy was sent for review to various stakeholders including teachers' colleges (Marymount Teachers' College was one, and one of the researchers was involved in the exercise). Thereafter, it was adopted as the cultural policy of Zimbabwe on 08 September 2004 with a foreword by the then Minister of Education A. S. Chigwedere.

In the preamble to the cultural policy, it is clearly stated that:

Some of our traditions, values and beliefs seem to be disappearing owing to various factors, which include colonialism, urbanization, globalization and acculturation. The need to promote and preserve our cultural heritage has become more important in the face of the above factors. Concerted efforts have to be put in place to preserve this cultural heritage for posterity and to maintain it as a unique part of world's cultural heritage (Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe. Harare: Ministry of Education Sport and Culture, September 2004:1)

In light of the above, one can then clearly understand why the vision and objectives of the cultural policy zero in on building a Zimbabwean culture based on our traditional values, beliefs and contemporary aspects that respect the dignity and creativity of individual people. This it is argued takes place taking cognizance of the fact that, "we are a diverse cultural society" (Cultural Policy of Zimbabwe. Harare: Ministry of Education Sport and Culture, September 2004:1). What it means is that Zimbabwe, being a multicultural society, has to take into account different ethnic, linguistic and religious groups in its definition of culture.

The key concepts of the cultural policy are outlined in seven categories:

- **Cultural Identity** - This section looks at Zimbabwean languages, Religion and Traditional beliefs, myths and rituals, customs, cultural values and ethics. The issue of national dress is

also covered in this area, together with heritage, monuments and preservation. Food and settlement come in as well.

- **Education and Training** - The main thrust of this section is on traditional knowledge systems, communication and debates on culture among other issues.
- **Creative and Cultural Industries** - Focus here is on performing arts, that is theatre, dance and music and Visual arts, which focuses on fine arts, crafts, film and television. Literary art comes in, in the form of book writing and publishing. Culture and tourism are also part of this component.
- **Culture and Social Issues** - This category covers issues such as health, traditional medicines, culture, and the environment vis-à-vis our own culture among other issues. Even contemporary social issues such as the HIV and AIDS pandemic are looked at within a cultural context.
- **Traditional Cultural Institutions** - Institutions such as the family, the community, chiefs and headman come in with specific roles in cultural preservation.
- **National Cultural Institutions** - Museums, the courts, and national monuments fall under this category.

Government's Role

This section clearly defines the role of government in the cultural heritage preservation struggle, for example support through legislation, provision of training facilities and funding etc from the above discussion, one can see that the policy is quite comprehensive touching on every aspect of the day to day lives of the Zimbabwean people.

To show how serious the government is with the preservation of culture, the adoption of the cultural policy was supported through a number of initiatives. Firstly provincial cultural officers were appointed (one in each of the ten provinces) to guide and support activities implemented to promote cultural preservation in various institutions such as communities, primary and secondary schools. A culture fund was also established and registered as a trust in 2006. This Trust was mandated with contributing to the growth and development of the culture sector in Zimbabwe; through the provision of financial and technical support to cultural practitioners, institutions and activities (Culture Fund

newsletter of January 2008). This is done through application to another important board set up to support the arts, the National Arts Council (ANC). Among the fund's beneficiaries are the following sub sectors: film, audiovisual and multimedia production, cultural heritage, fine arts and crafts, cultural industries, literature, languages and performing arts. This has been going on ever since the Culture Fund was set up and just for the first cycle of 2009 approved projects for support through the fund numbered fifty. Those approved by the sub sector were as follows: Cultural Heritage (6), Cultural Industries (5), Fine arts and Craft (5), Literature and Language (4), Film (2) and Performing Arts (28). Thus all the sub sectors were represented with the highest paid groups getting US\$15 000 and the lowest paid getting US\$500 (*The Zimbabwe Independent*, April 9-16 2009: 13).

These sub sectors cover most of various categories presented in the cultural policy, while at the same time showing not only focus on development and preservation of culture but also its packaging and commercialization. Apart from the above efforts at culture preservation, culture week is also taken quite seriously as it is celebrated with a lot of pomp and fanfare as various groups showcase different aspects of what is termed Zimbabwean culture.

With all these efforts being made to preserve our cultural heritage, one would then want to find out where culture huts come in and how much more benefits can be reaped where they are concerned.

Conceptual Framework

Culture has been defined from various perspectives such as philosophical, sociological and even literal but one always comes across certain tenets that bring the definitions to the same conclusion that culture touches on all aspects of man's life. Atkinson (1992:31) points out that philosophers use the word culture to describe every aspect of an environment created by man when he defines it thus:

Culture includes all beliefs, ideologies, customs, languages, structures, institutions, habits, practices, arts, altitudes and other recognizable products of human activity.

This view is also shared by sociologists who view culture as the way of life of a society's members, the collection of ideas and habits, which they learn and share and transmit from generation to generation (Haralambos and Holborn, 2000; Giddens, 1997). Henslin (1998) is even more summative and explicit in defining culture as referring to language, beliefs, values, norms and material objects passed from generation to generation. Both the philosophers and sociologists clearly show in their definition of culture that it is both material for example building, clothing, tools, instruments, weapons and non-material which refers to ideas, principles, values, which people themselves have developed as a means to guide the way they live their lives and develop their societies and institutions (Furusa, 1998; Henslin, 1998).

From a literary point of view, Ndolerire (2005) has defined culture as being characterized by a people's traditions, life-outlook, music and dance mode of worship, customs and beliefs, eating manners, production practices, aesthetic values, modes of communication, etc. In his analysis of culture he goes on to cite a literacy critic Mazrui's summation of the functions of culture, which run through the various definitions given above:

Culture performs seven functions: it provides people with lenses of perception and cognition, motives for behavior, criteria for evaluation, a basis of identity, a mode of communication, a basis of stratification and a system of production and consumption (Mazrui, 1990 cited in Ndolerire, 2005:31).

Thus, from the above definitions and functions of culture one can draw the following conclusions that:

- Culture helps us perceive and understand reality, determines our behavior, assists us in attaching value to things, gives us identity, helps us to communicate, determines our role and hierarchy in society and is instrumental in how we produce and consume (Ndolerire, 2005).
- It is both material and non-material.
- It is learned and shared; otherwise without these cultural guidelines which have to be learnt and shared, societies would not function effectively.
- It is transmitted from generation to generation.

- It is a larger part of what makes us human (Giddens, 1997).

Having defined culture thus, one is prompted to ask a number of questions that form the crux of the research:

- Can culture then, be compartmentalized in a small round hut?
- Can it be frozen and kept within the confines of a certain era for transmission from one generation to another?
- What role then do culture huts play in the struggle for the preservation of our cultural heritage?
- Are they of any relevance to the school curricula?

If so, what can be done to make them more effective and not die a natural death?

Background

Zaka district in Masvingo was one of the districts that caught on the wave of cultural heritage preservation with more verve than others as evidenced by the number of schools that embarked on establishing culture huts. This was after, the then Ministry of Education, Sport and Culture tasked provincial cultural officers (in late 2005) to ensure that schools in their provinces established culture huts. These in turn tasked district resource teachers responsible for culture to assist in implementing the “directive” by coordinating activities in their districts. Schools such as Danda, Chimedza, Murembwa (primary) St. Antony’s and Rudhanda High (secondary) were among those that were quick to embrace the idea. The district also holds the national model culture hut, the one at Murembwa School, which was built in conjunction with Chipawo (Children’s Performing Arts Workshop). It should be noted that the ‘culture hut’ concept is not a unique feature of the Zaka District schools under study. Such phenomena have been observed at the following schools: Gertnel in Chirumanzu District in Masvingo, Mashonjowa near Wengezi in Manicaland, Rujeko in Mutare and Ruda in Honde Valley.

The national museums and monuments of Zimbabwe also embarked on an outreach program in which they made school children aware of the need to preserve Zimbabwe’s cultural heritage that they classified as follows:

- i. Natural heritage e.g. trees, birds, rocks, animal etc.

- ii. Cultural heritage e.g. tools weapons, appliances and instruments.

The children were also made aware of the role of museums in cultural preservation and that Zimbabwe has five big ones: one in Mutare, another in Harare, then Bulawayo, Gweru and Masvingo. This awareness campaign culminated in the now annual national five (5) museums and monuments Quiz competition for primary schools that start from district level with winners proceeding to provincial and finally national level.

Methodology

The main methods of data gathering were the interview and observation, through which quite interesting data was captured.

Interviews

Interviews were held with the regional cultural officer based in Masvingo (1), the district cultural officer based at Jerera Growth point Zaka (1), teachers in charge of culture in the schools involved in the research (2), and the Great Zimbabwe national museums and monuments director (1).

The regional cultural officer was selected for interviewing because she was the one tasked with disseminating information guiding and assisting district cultural officers in their efforts at reaching schools in their districts. The district cultural officer was also chosen because he was the man on the ground, coordinating activities on cultural issues at district levels, ensuring the setting up of culture huts at schools in this area of authority. The teachers in charge of culture in the schools were found suitable because of their high involvement with culture issues at school level. The Director of National Museums and Monuments based at the Great Zimbabwe Monuments was also roped in, in his capacity, as a representative of a key stakeholder in the program (i.e. the National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe).

The interview schedule for the regional and district cultural officers centered on: the origin of the idea of culture huts, whether there was a circular or policy on the issue, who the stakeholders were and whether there were any challenges encountered. Follow up questions were made where there was

need for clarification or elaboration. The one for the school also touched briefly on issues above but from a slightly different angle as they focused more on the school in particular for example when the culture hut was established, who was involved, what “things” are displayed, how it functions to benefit the learners, whether the community is involved etc. The schedule for the museums and monuments of Zimbabwe representatives mainly centered on their role in the program, whether there was a difference between the culture huts and the museums and the impact of the project in their quest for preservation of Zimbabwe’s heritage.

Observations

This involved the researchers visiting the culture huts and making observations on what artifacts were displayed and whether there were any principles guiding the arrangements of these in the hut. The researchers also took note of whether there were differences and similarities in terms of the displays in the different schools. Some of the observations were also done in the company of the teachers or selected people who would assist by responding to questions that could arise in the course of the observation.

Presentation of Findings

In the case of both schools, the teachers concurred that the idea was a directive from their District Office. Heads of schools went for a meeting/ workshop and reported back to their staff members emphasizing the directive to build a culture hut at the school. The Better Schools Program spearheaded the project through their offices based at Jerera in Zaka District. Both teachers also indicated that they had not seen any circular to that effect and neither were they aware of any culture policy being in place. It was more of a top-bottom approach used.

At one of the schools, the specialist practical subjects teacher (i.e. in charge of art, agriculture, needlework, and cookery) was given the task to set up the culture hut. The hut was constructed using bricks and mortar instead of pole and dagga. The reason given was that they also wanted to discourage destruction of the natural heritage. Cutting down of trees would result in deforestation. Grass was used to thatch the hut and the floor was pounded to present a natural floor as in the olden days. Inside the hut, the set up is such that as one enters they see in the further end, a raised area for

storing clay pots (*chikuva*)¹ and a shelf for displaying utensils like plates, cups spoons, forks and knives. On the left just next to the door is a clay bench (*chigaravakwati*) incidentally there was no fireplace. Right round the hut, strategically spaced are paintings done by the teachers' best art pupils. The paintings depict various cultural activities and images such as an old man doing some woodwork under a tree with a small pot of maheu nearby, women using pestle and mortar, blowing horns, drums bow and arrow, clay pots, the Zimbabwe bird etc. she indicated that parents had been asked to donate artifacts for display but are yet to respond to the plea, three years down the line.

Another striking feature was that on display in this hut was a *clay tea set* (a teapot and six teacups) in spite of the fact that the teacher had a list of cultural artifacts that the national museums and monuments people had suggested could be displayed:

- Mortar and pestle (*duri nemutsi*)
- Digging stick (*jereso*)
- Bow and arrow (*uta nemuseve*)
- Short spear
- Ring bangles (*ndarira*)
- Claypot- different types eg
 - for storing milk (*hwedza*)
 - for storing water (*chirongo*)
 - for serving beer (*nyengero*)
 - for storing large quantities of beer (*gate*)
 - for cooking sadza (*shambakodzi*)
 - for serving relish (*mbiya*)
- A wooden pillow (*mutsgo*)
- Oil calabash (*chinu*)
- Different types of kilts (*nhembe*), for both men and women for the back part and *shashiko* for women (front) and *nhabwamaringa* for men (front).
- Winnowing baskets (*sero*)
- Big knife (*bakatwa*)
- A place for beer processing (*chisvino*)
- A marriage hoe (*ndoodza*)

Currently the culture hut can be described as simply bare. It has now been turned into a guidance and counseling room with two chairs and small table neatly placed in the middle of the hut where a fireplace should be. The practical subjects teacher, also indicated that the development of the hut had hit a stumbling block because she is no longer in-charge of the hut affair as the sports teacher has now been tasked to take over. However, the only aspect of culture being promoted is traditional dance, the reason being that schools compete for places in the national dance competition, the Jikinya Dance Festival. So plans that she had to fill up the hut with artifacts as well as traditional musical instruments such as marimba have been hampered even the idea of involving resource people from the community in the information of children on cultural issues using the hut as the center have been shelved.

At the other school, the scenario is quite different. The culture hut is well stocked with traditional artifacts. It is also built of pole and dagga and is grass-thatched the argument being that they wanted to depict the traditional way of building huts. In an interview one of the teachers at the school indicated that the success of finishing the culture hut lay in the fact that the community has been involved since the launch of the hut in 2006. During general work, on a daily basis, pupils are assigned to keep the hut in order and constantly update it with new findings. However, she lamented the fact that no lessons are linked to the hut for the benefit of the learners, although there are some subjects that could benefit from that such as Social Studies, ChiShona, Home Economics, Art, and Mathematics.

The culture hut at this school has the following artifacts among others: grinding stone, traditional regalia (kilts), spears, bow and arrow, knobkerries, different types of clay pots, pestle and mortar, calabashes, gourds, oil calabash, winnowing baskets, wooden plates and spoons, bird carvings, traditional instruments such as drums, rattles and leg-gourds.

An interesting artifact also displayed is a toy wire car. The justification for its inclusion was that they wanted to capture the changing times. Instead of just playing games like *chihwerere*, molding cows with mud both pastimes of the past; children now make toys that show the signs of the times. They also have a model of a mini-rural home, a fireplace, mud-shelves and a hanging line to dry food such

as meat and maize cobs on. The outside is also decorated through paintings of people doing various traditional chores and pictures of various traditional artifacts.

The school also hosts a cultural festival in the third term (2007) and pupils from neighboring schools as well as people from various communities have the opportunity to visit the culture hut.

Drawing from the two schools, one can see that the survival/success or failure of a culture hut depends on a number of issues:

- Community support and involvement
- Motivation of those put in-charge of the hut
- Initiative on the part of those involved in the set up of the project.
- Link with national arts council and/or various cultural officers, etc.

The Regional and District cultural officers both agreed that the move started after an awareness campaign by the National Museums and Monuments. They also pointed out that their mandate was to support the schools although lack of resources restricted their involvement with the schools save for competition and festival times when they provide information on set-pieces for music, traditional dance and drama. There is no competition on Culture huts. The Director of National Museums and Monuments also indicated that their involvement with schools was during the awareness campaign. Currently it is during the National Museums and Monuments Quiz Competitions. He indicated that their thrust was more on the preservation of the Natural Heritage as opposed to the Cultural Heritage.

Discussion

A look at the artifacts poses an interesting view which Ndolerire (2005) state that it is becoming increasingly difficult to compartmentalize an individual within a specific culture in an era of globalization where unfortunately value, especially African values, have been so diluted or in some cases even obliterated by foreign dominant cultures. Take for example the snuff horn (*gonamombe* or *chibako*), rarely does the younger generation see these, the older generation has become quite innovative using small lotion bottles, plastic containers or even small plastic sachets to keep their

snuff power. One can also ask the question: how many families still use wooden plates for their proper functions (for example during *lobola*, *bira*, etc., other than simply for display, if a household has any)?

Mathews (2000)'s idea of a cultural supermarket going hand in hand with globalization comes to mind. He argues that for a number of people belonging to a given culture is not a foregone conclusion. Mathews makes a direct comparison of the material supermarket and the cultural one, where those societies whose material goods are readily available in the world also have greater cultural influence (in the world). His argument here is that because of globalization people have a wide range of choices in terms of beliefs, communication, clothes etc to such an extent that it becomes difficult for one to define (in the case of this research) what artifacts put in the culture huts as being a true reflection of what constitutes the culture of the people of Zaka District.

Conclusions

Culture huts are quite a bold step towards culture preservation although culture cannot be “frozen” since it is dynamic; hence, the need to continuously revamp the culture huts and introduce new artifacts to cater for this dynamism as new values develop in our culture.

- Culture is both material and non- material, the latter cannot be adequately catered for by the displays in the “mini-cultural museums hence the need for literature to support the material culture by providing information on the other aspects of culture which are non-material such as marriage customs, the ancestral spirits, courtship and marriage.
- Culture huts have a role to play in the teaching of subjects across the primary school curriculum. For example ways of preserving food in Home Economics, transport and communication in Social Studies. Mats could be used to teach Mathematical concepts such as parallel lines as well as shapes, cultural topics in ChiShona, Religious and Moral Education.
- Culture huts if well maintained and effectively utilized can help build bridges between the school and community through teamwork while at the same time promoting transfer of information from one generation to another especially where the community members donate artifacts for display, then are later called upon as resource persons to give children information about them.

- They can also provide opportunities for cultural exchanges as these huts have been seen to differ in terms of their contents.
- They can also help in the development of awareness of what was/ is of value in terms of our traditions.
- Culture huts encourage cross-pollination of traditions, which are part of culture as not only students learn but teachers and the community as well, especially where traditional artifacts are juxtaposed with modern ones (i.e. dynamism of culture takes in new inventions).

Recommendations

- Culture huts as revealed in this research can be a good means of fostering healthy school community relations hence the need for collaboration so that schools and community resources can be identified and integrated.
- There is also need for support from various stakeholders to prevent the culture huts from dying a natural death, as was the case in one of the schools where it has been turned into guidance and counseling center.
- ‘Culture huts’ are more of mini museums rather than anything else, so there is need to attend to the misnomer.
- Lots of investment should be made to facilitate production of cultural literature so that reading on aspects of non- material culture that cannot be displayed readily available to complement the artifacts of material culture displayed in the huts.
- There is need to link these culture huts with the teaching of subjects so that learners benefit from their existence in the schools.
- Competitions tend to motivate schools in various aspects of school life, hence the need for competitions targeting these to motivate schools to revive culture huts and keep the fire burning.
- Organizations such as the national arts council and the national museums and monuments should not only come into the picture for outreach programs and festivals but if the seed they sowed is to bear fruit.

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