

# Safeguarding Uganda's Cultural Heritage: An Inquiry into the Opportunities and Challenges Brought by the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**To cite this article:**

Fredrick Nsibambi. Safeguarding Uganda's Cultural Heritage: An Inquiry into the Opportunities and Challenges Brought by the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Advances in Sciences and Humanities*. Vol. 8, No. 1, 2022, pp. 22-26. doi: 10.11648/j.ash.20220801.15

**Received:** October 29, 2021; **Accepted:** February 4, 2022; **Published:** March 18, 2022

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**Abstract:** Uganda's cultural heritage includes artistic and cultural expressions such as languages and literary arts, performing arts, visual arts and handicrafts, indigenous knowledge, cultural beliefs, traditions and values, cultural sites, museums, monuments and antiquities. Some of these cultural heritage aspects are man-made while others are natural. Our cultural heritage is important for both sociocultural and educational purposes. It promotes tourism and consequently, creates employment for people. The natural aspects of our heritage have been known to enhance the protection of the environment through indigenous knowledge (discussed in the later sections). The museums, especially community museums, for instance, have made an effort to engage young people through cultural heritage clubs, which are more than 150 across Uganda. The museums have also contributed to the safeguarding of unique and threatened aspects of Uganda's heritage. Sites and monuments, including historic buildings, are important in preserving and showcasing our collective memory as a country and tell our journeys in terms of social life, governance and administration. Despite its importance, our cultural heritage is usually not adequately supported, maintained, or documented, and people's awareness of its value is still alarmingly low. At the turn of 2020, Uganda just like other countries in the world was hit by the Coronavirus (COVID-19 pandemic), which virtually brought all aspects of life to a standstill. Tourism, particularly cultural tourism that provides a string on which the safeguarding of cultural heritage is fastened, was severely affected, exacerbating the dire situation that the cultural heritage industry was in before the pandemic. This paper examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the safeguarding of Uganda's cultural heritage both tangible and intangible, which includes museums, heritage sites, historic buildings on the tangible side, and the creative industries, traditional or indigenous medicines, and traditional values, on the intangible side. The paper further explores the opportunities and challenges that the pandemic poses to the protection and promotion of our heritage industry.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, Cultural Heritage Safeguarding, Creative/Cultural Industries, Museums, Opportunities & Challenges

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## 1. Introduction

Uganda's cultural heritage includes artistic and cultural expressions such as languages and literary arts, performing arts, visual arts and handicrafts, indigenous knowledge, cultural beliefs, traditions and values, cultural sites, museums, monuments and antiquities [1]. Some of these cultural heritage aspects are man-made while others are natural. The museums, sites, monuments, and antiquities are important for both sociocultural and educational purposes. They promote tourism and consequently, create employment for people. The

natural sites have been known to enhance the protection of the environment through indigenous knowledge (discussed in the later sections). The museums, especially community museums, for instance, have made an effort to engage young people through cultural heritage clubs, which are more than 150 across Uganda. The museums have also contributed to the safeguarding of unique and threatened aspects of Uganda's heritage. For instance, the Madi community museum in Moyo provides spaces for safeguarding the Madi

bow-lyre music instrument, which was inscribed on the UNESCO list<sup>1</sup> of elements that need urgent safeguarding in 2016. The Kigulu chiefdom museum in Iganga district, eastern Uganda safeguards the Bigwala gourd and music instruments, also listed on the UNESCO list of elements for urgent safeguarding in 2012 [1]. Sites and monuments, including historic buildings, are important in preserving and showcasing our collective memory as a country - the Cinema Hall building (current Watoto church building, constructed in the 1940s), the Bulange building (the seat of the Buganda Kingdom) constructed between 1955 and 1958 and the Mayor's Parlour (1895-1907) [2] tell our journeys in terms of social life, governance and administration respectively.

Despite their importance, these sites, museums and monuments are usually not adequately supported, maintained or documented, and people's awareness of their value is still alarmingly low. In addition, some of the antiquities are not collected and those that are kept in the Uganda Museum and other museums may not easily be accessible to all Ugandans. The tourism potential of these and other cultural resources is yet to be fully exploited.



**Figure 1.** Milk pots from western Uganda presented as part of dowry.

At the turn of 2020, Uganda just like other countries in the world was hit by the Coronavirus (COVID-19 pandemic), which virtually brought all aspects of life to a standstill. Tourism, particularly cultural tourism that provides a string on which the safeguarding of cultural heritage is fastened, was severely affected, exacerbating the dire situation that the cultural heritage industry was in before the pandemic.

This paper examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the safeguarding of Uganda's cultural heritage both tangible and intangible, which includes museums, heritage sites, historic buildings on the tangible side, and the creative industries, traditional or indigenous medicines and traditional values, on the intangible side. The paper further explores the opportunities and challenges that the pandemic poses to the protection and promotion of our heritage industry.

## 2. The Plight of Museums

According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), a museum is understood as a non-profit-permanent institution in the service of society and its development; it is open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for purposes of education, study and enjoyment. The ICOM's definition conforms to the 'western' notions of art and museums where museum professionals take charge of all operations in a museum.

In Uganda, there is a growing and interesting trend of community-based museums. These are community initiatives that collect, preserve and promote ethnic cultures. They are usually established by individuals, families, or groups of people. Sometimes universities and civil society organisations have also established their own [3]. Limited access to government museums and cultural patriotism could be some of the contributing factors to the emergence of community museums in Uganda.

According to the UNESCO report released in May 2020, 90% of the museums around the world closed due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. ICOM indicates that more than 10% may never reopen even after the pandemic [4]. Unlike other museums in the world, museums in Africa and Uganda, in particular, have been severely affected. Museums in Uganda were already suffering from the limited number of visitors (both international and local), a situation which was exacerbated by the numerous lockdowns and the closure of schools, which constitute the largest number of museum visitors. The closure of the international borders, including the Entebbe international airport worsened the already struggling museum sector. Museums in Uganda, both government and community-owned were closed forcing managers of especially community museums to look for alternative sources of income and livelihood. There were unconfirmed reports that some of the community museum managers were auctioning their museum objects for them to earn a living. Without visitors, some of the museums as well as their objects are not attended to, which raises so many questions about their survival during the COVID-19 period.

The UNESCO report also indicates that public funding to museums drastically reduced. The report shows a significant reduction in public funding, in some cases as high as 40%, affecting almost half of the museums in the United States of America. This could be attributed to the fact that in the face of the pandemic, a significant portion of public expenditure had to be dedicated to maintaining security, providing for the welfare of people and procuring relevant medical facilities and vaccines.

Without public funding, coupled with reduced visitor numbers, museums are likely to lose competent personnel, which will put the viability of museums in jeopardy. The extended closures of the museums, particularly community museums, are likely to make it difficult for them to sustain

<sup>1</sup> <https://ich.unesco.org/en/state/uganda-UG?info=elements-on-the-lists>

efforts not only to collect important objects but also to conserve them, ensure their security, and nurture relations with the general public or local communities.

On the other hand, however, some of the museums are quickly adapting to maintain their operations using new methods of work. According to the UNESCO report, it is noted that in the face of the crisis, museums acted quickly to develop their presence on the internet. Some of the community museums have embraced digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook and websites to market their services. Although with limitations on public transport and limited use of the internet by Ugandans makes it difficult for the museums to benefit from the digital platforms. The digital divide is, however, more evident than ever. The UNESCO report indicates that only 5% of museums in Africa and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) [4] were able to propose online content. Among the community museums in Uganda, there are about 4<sup>2</sup> community-based museums out of 25 that have managed to sustain their presence on digital platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Some managers of the community museums have used the period of the lockdown to reorganize their museum spaces and objects and add ancillary services in anticipation that when the Covid period is over, they will have much more to offer to their visitors than what they used to offer. The Kigulu Cultural Museum (KCM) based in the eastern part of Uganda has started a library attached to the museum.

In light of the COVID-19 situation and the closure of schools [5], some community museums such as the Koogere Foundation Museum in Fort Portal Tourism City (in western Uganda), Kigulu Cultural Museum in Iganga (in eastern Uganda), Bugungu Heritage Information Centre in Buliisa district (in the western rift valley), the Cultural Assets Centre and Museum in Kagadi district (in western Uganda) among others embarked on radio-based quizzes as a way to continue engaging young people both in and out of school. With radio competitions, community museums have been able to reach a wider audience of young people compared to a situation where schools used to visit the museums. Despite the success made by the community museums in engaging young people through radios, challenges were still noted. Mr. Ramazan Mugerwa from the Cultural Assets Centre noted that “without bodabodas (motorcycle taxis) it was difficult for young people to deliver their work to the museum and this contributed to the limited number of participants. The closer of borders between districts also limited submissions since most of the students outside Kagadi District thought that they cannot manage to submit their work. Furthermore, platforms such as SMS, email and WhatsApp were not much used since the majority of the people were experiencing financial difficulties during the lockdown so they could not afford internet data and airtime”

<sup>2</sup> Igongo cultural museum, Bugungu Heritage and Information Centre, Koogere Foundation Museum, and Mt. Elgon History and Cultural Museum

### 3. Heritage Sites and Historic Buildings

Heritage Sites are cultural or natural landmarks that have been recognized either by communities, national government agencies, or international agencies such as UNESCO. Historic buildings, on the other hand, are generally considered to be buildings or structures that have some kind of 'historic values'[6]. Heritage sites and historic buildings are deemed worthy of preservation due to their values to humanity, both in the present and for future generations [7].

Like the museums, heritage sites and historic buildings in Uganda have been greatly affected by the pandemic. According to the June 2021 UNESCO report highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on the World Heritage Sites, it was reported that: “90% of countries with World Heritage properties had closed or partially closed them”. The report further indicates that visitors to World Heritage Sites dropped by 66% in 2020. Staff redundancies of an average of 40% of permanent staff and 53% of temporary staff were reported at those sites.[8]

Besides the World Heritage Sites such as Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park and Rwenzori Mountains National Park, many other sites such as Nyero Rock Paintings in Kumi district, Bigo Bya Mugenyi in Ssembabule district, Fort Patiko in Gulu district that is recognised at the national level were equally affected. Without visitors, the sites cannot generate revenue which affects daily operations at those sites.

The situation with historic buildings, especially in urban centres, has been worsened by the fact that city and municipal councils, which are supposed to pass laws to safeguard the historic properties can hardly meet. Yet, on the other hand, the construction industry has remained vibrant during the pandemic. Some of the important historic properties have been threatened with demolition during the lockdown or could be affected by new developments in their vicinity.

The death of some caretakers also raises several questions on the sustainability of historic buildings during and after the pandemic. For instance, the demise of Ms. Margaret Namugenzi, the caretaker of the Ham Mukasa historic building<sup>3</sup> may pave way for the family members to demolish the house or convert it to other uses that may compromise the historical values for which it has been known to represent.

### 4. Indigenous Knowledge, Traditional Medicine and Traditional Values

Indigenous knowledge can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an indigenous (local) community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment [9]. Gumbo contends that indigenous

<sup>3</sup> The Ham Mukasa *ancestral* home is believed to have been completed in 1902. Ham Mukasa (1868-1956) was a leading politician, intellectual and ethnographer of Buganda. He was also secretary to one of the longest-serving prime ministers of the Buganda kingdom and Saza Chief (Sekiboobbo) of Kyaggwe.

knowledge is the homegrown and local knowledge – knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. This knowledge is manifested in different ways, it can be manifested in a way a given society invents medicines to treat diseases or in the way a society governs itself [10]. Gupta et al argue that indigenous knowledge is regarded as the sum of experience and knowledge for the given ethnic group on specific aspects, which form the basis for decision-making. This indigenous knowledge is learned from nature since time immemorial [11]. On the other hand, traditional values are regarded as the moral and ethical principles traditionally upheld and passed on within a family, like fidelity, honesty, truth, and faith<sup>4</sup>

Unlike other aspects of our cultural heritage, the COVID-19 pandemic has largely increased research and investment in the field of traditional knowledge, particularly knowledge concerning traditional medicines. It has also increased the recognition of the values and relevance of traditional medicines nationally and internationally. In most cases, knowledge of traditional medicine is passed down from one generation to another and stays in the family. Usually, herbalists are faced with numerous challenges for example younger generations have been slowly losing interest in traditional medicine and healers are dying and with them their knowledge. In other cases, herbalists have been attacked and ridiculed by modern religious fundamentalists. With the COVID-19, this situation is, however, slowly changing. Many people in Africa and Uganda in particular, including those who subscribe to modern religions, resorted to traditional medicines to treat themselves against the effects of the pandemic. Universities have increased their research efforts – notably the Mbarara University of Science and Technology and Gulu University. Professors from these universities have invented traditional medicines Covidex and Covilyse respectively, which are said to reduce the effects of the virus.

It should, however, be noted that despite the increased investment in indigenous knowledge regarding our traditional medicine, other aspects of indigenous knowledge regarding natural heritage management, food security and governance have largely been neglected during this period. Mining, construction and cutting of indigenous forests have continued during the lockdown – and local communities have been unable to popularize campaigns of using traditional knowledge and values to safeguard such important resources. School cultural heritage clubs<sup>5</sup> were closed thus reducing spaces through which important traditional values regarding food security and social cohesion are transmitted.

Before the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, many parents had relegated their responsibilities of grooming their children to self-styled sengas (paternal aunties) and kojjas (maternal uncles) on different FM and TV stations. The annual royal enclosures (Egisakaate in

Buganda, Ekigango in Busoga) had also taken over the responsibilities of teaching moral values to young people. Whereas it was anticipated that since young people were locked up in homes with their parents, the transmission of important traditional cultural values of honesty, empathy, transparency and integrity among others to young people, would take place, this has been to the contrary! Many cases of violence, suicide, theft, and teenage pregnancy have skyrocketed during this period. Secondly, mismanagement of public resources, especially resources meant for relief food and facilities such as vehicles, has been reported in the media, indicating a breakdown in important traditional values of integrity and transparency.

## 5. Cultural and Creative Industries

Cultural and creative industries are industries that have their origin in individual creativity, skills and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property [12]. They include folk art, festivals, music, books, paintings, performing arts, cuisine, fashion, crafts, traditional medicine, film industry, broadcasting, digital animation, video games, architectural and advertising services [13]. Cultural and creative sectors are important in their own right in terms of their economic footprint and employment [14]. They spur innovation across the economy, as well as contribute to numerous other channels for positive social impact (well-being and health, education, inclusion, urban regeneration, etc.) [15].

According to Charles Batambuze, the executive director of the Uganda Reproduction Rights Organisation (URRO), the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as a public health emergency in March 2020 disrupted all economic sectors, with the culture and creative industries as the hardest hit. Although the extent of the social and economic damage on culture and creative industries will take some time to be established, early impact studies of COVID-19 on Uganda's culture and creative industries are turning out very gloom data. According to Batambuze, estimates by the government show that the sector lost Shs15 billion (about \$4 million) within a period of one month following the lockdown in March 2020."

"Measures to stop the spread of COVID-19, including bans on public gathering, nighttime curfews, social distancing measures, closure of performance theatres, cultural centres, cinema halls, discotheques, beaches, recreational and entertainment spaces, bars, galleries, museums, schools, universities, sports centres, libraries, bookshops and public spaces and restrictions on concerts have in most cases, brought social and economic life to a halt, impacting culture and creative industries' business and productivity," Batambuze adds<sup>6</sup>.

Unfortunately, the situation with the creative/cultural

<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family\\_values](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_values)

<sup>5</sup> The school cultural heritage clubs are supported by the Cross-Cultural Foundation of Uganda through its Heritage Education Programme

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/special-reports/how-COVID-19-has-impacted-the-african-creative-industries-3459840>

industries has a trickle-down effect on other sectors of the economy. Transport, agriculture and textile industries are all affected. If people are not moving out of their homes to attend social events, they are not likely to buy new clothes and are not likely to eat out in restaurants. The COVID-19 crisis, for instance, has pushed textile entrepreneurs to take tough decisions such as laying off staff, introducing pay cuts, and asking employees to go on unpaid leaves. Although farming remained active, agricultural products had a limited market thus a reduction in the prices of farm products.

The closure of schools exacerbated the challenges related to the future of the creative industry in Uganda. Schools are important spaces in nurturing young talents through Music Dance and Drama (MDD) and culture clubs. With schools closed, young people have limited opportunities to nurture their talents as future actors in the cultural/creative industry, painting a gloomy picture for the future of the industry.

## 6. Conclusion

Whereas the COVID-19 pandemic has had far-reaching negative effects on the safeguarding of Uganda's cultural heritage both tangible and intangible, it is important to note that it has spurred creativity and innovations within Uganda's culture sector.

Attitudes and mindsets towards certain aspects of culture such as indigenous medicine have evolved after many Ugandans embarked on traditional medicines as a remedy for the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored the relevance of our cultural heritage in terms of sustainable development particularly, about health, wealth creation and employment and education [16]. This therefore places a responsibility to both state and non-state actors responsible for the safeguarding of cultural heritage to invest adequate resources both financial and technical in the promotion and protection of Uganda's cultural heritage resources.

## Appreciation

First and foremost, I would like to appreciate Mr. Simon Musasiizi, the Heritage Trust Manager in Uganda for proofreading my article. Secondly, I appreciate the support from community museum managers and other actors in the culture sector who shared information about their operations.

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