

NARA TRADITIONAL SONGS AS INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

A Preliminary Research Proposal Submitted to: PFK-Platform 4-Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Tourism

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Letter of Intent

I am Issa Adem Hamid. I was born and raised in Sudan by a half-Sudanese Arabic-speaking father and an Eritrean mother from the Nara ethnic group. My father died when I was only three years old and my mother entrusted me to my maternal grandmother and went to Saudi Arabia in order to support us by working as a housemaid. Therefore, I grew up in a multilingual and multicultural milieu where Arabic, Nara, Tigre, and Tigrinya were predominant. This diverse linguistic and cultural background played a significant role in molding my interest in languages. Moreover, I attended primary, middle and secondary school in bilingual class rooms where Arabic and English were the media of instruction. This educational environment further strengthened my interest in the study of languages including Nara, Tigre, Tigrinya and English. For this reason, I joined the department of English at the University of Asmara where I studied literature and language related undergraduate courses and received my bachelor's degree in English.

In 2003, I was recruited by the University of Asmara as a graduate assistant in the Department of English where I taught introductory English to freshman students and assisted the students in their senior project papers. In 2007, I completed my MA in English at Asmara University where I served the College of Arts and Social Sciences as a lecturer in Sophomore English and Eritrean Oral Traditions. In 2010, I joined the Department of Eritrean Languages and Literature where I was heavily involved in designing courses for the new department and in launching of the Journal of Eritrean Studies, a peer reviewed academic journal published by the College of Arts and Social Sciences. In 2012, I was appointed as head of the Department of Eritrean Languages and Literature and also as a member of the editorial Board of the Journal of Eritrean Studies.

In the Department of Eritrean Languages and Literature, I had the chance to teach Eritrean Oral Traditions and closely examine the nature of the various genres of Eritrean verbal arts and thereby I gradually developed interest in traditional songs, particularly Nara songs and lyrics as part of intangible heritage. As a result, I began to collect and write about Nara songs and lyrics, particularly wedding songs.

In 2016, I was promoted to the rank of an assistant professor by the Eritrean National Commission for Higher Education and recently, I published a book titled: *Got knocked into*

Shape and completed and submitted a research paper describing the customs and traditional practices of the Nara ethnic group of Eritrea. Teaching Eritrean Oral Traditions over ten years provided me with the opportunity to develop interest in Nara verbal arts in the form of songs and oral poetry. It is this that thus gave me the impetus to undertake the proposed study on intangible heritage and sustainable tourism by focusing on Nara songs and lyrics.

The Nara people are natives only to Eritrea and the fact that they constitute about 1.5 percent of the total Eritrean population make them a minority among other majority linguistic groups. This peripheral position puts them at a great disadvantage and even threatens the continuation of their language along with their verbal arts. Although, the Nara songs and lyrics are indigenous Nilo-Saharan genres in the region, they are neglected in research and other scholarly works including documentation and preservation projects. It is this serious issue which provoked the researcher (who himself is a native Nara) to undertake this study.

This research paper which will be designed in order to appeal to the 2003 UNSECO's Convention surrounding the safeguarding of intangible heritage becomes doubly significant since it will try to flesh out not only the rich intangible heritage but also the value it could provide in affecting tourism in the region under investigation. The Nara songs and lyrics are more captivating because they are typical examples of African indigenous tradition and therefore very different, at least, from the Tigrinya who reflect Afro-Arab cultural roots. Therefore, protecting and preserving the Nara songs as an intangible heritage is important not only to the Nara society but also to the Eritrean tourist industry.

The project is also important because it falls within the ongoing documentation activities and scholarly works of an Italian team from the University of Naples "L'Orientale" which is currently working on a dictionary and grammar of the Nara language. I, therefore, believe that this work will give a new impetus to the ongoing documentation project. Moreover, the findings of this study will be used to further improve the current curriculum of the Department Eritrean Languages and Literature because its current curriculum is narrowly focused on only the oral narratives of Semitic languages. For instance, the curriculum has courses like Tigrinya Composition, Tigrinya Written Literature I, Tigrinya Written Literature-II, and Arabic I and

Arabic II but there are no such courses related to the other Eritrean literary texts. In the view of the above research questions, I strongly believe that I have the research skill to enable me identify, collect and document the seriously endangered Nara traditional songs, narratives and oral literature as intangible cultural heritage. Upon the completion of my PhD program, I intend to return to my country and work earnestly in the preservation and conservation of endangered musical pieces in the form of song lyrics among the minority ethnic groups.

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A Preliminary Research Proposal

Abstract

The intention of this study is to collect and document Nara traditional songs and lyrics. Nara lyrics and traditional songs as intangible heritage are on the brink of extinction because the Nara language itself is under threat from the more dominant neighboring languages. The Nara people are peripheral people and thus less known to the center and therefore they are neglected in research and in conservation and preservation projects. It is these serious issues which provoked the researcher (who himself is a native Nara) to undertake this study. The Nara songs and lyrics including their costumes and body decorations are more captivating because they are typical examples of the indigenous African tradition and therefore very different, at least, from the Tigrinya who reflect Afro-Arab cultural roots. Therefore, protecting and preserving the Nara songs as an intangible heritage is important not only to the Nara society but also to the Eritrean tourism industry. This research paper will thus examine the rich intangible heritage and the value it could provide in facilitating tourism in the country. Since the data for this research will be both quantitative and qualitative, questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, will be used to collect the information and audio recorders will be used to record the songs.

Keywords: Nara, traditional songs and lyrics, Nilo-Saharan narratives, intangible heritage, sustainable tourism development, Eritrea.

Introduction

The Nara are one of the smallest ethnic groups found in the western lowlands of Eritrea. They account for about 1.5 percent of the total Eritrean population and are followers of Islam and live on farming and rearing domestic animals. The Nara, like the Kunama, belong to the Nilo-Saharan ethnolinguistic group that migrated to the present day Eritrea from the Nile Basin, some 10,000 years ago. But unlike Kunama, the Nara are entirely Muslims and found only in Eritrea. The Nara language has four distinct dialects namely, Hikir, Mogorayeb, Koita, and Saantorta. Within each dialect there are also sub-dialects where distinctions are easily visible in pronunciation. The Nara and the Kunama are cousins of Nilo-Saharans like Dinka and the Nuer of Sudan and the Anuak of Ethiopia. Despite their genetic affiliation, Nara and Kunama are not cognate languages and nor are they mutually intelligible. However, they do exhibit significant similarity in their phonological patterns and grammatical structures. For example, they both have the same subject-verb-object order.

Statement of the Problem

Nara lyrics and traditional songs, as intangible heritage, are in a state of danger because the Nara language itself is under threat from more dominant neighboring languages such as Tigre and due to factors like urbanization, inter-ethnic marriage, ethno-linguistic intermingling, and modernization which until this day continue to affect the oral traditions of the Nara people including song narratives. Studies thus show that Arabic and Tigre in the western lowland of Eritrea are spoken widely by the Nara people as either first or second languages while Tigrinya is popular as a language of administration, education and market transaction. The question of who in the family uses which language languages and with whom, and how frequently is of course equally important. Unfortunately, no research based data related to this issue is available. The majority of the Nara people who were born in Sudan during the pre-independence era speak Arabic as their first language. Nowadays, the Nara people, particularly the young, who live in urban areas like Tessenei and Barentu and Golij no longer have active knowledge of their traditional songs. In urban areas, Nara folk songs are gradually being replaced by Sudanese Arabic songs and to some extent by Tigrinya songs. It is these serious issues which provoked the researcher (who himself is a native Nara) to undertake this study in order to preserve Nara song narratives as intangible heritage in Eritrea. The proposed study will, therefore, identify, collect and document Nara traditional songs and is expected to come up with relevant results that show how and why such songs are under threat and suggest ways and means by which they can be saved from extinction.

Purpose of the Study

The proposed study aims at:

- Collecting and documenting traditional songs
- Establishing the measures which can be taken in order to revitalize the Nara verbal arts
- Disseminating knowledge and information about the beauty and the value of the Nara traditional songs to the Nara in particular and to Eritreans in general

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are envisaged to establish measures that can be taken in order to promote awareness of the value and beauty of Nara and traditional songs and assist policy makers particularly, in the Ministry of Education and the Commissions for Sports and Culture in order to reinforce conditions under which the Nara people can promote and protect their language and thereby also their songs and lyrics.

Research Design and Methodology

The study will focus on two main questions: why are Nara traditional songs in steady decline? And what measures can be taken to promote awareness about their value as verbal arts? To answer these questions the researcher will conduct a sociolinguistics survey using quantitative and qualitative research instruments including questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions and will use audio recorders in order to register the songs. The selection procedure for the research sites will be preceded by a pilot study in one Nara location to test if the questions will give the answers the researcher is looking for. Data analysis: in order to make the recorded data accessible for analysis and interpretation the audio recordings will be transcribed and then translated into English.

Dissemination Plan

Upon successful completion of this project, the researcher intends to conduct seminars in order to disseminate the findings of the study and eventually publish the results in order to reach a larger audience.