

Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of African descendants in Belize

An action plan to map recent and ongoing living heritage activities in Belize

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and the National Garifuna Council



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Introduction

Belize is a country joined, geographically, with Central America, with a colonial history shared with both Latin America and the Caribbean. It is 8887 sq. miles with a population of approximately 440,000 (Statistical Institute of Belize, est. 2020). Our pre-colonial history holds evidence of the Ancient Maya inhabiting our borders for thousands of years with three surviving groups still living here today. Our colonial history saw both Spanish and British colonisation, with the genocide of millions of indigenous groups and the buying and selling of enslaved Africans in the Americas. Belize was a haven for many persons fleeing from prejudice and genocide in countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean and created bilateral relations before and after Independence in 1981.

This historical foundation birthed an ethnically diverse country with much cultural assimilation. However, this historical foundation also forced some cultures to be segregated from others to keep “societal norms”. For a while, we mapped out our country to have cultural groups that only resided in one particular district and that kept many people from understanding and, to some degree, respecting the cultural backgrounds and traditions of others.

The nationalist movement of the 1950s sought to unify our population under the Belizean identity while recognizing the distinct features of each ethnic group. Globalization has brought us further into understanding and appreciating our cultures more and more. We have seen a shift where we are slowly appreciating the ethnic differences in Belize. As the world becomes more commercialized and industrialized, it becomes more challenging to keep some traditions alive. Some ethnic groups have been able to create unity within their communities to develop safeguarding measures and have become bearers and practitioners of their heritage in Belize. However, the younger generations have not been able to fully grasp the importance of stewarding one’s heritage.

The 2003 UNESCO Convention binds Belize to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of its people. Through the efforts of many domestic, regional, and international organizations, we have managed to assist communities in safeguarding their tangible and intangible heritage. In Belize, we have focused on safeguarding measures to steward the ICHs of the Yucatec, Mopan, Ketchi Maya, Garifuna, Kriol, and Mestizo groups. Yet, more attention must be paid to other groups such as the East Indians. The work continues. The project, “Strengthening the Capacity of Community Leaders and Public Managers for the Safeguarding of ICH for the People of African Descent of the SICA region & Cuba”, aims to assist Afro-descendant communities in stewarding their Intangible Cultural Heritage by mapping safeguarding actions that can eventually turn into policies that everyone can respect.

Based on the research conducted by the community representatives, most of the information is kept within the organizations. The initiatives taken by National Garifuna Council (NGC) and

National Kriol Council (NKC) are significant efforts to safeguard the ICH of their respected Afro-descendant cultures. They develop most of the organization and logistics behind the events and festivities, and due to their certification and recognition by the state as legal NGOs, they can acquire necessary funds from the state. These funds come through the National Institute of Culture and History under the Ministry of Culture. However, in most cases, the Institute also has to acquire grants for projects or events because the budget from the state is only granted every fiscal year in April. Naturally, these grants are available periodically. Most grants are only provided for ICH if the funds come from UNESCO or other entities, such as embassy grants within the country. The state (NICH) is the actor that ensures the funds are utilized for the stewardship of ICH in several communities. This project to safeguard Afro-descendant Heritage in the CECC/SICA Region and Cuba is a primary example of how all actors in Belize collaborate as stewards of our Living Heritage.

Analysis

The matrix developed by the community representatives of the Garifuna and Kriol cultural groups reflects a range of revived and recent actions that have taken place over the past five years, both before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These actions, which are carried out annually by the respective NGC and NKC aim to ensure the continuity and preservation of diverse aspects of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) associated with Afro-descendant communities. It is worth noting that each action undertaken encompasses multiple dimensions of Afro-descendant living heritage, rather than focusing solely on a single aspect.

One notable action within the matrix is the Ms. Garifuna Pageant. This event serves as a platform to encourage young women to become bearers of Garifuna heritage. Participants in the pageant are expected to demonstrate proficiency, particularly in language, traditional knowledge systems, dance, music, and a deep understanding of Garifuna history. By emphasizing these aspects, the pageant contributes to the safeguarding of Garifuna cultural practices and traditions, while also empowering young women to take pride in their heritage and serve as ambassadors for their community.

Another significant action highlighted in the matrix is the Krismus Bram, a community celebration that showcases the richness of Kriol language, food, music and dance. This event plays a vital role in fostering a sense of unity and cohesion within the community while actively stewarding Afro-descendant living heritage. By incorporating various cultural expressions, the Krismus Bram not only preserves Kriol traditions but also provides a space for community members to connect, share, and celebrate their collective identity.

The matrix demonstrates a comprehensive approach to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. By encompassing multiple dimensions of Afro-descendant living heritage, the initiatives undertaken by the Garifuna and Kriol cultural groups reflect a commitment to preserving a diverse range of cultural practices, knowledge systems, and expressive forms. Through actions like the Ms. Garifuna Pageant and the Krismus Bram, these communities actively engage in the transmission of cultural heritage to younger generations and foster a sense of cultural continuity.

It is important to recognize the significance of these initiatives in light of the ever-changing social and environmental contexts. The inclusion of multiple facets of intangible cultural heritage ensures that no singular aspect is neglected, thereby reinforcing the richness and complexity of Afro-descendant cultural traditions. By promoting active participation, knowledge transmission, and community engagement, the Garifuna and Kriol cultural groups exemplify a dynamic approach to the revitalization and safeguarding of their respective cultural heritages.

Reflections

Belize has demonstrated a commendable commitment to cultural safeguarding through various initiatives and collaborations between government institutions, community actors, and other stakeholders. The recognition of indigenous rights, integration of cultural education, organization of festivals and events, and the preservation of cultural heritage sites and artifacts are all testament to the country's efforts in preserving its rich cultural heritage.

The National Institute of Culture and History (NICH) has played a crucial role in coordinating and implementing cultural safeguarding initiatives through its respective branches such as the Institute of Archaeology, the Museum of Belize and in collaboration with other state institutions like the Belize National Library Service and Information System, and the Department of Youth Services to protect and promote cultural heritage. These collaborations, along with partnerships with local communities, non-governmental organizations, and traditional knowledge holders, have ensured a comprehensive and inclusive approach to cultural safeguarding.

Both official sources, such as NICH's website, the National Library Service, and the Museum of Belize, and community-based sources, including community organizations and traditional knowledge holders, offer valuable insights and information on cultural safeguarding in Belize. Engaging with a combination of these sources allows for a more holistic understanding of the efforts being made to preserve Belize's cultural heritage.

By preserving and celebrating its diverse cultural expressions, Belize not only fosters a sense of identity and pride among its population but also ensures that its cultural heritage is safeguarded for future generations. The continuation of these efforts will contribute to the preservation of Belize's unique cultural identity and the promotion of cultural diversity and inclusivity within the country.

Recommendations

Based on the safeguarding actions, community actors involved, state institutions, and sources of information for cultural safeguarding in Belize, the following recommendations can be made to further strengthen the preservation and promotion of cultural heritage:

1. **Strengthen Collaboration:** Foster increased collaboration and partnerships between state institutions, community actors, and non-governmental organizations involved in cultural safeguarding. This can be achieved through regular meetings, workshops, and joint initiatives to share resources, knowledge, and best practices.
2. **Capacity Building:** Invest in capacity-building programs for community actors, including indigenous communities, community-based organizations, local artists, and artisans. These programs can provide training in cultural preservation techniques, documentation methods, and project management, empowering these actors to take a more active role in safeguarding their cultural heritage.
3. **Intergenerational Transmission:** Support initiatives that facilitate the intergenerational transmission of cultural knowledge and practices. Encourage elders and knowledge holders to actively engage with younger generations through mentorship programs, cultural apprenticeships, and community-based educational initiatives.
4. **Documentation and Research:** Allocate resources for comprehensive documentation and research on Belizean cultural heritage. This can involve conducting ethnographic studies, documenting oral histories, and creating digital archives to preserve and share cultural knowledge. Collaboration between state institutions, academic institutions, and local communities can facilitate these efforts.
5. **Community-Driven Projects:** Foster community-led projects that empower local communities to take ownership of their cultural heritage. Provide funding opportunities and technical support for initiatives such as community museums, cultural festivals, language revitalization programs, and traditional arts and crafts cooperatives.
6. **Public Awareness and Education:** Increase public awareness and understanding of Belizean cultural heritage through educational campaigns, media outreach, and public events. Promote

cultural education in schools at all levels, integrating cultural topics into the curriculum and organizing cultural exchange programs between different communities.

7. Sustainable Tourism: Encourage responsible and sustainable tourism practices that respect and promote cultural heritage. Collaborate with the tourism sector to develop community-based tourism initiatives that offer authentic cultural experiences while ensuring the fair and equitable distribution of economic benefits among local communities.

8. Regular Assessment and Evaluation: Establish a system for regular assessment and evaluation of cultural safeguarding initiatives. This can help identify areas of improvement, measure the effectiveness of existing programs, and ensure accountability in the implementation of cultural safeguarding strategies.

9. Continued Research and Monitoring: Support ongoing research and monitoring efforts to stay updated on the evolving needs and challenges in cultural safeguarding. Encourage academic institutions, research organizations, and community-based researchers to contribute to the knowledge base on Belizean cultural heritage.

10. Public-Private Partnerships: Facilitate public-private partnerships to mobilize additional resources and expertise for cultural safeguarding. Engage with businesses and private foundations to support cultural preservation projects through corporate social responsibility initiatives and sponsorship programs.

By implementing these recommendations, Belize can further enhance its cultural safeguarding efforts, ensuring the long-term preservation, promotion, and vitality of its diverse cultural heritage for present and future generations.

Actors and Organizations

Community actors for Afro-descendants in Belize play a vital role in preserving and promoting cultural heritage, addressing social issues, and empowering the Afro-descendant community. These actors include various organizations, institutions, and individuals who actively engage in community development and advocacy efforts. Here are some notable community actors for Afro-descendants in Belize:

1. University of Belize: The University of Belize serves as a key educational institution that provides academic programs and research opportunities relevant to Afro-descendant issues. It contributes to the generation of knowledge and the development of future leaders within the Afro-descendant community.

2. National Garifuna Council: The National Garifuna Council is a prominent organization dedicated to promoting and preserving Garifuna culture and heritage. It works closely with Garifuna communities across Belize, advocating for their rights, organizing cultural events, and fostering community development.

3. Community-Based Organizations: Numerous community-based organizations operate in Afro-descendant communities, focusing on various areas such as education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, youth development and cultural continuity. These organizations often provide essential services and resources to address community needs and foster social and economic empowerment.

4. Government and NGO Partners: Collaboration between government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is crucial in supporting the Afro-descendant community. Government agencies, such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education, partner with NGOs to implement programs and policies that address the specific needs of Afro-descendant communities.

5. Local Artists and Artisans: Afro-descendant artists and artisans play a crucial role in preserving cultural traditions and promoting artistic expression within their communities. Their work encompasses various forms of art, including music, dance, visual arts, and crafts, contributing to the vibrant cultural landscape of Belize.

6. Municipal Bodies: Local municipalities play a significant role in providing services and infrastructure development for Afro-descendant communities. They work closely with community leaders and organizations to address community needs, improve access to basic amenities, and promote local governance.

7. Indigenous Communities: Afro-descendant communities often have connections with indigenous communities in Belize. These interactions facilitate cultural exchange, collaboration, and mutual support in areas such as land rights, cultural preservation, and advocacy for social justice.

8. Elders and Knowledge Bearers: The wisdom and knowledge of elders within the Afro-descendant community are highly valued. They serve as cultural custodians, preserving traditional practices, sharing historical narratives, and guiding younger generations in cultural, social, and spiritual matters.

9. Educational Institutions: Academic and technical institutions, including primary, secondary and tertiary level schools, play a critical role in educating Afro-descendant youth. These institutions contribute to promoting cultural awareness, imparting knowledge, and fostering personal development among students.

10. Local Governance Structures: Local governance structures, such as village councils and community associations, provide platforms for community members to participate in decision-making processes. They help amplify the voices and concerns of Afro-descendant communities, ensuring their needs are considered in local development plans and policies.

11. Community Members: Lastly, community members themselves are vital actors in driving change and advancing the interests of Afro-descendant communities. Through active participation, engagement, and collective action, community members work towards preserving their culture, advocating for social justice, and improving the overall well-being of their communities.

In Belize, the collaboration and concerted efforts of these community actors are crucial in empowering Afro-descendant communities, preserving cultural heritage, addressing social issues, and fostering socio-economic development.

Safeguarding Measures

The safeguarding measures in Belize, primarily led by Afro-descendant organizations with financial support from the Government of Belize ministries, encompass a wide range of initiatives aimed at preserving, promoting and transmitting the cultural heritage of Afro-descendant communities. These measures demonstrate a proactive approach to cultural safeguarding and reflect the collaborative efforts between community organizations and the government.

The Gulisi Community Primary School focuses on Intercultural Bi-lingual Education, ensuring that the younger generation is equipped with knowledge about their heritage. While the Garifuna culture is at the center, it is an inclusive institution attended by children of varied cultural backgrounds. This initiative plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural traditions, values, and practices to future generations, fostering a sense of pride and identity among Afro-descendant students.

The Gulisi Museum serves as a platform for cultural heritage preservation. By showcasing artifacts, exhibits, and information related to Afro-descendant history and culture, the museum actively contributes to the documentation and conservation of intangible cultural heritage. It provides a space for visitors and community members to learn and appreciate the rich cultural traditions of the Afro-descendant communities in Belize.

The Grand Ball and the National Garifuna Annual Solidarity Mass are cultural events that bring the community together to celebrate and honor their heritage. These events serve as opportunities for cultural expression, showcasing traditional music, dance, and customs. They contribute to the promotion and visibility of Afro-descendant cultural practices and create spaces for community unity and solidarity.

The Battle of the Drums Competition, the Habinah Wanaragua Competition, and the Christmas Bram are cultural festivals and events that highlight the significance of music and dance, as well as storytelling within Afro-descendant communities. These events provide a platform for artists and performers to showcase their talents while preserving and promoting traditional forms of artistic expression.

The Cassava Demonstration Center and the Urau Drumming Center are dedicated to preserving cultural heritage. These centers serve as hubs for learning, teaching, and practicing traditional skills related to cassava processing and drumming techniques. By preserving these important aspects of Afro-descendant culture, they contribute to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

The Ms. Garifuna Belize Pageant and the SCEC & SVG Yurumein Project-Garifuna Classes are initiatives that promote cultural education and empower young women to become ambassadors of their heritage. These projects emphasize the importance of language, traditional knowledge, dance, and music in preserving and transmitting Afro-descendant cultural practices.

Emancipation Day and Flower's Bank Day commemorate significant historical events and serve as reminders of the struggles and achievements of Afro-descendant communities in Belize. These observances provide opportunities for reflection, education, and community engagement, fostering a sense of pride and resilience among community members.

The "Drums, Not Guns" Initiative aims to address social issues through cultural activities. By using traditional drumming as a positive outlet for youth, this initiative promotes social cohesion, conflict resolution, and community empowerment.

The Cashew Festival, Hot Cross Bun Festival, Belize Kriol Project, Kriol-English Dictionary, Traditional Drumming and Dance Summer Camps, and Di Maroon Band all contribute to the preservation and promotion of Afro-descendant cultural heritage through various avenues. These initiatives showcase the diversity and richness of Afro-descendant traditions, ensuring their continuity and vitality.

Overall, the combination of educational, preservation, celebratory, and community-oriented initiatives demonstrates a comprehensive approach to safeguarding Afro-descendant cultural heritage in Belize. These efforts highlight the importance of collaboration between Afro-descendant organizations and government institutions, ensuring the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions for future generations.

Conclusions

In wrapping up this first phase of the Safeguarding of Afro-descendant Heritage in Belize project, it is evident that stewardship efforts are crucial for the rich cultural tapestry of Belize. The safeguarding measures implemented, spearheaded by the dedicated National Garifuna Council and the National Kriol Council respectively, serve as commendable strides toward the protection of this invaluable heritage. It is also imperative to note that all these measures involve the communities who are members of the councils or the other non-profit organizations that are dedicated to safeguarding their Afro-descendant heritage.

However, it's essential to acknowledge that this is just the beginning of the journey. While the organized activities by the respective councils are making a positive impact, further investigations into community-specific measures are imperative. Each community holds unique practices, stories, and traditions that contribute to the overall mosaic of Afro-descendant heritage in Belize. Understanding and preserving these nuances will undoubtedly enhance the effectiveness of safeguarding initiatives.

In essence, the overall project, the mapping and national inventory, stands as a national, collective commitment to cultural preservation. Yet, it also serves as a reminder that our efforts must be dynamic, responsive, and inclusive to truly honour and protect the diverse Afro-descendant heritage that graces the Belizean landscape.