

PREFACE

This Special Issue of African Study Monographs consists of a selection of the papers presented at the international workshop “Preserving local knowledge in the Horn of Africa: Challenges and prospects for collaborative research in oral literature, music and ritual practices,” organized by Simone Tarsitani, Masayoshi Shigeta, and Itsushi Kawase on 17–18 September 2008 in Harar, Ethiopia. International and Ethiopian scholars, and representatives of local institutions were invited to Harar to present experiences and reflections on the challenges and prospects of documentation and preservation of local knowledge in the Horn of Africa, with special attention given to the domain of intangible heritage. The aim of the workshop was to promote interdisciplinary research in oral literature, music and ritual practices, and encourage collaborative work among international scholars, local researchers and communities.

The workshop was sponsored by the African Local Knowledge Formation and Positive Practice project, jointly with the Global COE Program of Kyoto University, and co-hosted by the Harari People’s National Regional State’s Culture, Tourism and Information Bureau, the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology and the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of Addis Ababa University. The scope of the meeting in Harar was consistent with some of the key concepts promoted by the two sponsoring bodies. Research on local knowledge, its formation and practice in contemporary Africa, considering social contexts and historical processes in which it was generated and is continually developed, is central in the project led by Masayoshi Shigeta at the Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies (ASAFAS), Kyoto University. In its theoretical and methodological approach to research in Ethiopia, the African Local Knowledge project focuses on the use of local knowledge to improve living conditions (positive practice), with an attempt to understand its meaning in a glocal (global and local) context. The project acknowledges that from observation and interpretation of beliefs and practices of local knowledge, it is impossible to translate this type of understanding from a local to a global context without the practical intellectual thought that is nurtured through collaboration. Thus the various research teams that are currently operating in this project’s framework count on an ongoing commitment and research partnership between ASAFAS and Addis Ababa University.

The workshop was also supported as part of the international symposia organized by the “Global COE Program—In Search of Sustainable Humansphere in Asia and Africa,” contributing in particular to the program’s Initiative 4 on “Studies in the Potentialities of Local Culture, Institutions and Technology.” This initiative, led by Akio Tanabe, aims to discover and understand the intellectual potentials of local and regional cultures in the attempt to pursue a path of development based upon sustainable humansphere. Intellectual potential here refers to indigenous knowledge-concepts, practical knowledge, ecological and social relations, values, institutions, techniques and technologies—historically accumulated in the various localities and regions of the world.

African societies are currently going through a period of accelerated social

change, promoted by political developments and processes of modernization that include urbanization, displacement, fluctuating markets and technological advances, among others. These changes have the potential to deeply impact the lifestyle of populations and they may also affect the meaning and methodologies of anthropological, literary, historical and ethnomusicological investigations. In this context, the organizers wanted this workshop to represent one in a series of more in-depth exchanges between scholars and the local communities concerning issues pertinent to African societies in the 21st century.

Intangible cultural heritage was the shared focus of the presentations and discussions in the workshop, especially as it is manifest in the domains of oral traditions and expressions. Intangible heritage includes oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe and traditional craftsmanship skills. Each of these domains was considered in varying measures in the presentations. Moreover, as safeguarding measures are the current focus of international consensus concerning the viability of intangible cultural heritage, we proposed preservation as a key perspective; there is a need to identify, document, protect, promote, and revitalize traditions and to link the intangible to the tangible legacies in a context that is relevant to contemporary African communities.

This meeting would not have been possible without the hospitality and cooperation of the Harari People's National Regional State's Culture, Tourism and Information Bureau. On this occasion, this bureau, as well as other local affiliates, proved once again what has been praised often times about the community in Harar: their generous hospitality. During the two-day workshop that was open to the public, there were 89 registered participants (18 of whom gave papers), an outstanding number for such an academic event that took place in a small, mostly Muslim city during the middle of Ramadan (Fig. 1). The 18 speakers were affiliated with institutions in Ethiopia (6), Japan (8), Italy (3), and there was one representative from UNESCO. All participants tremendously appreciated the involvement of a large number of scholars, elders and representatives of local institutions from Harar who actively contributed in all phases of the workshop, providing a tangible example of the resourcefulness and complexity of the interaction between researchers and bearers of African local knowledge. After the presentations and discussions, spanning over two days, the meeting was closed by a visit to the recently established Sherif Harar City Museum. Following the workshop, a group of participants joined a study tour to the Argobba village of Koromi and to several Islamic holy places near Harar.

This workshop, through several significant case studies that were presented, was an occasion to reflect on significant issues related to the methodology involved in the documentation and preservation of intangible heritage. A consensus emerged reflecting the idea that interdisciplinary approaches may best benefit any attempt to research and help preserve intangible cultural heritage in Ethiopia and in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, though not without complications, it remains essential to strive to establish positive exchanges and collaborations between researchers and local and international institutions.

The twelve papers of this publication can be grouped in four areas. Simeneh

International Workshop

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Harari Cultural Center Hall
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Fig. 1. Brochure of the international workshop “Preserving local knowledge in the Horn of Africa: Challenges and prospects for collaborative research in oral literature, music and ritual practices.”

Betreyohannes, Woube Kassaye, Ilaria Sartori & Abdulmuheimen Abdunassir, and Mesele Terecha’s articles on the theme of music deal with scholarship on Ethiopian music, Harari musical heritage, and history of the Hamina people. Chiaki Fujii’s article on the religious ritual activities of Zanzibar, together with the late Professor Hussein Ahmed Hajji and Minako Ishihara’s contributions on Ethiopian Islam, offered perspectives on Islamic studies. Itsushi Kawase’s paper offered reflections on practice and methodology in the field of visual anthropology. The papers by Abdulmuheimen Abdunassir, Alessandro Gori, and Belle Asante Tarsitani & Simone Tarsitani, contribute to anthropological, linguistic, and historical studies on Harar. Fumiko Ohinata’s report about UNESCO’s activities for the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage in the Horn of Africa constitutes an important

reference point and a frame for all the discussions herein and for the future developments in the field, both in terms of scholarly research and of cultural policy.

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