

Blue Shield in Benin

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Resumen

El Escudo Azul en Benin

La actividad humana tiene repercusiones nefastas a escala planetaria en el medio ambiente, tanto en la fauna como en la flora. Se pueden adoptar medidas cotidianas y sencillas para proteger y preservar la naturaleza (trabajos de saneamiento y limpieza, utilización de recursos naturales, reciclaje, etc.).

Las catástrofes naturales y las provocadas por el ser humano (conflictos armados, guerras, pillajes, etc.) destruyen y hacen aún más frágil la naturaleza. La vida en simbiosis con la naturaleza es un vector provechoso para el mejor conocimiento de los elementos naturales. Las tradiciones orales y los valores culturales desempeñan un papel determinante para adoptar a tiempo las medidas que se imponen en situaciones de emergencia.

El programa del Escudo Azul en Benin tiene por objetivo reforzar la sensibilización cultural con vistas a mejorar la vida de las personas y proteger los bienes culturales. Además, el Comité del Escudo Azul de Benin se ha asignado el objetivo de incrementar la sensibilización del público a las cuestiones culturales y proteger el patrimonio cultural, así como fomentar el entendimiento entre las distintas culturas mediante la cooperación y el intercambio de conocimientos y experiencias sobre las formas contemporáneas de la cultura.

Résumé

Le Bouclier bleu au Bénin

L'activité humaine a des conséquences néfastes sur l'environnement à l'échelle planétaire, aussi bien sur la faune que sur la flore. Des mesures simples et quotidiennes peuvent être prises (travail d'hygiène et de nettoyage, utilisation de ressources naturelles, recyclage, etc.) afin de protéger et de préserver la nature.

Les catastrophes naturelles et celles causées par l'homme (conflits armés, guerres, pillages, etc.) détruisent et affaiblissent encore cette dernière. La vie en symbiose avec elle est un vecteur profitable pour la meilleure connaissance de celle-ci. Les traditions orales et les valeurs culturelles ont un rôle déterminant pour que les actions à entreprendre en situation d'urgence soient prises à temps. Le programme du Comité du Bouclier bleu au Bénin a pour but de renforcer la sensibilisation à la préservation des biens culturels du public. En outre, il tente de favoriser la compréhension entre les différentes cultures par la coopération et les échanges de connaissances, d'expériences et de savoirs dans les formes contemporaines de la culture.

Introduction

The advantage of traditional African societies is their belief that life would not be possible without being in perfect harmony with nature. This philosophy is very close to the statement by the great mystic, Francis Bacon, when he said "one only commands nature by obeying its laws".

All life in our African societies is related to this need to maintain a certain harmony with Mother Nature even though occurrences and the level of development sometimes lead to the opposite and, undoubtedly hasty, conclusions.

We are aware that it is possible to lose sight of the impact of a simple action on the giant nature. This is why it is now necessary for us to be concerned with raising awareness on the need to promote, protect, safeguard and preserve the environment. Nature needs to be:

- protected for what it contains now or will contain in the future;
- safeguarded for all it has, which seems to be disappearing, with a view to reducing any tendency towards impoverishment;
- preserved so that it can still play its role as a museum and research laboratory;
- promoted for all that can be regenerated in order to preserve biological diversity.

Such concerns are indisputably part of the broader issue of culture, and also fall within the scope of action taken to protect endangered heritage, the key preoccupation of the Benin Blue Shield Committee, which was set up in May 2002.

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate, in a few minutes, how our local traditions and cultural values can make a significant contribution, provided action is taken in time, to safeguard and preserve our cultural heritage and its environment.

What Content Should Be Given to the Preservation of the Environment?

Preservation of the environment should bring to mind a certain number of expressions, such as, protecting, safeguarding, promoting, conserving nature, safeguarding and preserving the environment. Protecting nature implies, first and foremost, carrying out a task of cleaning, i.e. in the immediate surroundings, having a special place for refuse and being aware that large quantities can be a nuisance, ensuring the cleanliness of lavatories and having a clear policy on discharging wastewater.

Promoting or safeguarding the environment means caring about nature by refusing to be complacent about the fact that so many species of flora and fauna are disappearing, and through the fault of human beings. It is now widely acknowledged that nature is based on a balance between its elements and that efforts must be made to preserve this living and vital setting in all its wealth, for the sake of biological diversity.

Preserving the environment means realising that producing smoke at home and wasting energy leads to deterioration of the ozone layer and hence to global warming and climate change. Preserving and protecting

nature means using natural resources while at the same time allowing them to regenerate. It means making sure that one's behaviour does not endanger the vital relationship between humans and all the other elements in nature such as trees or animals.

It is therefore not enough just to protect the environment to meet this challenge; it is also essential to promote, preserve and safeguard it, even sometimes when this is counter to personal interests. Efforts need to be focused on implementing deliberate actions. The many attacks on the natural environment have harmful effects on the health of humans and their heritage, but these are rarely perceived in any lucid way. It should therefore be clearly understood that by defending nature, man defends man, he satisfies his instinct to preserve the species. Measures, which may at first seem insignificant, should be perceived by everyone as potential when multiplied by millions, although this may not be apparent to individuals. As education on how to preserve the environment tends to cover personal behaviour, it is necessary to find a way to internalise feelings and attitudes, hence the need to turn to deeper sources in our traditions and culture.

Our Culture as a Source and Basis for such Education

Cultural values are usually transmitted through education experienced in the following ways.

Family life and customs: learning about social life, ethics and respect for all aspects of life (human beings and objects) starts with the family. Initiations, which are primarily a means of social integration, form a bridge from one social class to another, and also to social obligations. Learning to work through practice: work in our traditional societies means being in harmony with nature so as to create goods and services for oneself and for society; this is where the sacred character of the earth and nature emerges.

Social education through numerous traditional channels, which are intense means of cultural education, for example:

- traditional songs and dances;
- stories and legends;
- customary festivities (or alliances);
- wakes (funerals or rites), pious gatherings, e.g. procession with the fetish, religious communities and activities associated with life in temples;
- village assemblies, councils of kings and important figures;
- new "extended message hubs" (kpanlingan, gandido), work duties (fetching water, fishing in backwaters, laundry, "tontine", market) rituals conveying "messages" from the beyond from ancestors.

Such moments create opportunities for "credible words", "emotional words", "dynamic words", i.e. "intense and special communications" within a community or a region.

It should be noted that the modernisation of life has contributed to a certain deterioration of cultural values that now only have their true meaning in places that have been able to avoid this negative influence.

It can even be said that a new phenomenon has emerged today: the domination of a hybrid character that is neither African nor western. Trends and attitudes are adopted without realising that these behaviour patterns may cause pollution, or impose an obligation for greater cleanliness. There is therefore a need to choose more credible channels.

Credible Traditional Channels

These are moments, situations and spaces specific to a community in a restricted ethnic sense, or typical of communities living in the same geographical area, land or region and maintaining communications amongst themselves out of necessity. There are a large number of these situations or opportunities which have separate, distinctive features, plus similarities.

They are also time sequences linked to events and with a special social significance. They may be formal or informal; they possess, in an intrinsic way, emotional, intense and persuasive dynamics for communication; for example:

- popular festivities and customary celebrations (or alliances) when traditional songs and dances convey important messages still relevant today;
- pious gatherings, these being the fulfilment of a process involving education over several months in religious communities where individuals have to submit and are initiated into a different concept of life (procession with the fetish), or may be in response to social situations deemed degrading and cause for concern, e.g. exorcisms to clean nature, to purify it (to von; to kplo klp, etc.);
- rites that convey "messages" from the beyond, from ancestors who often return after being consulted by oracles;
- village assemblies when consultations are carried out in the presence of notables and opinion leaders;
- the new "extended message hubs".

Despite the absence of a mechanical or TV "bearer" or "vector", local media systems have wide-ranging effects. The messages are circulated, are heard and permeate the population (over time). Take the example of the life cycle of a song in a rural area. Both the production and distribution processes usually require a participatory approach. Their "consumption" creates intense and dynamic "fields of interaction". Their essential quality is to reduce distance.

What specific contributions to participatory management of the environment can be expected from these bodies?

It has been established that the "traditional" technicians and specialists of these media know what to do and say on such matters and that the "finished product", i.e. the message merging with the medium, appears as a collective creation, a social endeavour initiated and completed in a shared laboratory.

Because of the intrinsic efficiency of these local communication systems, they can produce the following effects and with great speed:

- dynamic circulation of information (knowledge, knowledge to do, knowledge to say, and knowledge to be);

- facilitation of social mobility (with a driving force, repeated effects and a permanent effect);
- meaningful motivation and adoption of the message and new ideas.

The expected result is therefore to raise the awareness of local officials that cultural heritage, in whatever form, should be kept alive in the name of the human race and that there must be an awareness of its importance for the community, region, and even humanity, should be managed by all persons concerned with its existence, and promoted among the younger generation and the population at large through a culture based on the notion of heritage, and constantly reconstructed in its originality so as to develop its impact. This is a demanding task because of the broad scope and because of the interests involved.

The Role of each Party and Urgent Measures

We are convinced that those responsible for our cultures feel that an important part of their existence lies in heritage, but believe that this attitude is a statement of what should be obvious. The dangers of our heritage disappearing, being weakened or inadequately protected are already apparent: natural disasters (weather) and catastrophes caused deliberately (destruction during conflict, war, looting, etc.). Life in symbiosis with nature is a way of living conducive to the emergence of new and beneficial patterns of behaviour; problems relating to such innovations require means beyond the reach of local communities and are therefore neglected.

Emergency measures can be summarised as follows:

- identify cultural property that needs to be restored: cities, temples, museums, and certain valuables, through a rapid survey among resource people and leaders in these circles;
- conduct an inventory of our cultural heritage and values in each region with a multidisciplinary team of experts;
- promote awareness of the importance of our values and cultural wealth among a critical number of groups, mainly young people who are likely to be involved in the project and in the regional follow-up;
- undertake marketing activities to publicise selected articles of cultural heritage with documents for the general public;
- foster cultural exchanges between the generations in houses designed for this purpose according to the architecture of the environment, and in all fields;
- set up a scientific committee of museologists, traditional historians, academic historians, sociologists, teachers/researchers and cultural counsellors;
- strengthen cultural activities at grassroots level as a means of encouraging dialogue between the generations and as a contract for cultural development.

Cultural identity has been so tarnished that there is a tendency to sacrifice all notions of cultural heritage on the altar of globalisation. What we envisage is to promote knowledge of every aspect of the wealth of humanity as a whole, as well as various specific features observed, not to accentuate differences but to draw lessons that may be useful from these important moments of human life.

There is a fear that such wealth could fade into oblivion as not enough is known about it, and that it might therefore be discriminated against by a lifestyle that is sometimes too science-oriented.

The experience of the Marxist/Leninist revolution in our country has led to disastrous situations in this particular area. Sacred sites that were places of authentic preservation for biodiversity and of secrets for protecting the environment and medical cures guarded by the holders of ancestral knowledge, have been destroyed. It is indeed fortunate that values have transcended such political calculations and considerations.

Cultural Programme of the Benin Blue Shield Committee

Culture is considered to be the foundation for sustainable development in the programme adopted by the Benin Blue Shield Committee. The deterioration of movable and immovable cultural property, in the event of a natural disaster, national or international armed conflict, or threats to the internal security of the country, weakens the identity of self-awareness and therefore the continuity of a community, group of people or region. There can be no question of sustainable development if local culture is not strong enough to combat negative effects. This is why strengthening the cultural identity of Benin is a vital component in the development policy of the Benin Blue Shield Committee. Preservation, restoration and studies on cultural heritage are components in this policy.

The interest shown by the people of Benin in their culture as a foundation for sustainable development took concrete shape on May 25, 2002, in a cultural programme developed by a group from the Benin sections of the following NGOs: IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions), ICA (International Council on Archives), ICOM (International Council of Museums) and ICOMOS (International Council on Monuments and Sites).

This sub-group of four NGOs comprises the Benin Blue Shield Committee and is the main instrument for dialogue in Benin with the International Committee of the Blue Shield.

The programme of the Benin Blue Shield Committee is aimed at reinforcing the cultural awareness of the people and preserving artistic treasures and forms of culture. In addition, it seeks to foster understanding between different cultures through cooperation and exchanges of knowledge, experience and skills in contemporary forms of culture.

The cultural programme supports a large number of projects and activities by granting financial aid. The projects and activities should preferably be based in Benin, a developing country. The following activities can be considered as coming under the cultural programme of the Benin Blue Shield Committee:

- the expansion of museums or establishing collections;
- the creation or enlargement of a school (convent, temple, etc.) with a view to preserving a traditional cultural form;
- the creation of a cultural cooperation structure, such as centres for art and culture, publishing houses, libraries and archives, etc.;

- temporary exhibitions on a cultural theme;
- participation of poets from Benin in international poetry festivals;
- trips, meetings, courses, etc.;
- exhibitions of works of art;
- tourist itineraries and sites;
- construction or restoration of monuments.

Criteria for Assistance from the Benin Blue Shield Committee

To receive assistance from the Benin Blue Shield Committee, projects must be submitted as applications; this may be a component part of a larger-scale project. The projects should contribute to the social and cultural development of the community in question. They must be feasible and appropriate, with solid financial backing. The application for assistance must be submitted before the project or activities are initiated. Projects in progress cannot benefit from assistance under the terms of the cultural programme of the Benin Blue Shield Committee.

Applications for Assistance

All applications are assessed by the Benin Blue Shield Committee and must include the following information:

The Project

- name and brief description of the nature of the project;
- the place where the project will be implemented;
- short-term and long-term objectives of the project (sustainability);
- target group and how it will be involved in the project;
- relevance of the project to the cultural programme of the Benin Blue Shield Committee.

Implementation

- timetable with a description of the different phases and duration of the project;
- overview of the people and/or authorities responsible for the project;
- overview of all the permits required (e.g. building permit/approval);
- contingencies should be taken into account; e.g. are there opportunities for repair and maintenance on the spot?

Financing

- initial estimates;
- operational budget;
- financing plan and overview of contributions of third parties (requested and granted) from 5% to 10%.

Expected Sources of Funding

In carrying out its objectives, the Benin Blue Shield Committee receives financial and logistic assistance from non-governmental organisations and entities, e.g.:

- IFLA programme for development and library economics (ALP/IFLA);
- IFLA programme for preservation and conservation (PAC/IFLA);
- Danish Agency for International Development (DANIDA);
- UNESCO;
- Data based on French-speaking countries (BIEF);
- ICA programme for the preservation of archives;
- ICOM programme for the preservation of museums;
- ICOMOS programme for the preservation of monuments and sites.

The Benin Blue Shield Committee strives to diversify its financial resources, particularly among African organisations.

History of the Benin Blue Shield Committee

The French Blue Shield Committee was officially established on Friday, June 15, 2001, in the presence of a large number of guests invited to vote for the Governing Body of the Association; the committee was elected on July 4, 2001. The French Blue Shield Committee acts through regional and local commissions.

The Association for the Promotion of Social and Cultural Tourism in Africa and in France (TOSCAF-BENIN) is an institutional representative of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). It urgently needed to set up an organisation to promote activities protecting endangered cultural heritage in Benin. Gradually, in the course of numerous debates, the idea emerged of setting up a regional and/or local commission to undertake preservation measures in Benin. This aroused interest from a number of organisations, in particular, IFLA and TOSCAF-BENIN.

In October 2001, a letter was sent to TOSCAF by the PAC/IFLA programme on meetings being held for the Benin sections of IFLA, ICA, ICOM and ICOMOS.

Possibilities for creating a National Blue Shield Committee in Benin were explored and the idea became reality. The regional preservation commission for the Blue Shield was set up in Benin and named the Benin Blue Shield Committee.