

CONFERENCE OF AFRICAN MINISTERS OF CULTURE (CAMC III)

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**Activities Report  
Of the Center for Linguistic and Historical Studies through Oral  
Traditions (CELHTO)**

*African Union Regional Office, Niamey - Niger*

CAMC/EXP/10(III)

**I. INTRODUCTION**

**1) Historic**

In August-September 1966, an international comity of experts convened at Abidjan to examine all the scientific issues related to the realization of the project of **General History of Africa**, implemented by the International Scientific Comity (UNESCO). After the identification of the sources – oral, written, archeological, etc.-, it recommended the UNESCO “to give the highest priority to the supports in terms of collection, conservation and use of the oral tradition data and encourage the creation in Africa of Oral Tradition Documentation Centers”. Having emphasized the originality of this approach, the comity retained for a priority study and on the basis of objective criteria, the Sudanese site, centre of the successive kingdoms such as the kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Sokoto, etc. In September 1967, some experts convened at Niamey in order to examine the methodology issues of the oral tradition (collection, transcription, translation, analysis) and recommended the establishment of a center at a regional level in charge of the conservation of the oral heritage. That is how the *Research and Documentation Center on the Oral Tradition (CRDTO)* was created on July, 30, 1968 by the UNESCO. Approximately at the same period, a consultation of experts on the coordination and planning of the oral tradition data collection convened at Ouagadoudou designed the priority research themes and programmes as well as the cooperation modalities between the institutions, with a view of developing a strategy called *Coordinated Regional Plan of Ouagadoudou*. In December 1971, The Center of Niamey was associated to the preparation of the meeting at Dar-Es-Salam (Tanzania) during which was formulated the **Decennial Plan for the systematic study of the African oral**

**tradition and languages as vehicle of culture.** The emergency of establishing a Regional Center for oral traditions in each main region of Africa (West Africa, Central Africa, Eastern Africa, Southern Africa) was defined at this meeting. At last, in 1974, the CRDTO of Niamey was integrated to the Organization of the African Unity (OAU) organization chart as *Center for Linguistic and Historical Studies through Oral Traditions*.

## **2) The CELHTO**

From the beginning, the CELHTO/OAU was assigned the mission of coordinating the research programmes on the languages in West Africa and on the oral traditions of the whole continent, while the study and promotion of the whole continent's languages were assigned to the former Office of the Inter African Languages OIL/OAU, previously created in 1976 at Kampala.

## **II. PROGRESS OF THE CELHTO**

Through some significant projects, the CELHTO established itself at the continental level as being a reference center of oral tradition data collection and management. Further to that, the activities of the center declined. With the African Union advent, the institution has experienced an audit and was assigned a new mandate.

### **1) The General History of Africa**

The CELHTO has actively participated to the collection and supplying of the oral traditions' data as the source of production of the General History of Africa. The CELHTO was also involved in the translation of this document in Hausa in collaboration with the Sokoto University in Nigeria and in Fulfulde with a team of Fulfulde language experts, organized within a network called "Society of Peulh Studies" (SPS).

At the end of this project, the CELHTO and the UNESCO on one hand and the CELHTO and the SPS on another hand succeeded in translating seven over the eight volumes of the General History of Africa in Hausa and two over the eight volumes in Fulfulde.

## **2) ARTO and NOREA**

### **➤ ARTO (Archiving of the Oral traditions)**

The collection, the archiving and the diffusion of the oral traditions are the objectives of the oral traditions' resonant archives and documentary resources in Africa.

The ARTO project makes an inventory of and organizes in conformity with the prevailing norms all the oral documents and put them on stable aids (digitalization on CD). The project operates the archiving and exploitation of the documents by mean of catalogs or slips. Some information related to the African culture are then filed in a data bank and put at the disposal of the users and all the persons interested in the African cultural problematic, wherever they are.

It must be specified that with regards of the intellectual property rights, only extracts from different themes are published. The integrality of the digitalized information, burnt on CD is kept in the CELHTO audio library.

This project, conceptualized after ten or so workshops bringing together African and European researchers, communicators and technicians has been realized thanks to the material support of the Swiss Cooperation for Development through its intermediary, Intermedia Consultants SA (Berne). Considering the success of the project, the CELHTO required its extension to the other African regions. This request was not followed up.

### **➤ NOREA (Digitalization of the Orality, collected in Africa)**

NOREA is a project operating on the living tradition. It is mainly interested in the data related to the contemporary persons or recently dead, traditionalists, wisemen or griots. NOREA aims the digitalization of all the sound data, written or imaged, stored on analog tapes in the Research Centers and radio diffusion stations.

## **3) The 2003 Audit of the CELHTO and project of a new structure**

As part of the change process of the Organization of the African Unity (OAU) in the African Union (AU), a team of experts consultants has been assigned by the hierarchy

of the new pan African structure to evaluate the CELHTO in order to propose a restructuration plan of the center by the assignment of new missions, objectives and a new continental scale and to define the cooperation of the new structure with the African Union Commission.

The evaluation showed that the objectives assigned to the CELHTO since approximately thirty years which at first sight give priority to the study, development and promotion of African languages as well as a better knowledge of the history of the continent through the oral traditions, are today very restricted facing the big development challenges that the African countries are facing. A revision of the mandate of the CELHTO as well as the restructuration of its organization chart was recommended.

#### **4) The 2005 CELHTO new mandate**

The new missions of the CELHTO rely on two factors, in particular the natural evolution of its activities and the advent of the African Union.

The evolution of the activities of the CELHTO resulted in the extension of its scope beyond the oral traditions data collection and promotion of African languages, to be interested by everything related to the African societies and cultures in their richness, diversity and convergence.

The advent of the African Union, with some new organs such as the Pan African Parliament, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council, the Justice Court, brought the CELHTO to a new mission which consists in providing these new organs, when needed, reliable and updated information and analysis, enabling their effective participation to the AU decision making process.

Some AU priorities such as the speeding up of the implementation of the Abuja Treaty Instituting the African Economic Community (AEC) and NEPAD, conducted the CELHTO to conduct resolutely its activities towards an effective participation to the African continent auto development process, based on African traditions released from duly identified dysfunctional values.

This is just like the focus put by the AU on the socio cultural, political and economic integration of the continent. Another new mission of the CELHTO is the contribution to

this new integration dynamic in all the continent living forces, in particular the committed Civil Societies Organizations (CSO).

### **III. 2008 – 2010 ACTIVITIES**

The new mandate led the CELHTO towards the conservation of its assets, the promotion of the African cultures, the integration and development. To perform this mission, the CELHTO was involved in the systematical production and diffusion of the documents, the realization of the African communities' sociological studies, the development of the relationships with the African Diasporas and the researches on the authentic African strategies of prevention and resolution of conflicts and the promotion of the culture for the development.

The new mandate of the CELHTO was doubled with a staff restructuration which did not come into being. From 2007 to 2010, the center operates with a coordinator and only one programme manager, while three programme managers were planned in the new organization chart of the CELHTO, resulting from the Maputo Plan.

Despite the situation, the commitment of the CELHTO in the definition of its activities within the spirit of the African Cultural Renaissance Charter did not weaken. With targeted projects realized in collaboration with as well private as public cultural actors, the CELHTO built its campaign plan for the ratification of the African Cultural Renaissance Charter.

#### **1) 2008 Activities**

✓ In collaboration with the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilizations (CBAAC), in Nigeria, the CELHTO organized in Niger an International Conference on the African rock Art.

✓ The CELHTO and CARE International Niger organized an International Conference in Niger on the women leadership in Africa. During this conference, the programme manager declared a communication about the women leadership in Rwanda after the genocide.

✓ The Centre Culturel Franco Nigérien Jean Rouch in partnership with the CELHTO organized the third edition of the African Forum of the Film Documentary devoted to the theme: « Cinema, Trance and Possession ». On this occasion, photo exhibition, round tables, cinema lessons and a symposium convened at the CELHTO.

✓ The publication of « Kurukan Fuga », published by Harmattan and the organization of a conference on « The speech of Nicolas Sarkozy at the University of Dakar » by the Popular University of Niamey in partnership with the CELHTO have been the main realizations of the 2008 programme.

✓ The participation of the Coordinator to the Heads of States Summit at Addis Ababa as well as the participation of the programme manager to the Regional Workshop on the launching of the formulation process of a post conflicts development community policy in West Africa organized by the OCDE/CSAO and ECOWAS at Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, must also be noted. The programme manager declared a communication on the post conflict reconstruction in Rwanda and the CELHTO was involved in the regional work group on the post conflict and development. The workshop was interested in the monitoring of the situation in Niger and the establishment of a methodical monitoring device of the situation in Niger was assigned to the CELHTO by the OCDE/CSAO.

✓ The CELHTO distributed more than 500 documents, approximately a thousand of visitors referred to the documentation center and the CELHTO hosted a musicologist intern from the National Technical Scientific Research Center of Ouagadougou (CNRST).

### **1) 2009 Activities**

✓ **The digitalization project:** This project aims to maintain and put at the disposal of a large number of users little known, inaccessible or untraceable publications. The ancient, threatened by disappearance documents and the CELHTO productions existing in one exemplary are digitalized in priority. The digitalized documents will be progressively recorded so that at the final, the documentation of the CELHTO may be consulted online.

**The Intergenerational Dialogue:** It is a project of a Pan African scope which poses the crucial problem of the break of the intergenerational communication and beyond, the oral

tradition. During its first phase, the project intervened in seven West and Central African countries. A presentation of four DVDs from the Intergenerational Dialogue project was produced according to the interviews realized in seven countries and a round table made at Conakry.

✓ **A Seminary-Workshop on the following theme: "Contribution to a better exposure and a re-reading of the General History of Africa"** was organized by the CELHTO at Niamey. The seminary was inspired by the Executive Council decision of the 15<sup>th</sup> African Union Ordinary Session held on July, 1<sup>st</sup> 2009 at Syrte on the General History of Africa and constitutes a contribution to the UNESCO project of updating of the history teaching in Africa.

✓ **A storyboards' presentation of three African tales:** It consists in technical documents allowing the illustrated representation of the tales, prior to their production in films. It is a pre production intended for drawing the attention of the decision-makers on the possible protection methods of the African tales.

✓ **The recording and saving in DVDs of a *Sharo edition*,** friendly epic practiced in Peulh countries and presented as a total Art associating Vocals, Dance, plastic and tailoring aesthetic, bravery and pharmacopeia with the Poetry. This Art practiced by the Peulhs and having an integrationist cultural value all over West Africa is endangered. The CELHTO has also put this reportage at the disposal of the general public.

✓ **The CELHTO made several communications,** one of which declared by the Coordinator at the Euro-African Cultural Cooperation Campus at Maputo on the African Union strategies for Culture and development. Another one was declared at the second Pan African Cultural Congress at Addis Ababa on the cultural properties protection tools during the conflict times. The programme manager attended the African Cultural Institutions' Summit (SICADIA) where he declared a communication on the preparation of the second Pan African cultural congress.

✓ The CELHTO has coordinated the publication of the book: « **The BASAA from CAMEROON,** historical monograph, as reported by the oral tradition» edited at Harmattan. The Basaa population presence has been reported in some other African countries besides Cameroon. This people represent a veritable Diaspora within the continent. The promotion of the Basaa cultural memory may be an integrator element of the countries sharing the same functioning codes than this people.

✓ **The CELHTO** has distributed approximately 750 documents and hosted two intern students in library training at the Training Institute on the Communication and Information Techniques of Niamey (IFTIC). More than a thousand of visitors referred to the documentation center.

## 2) 2010 Activities

✓ **Opéra du Sahel:** In collaboration with the «Prince Claus Foundation » from Holland and the Ministry of Culture of Mali, the CELHTO will produce a book on: « The memory of the Opéra du Sahel ». The objectives of this project are to increase the cultural awareness and promote the activities in the field of culture and development. The culture represents a fundamental human need, the interaction between the culture and the development confirms the culture essential role in the development process. The Opéra du Sahel is an innovative element in the range of African artistic productions. It is a development project, an important cultural project with a sustainable impact. 80 artists representing 11 countries have participated to this work and benefited of an international scene.

✓ **Escales Africaines:** In partnership with Mr. Yacouba Konaté, art critic and tenured professor of philosophy at the Abidjan-Cocody University and Mr. Youssouf Tata Cissé, emeritus researcher at the CNRS, Paris, the CELHTO has realized this project which aimed the animation of the centers of Intellectual interest about an original perception of the African Thought in five (5) capitals of the West African countries. These conferences will be documented and will give rise to the publication of a book and DVD.

✓ **Musique pour la Paix:** The project aims the implication of the African and Diaspora musicians in the conflicts prevention and peace consolidation actions. At the final, It should result in the creation of a legal framework allowing the African musicians to intervene as a support to the AU peace keeping missions. Considering the declaration of the year 2010 as Peace Year in Africa by the African Union, and considering the particular circumstances in Niger, hosting country of the CELHTO which will begin an electoral process, the project will rope in the Niger civil society and musicians as part of an action titled: "All for free, transparent and peaceful elections in Niger".

✓ **The Africa Day:** In partnership with the WAMP (West Africa Museums Programme) and the OCPA (The Observatory of the Cultural Policy in Africa), the CELHTO

organized on the occasion of the Africa Day, an important conference on the theme: « Fifty years of Cultural Policy in Africa ».

✓ **The cycle of the CELHTO Conferences:** In order to ensure the cultural animation of the center, some conferences on selected themes are regularly organized. Various themes such as: The issue of the copyrights in Niger, The poetry of the pestle in Niger, The implication of the traditional leadership in the conflict management etc.... have been discussed.

✓ **Regard sur le passé :** The project aims the production of the audio material for pedagogical and didactic purposes based on the General History of Africa through the translation in Swahili, Hausa, Arab and English of the famous song “Regard sur le Passé” from the Bembeya Jazz National of Guinea. The song recounts the glorious moments of Almamy Samory Touré, Emperor of Wassoulou, one of the most discerning resistant against the colonial invasion in Africa

✓ **Production of films:** The CELHTO has initiated and produced a film documentary on the sustainable funding of the cultural development, which is the theme of the third conference of the African Ministers of Culture.

✓ **Missions:** The coordinator has attended the UNESCO seminary on the pedagogical use of the General History of Africa at Tripoli and the joint celebration African Union - Government of Ghana of the symposium on the centenary of Kwame Nkrumah at Accra. The programme manager declared a communication at the CENSAD Ministers of Culture’s meeting on the valorization and maintenance of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

✓ **The CELHTO** has distributed around 1000 documents and more than a thousand of visitors have consulted the documentation center, the center hosted three interns; two Nigerien students in library training at the Training Institute on the Communication and Information Techniques of Niamey (IFTIC) and one Cameroonian, former IFTIC student.

✓ **Pending activities**

- Publication of an anthology of the oral poetry of Côte d’Ivoire
- On the occasion of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the African independences, the CELHTO cultural Programme Manager is invited by the General

Direction of France Heritage (Direction Générale du Patrimoine de France) to attend a seminary on the African neglected heritages, on November 2010.

- In partnership with the Association Bâtir et Développer (Build and Develop), the CELHTO will produce a presentation of four illustrated albums on the youth of the Niger river, its populations, the riverside countries and their myths.
- The project of capitalization of the memory of the main African historical monuments. It aims a 3D presentation of the historical sites and monuments according to their historic, mystical and philosophical values conveyed by the oral traditions and put the data at the disposal of the general public as a contribution to a better knowledge of the history of Africa.

### 3) The 2011 projects

✓ **Enhancement of the Cultural Heritage of Guinea-Bissau:** Conceived in partnership with the Association « Iles Canaries- Guinea-Bissau: cultural exchange », the fundamental objective of this project is sensitize the population of Guinea-Bissau on the interethnic tolerance through the knowledge and vulgarization of the common identity elements.

It is about the reconstruction of the History of Guinea-Bissau from a neutral point of view, the diffusion of the common identity elements and the awareness of the populations. This work must extended to all the country's ethnic groups in order to increase an interethnic cultural communication and favor the socio political conflicts resolution which affected Guinea-Bissau in the last decade.

✓ **Atlas of the African Tales:** This project is essentially based on the coordination of the works of the universities, local associations and research centers on the oral tradition, particularly the stories, for collection. At the final, the project will produce an Atlas of storybooks according to the regional and thematic homogeneities. The project will value the narrator's work, develop the interest of the general public in the tales and ensure the maintenance of the tales as the most recognized elements of the oral tradition.

✓ **The Project of a documentary film: «The Sosso Bala ».** It is a project of film documentary about the sacred Balafon called Sosso Bala and considered as the symbol

of liberty and cohesion of the Mandingo community, spread over a territory owned before by the Mali Empire and found today all over West Africa.

The instrument, shrouded in mystery and full of magic power, was firstly owned and played by the King Soumaoro Kanté who was crowned at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It accompanied over the centuries the transmission of epic poems, especially the Soundjata's epic and praises hymns dedicated to the founder of the Mali Empire

In 2001, the UNESCO declared the Sosso Bala's cultural space a masterpiece of the humanity oral and intangible heritage. In order to protect and encourage the transmission of this musical tradition, a safeguarding project has been established through an action plan composed of several sections...

The Sosso Bala's story, its cultural importance and emanating emotional feelings are highly significant to arouse a curious interest for the African cinema in order to motivate the restitution for the posterity through a film, this strange story of an atypical instrument, full of myth, aged of more than nine (9) centuries.

✓ **The project of safeguarding the endangered archives** from the creation of the CRDTO by the UNESCO in 1968 up to the institution of the CELHTO, a lot of information from oral source have been collected, used and stored in the CELHTO's archives. Today a sound archive (audio and video) of around 5000 pieces and a library of more than 4000 books are counted. To this must be added the cultural productions (publications, audio numerical duplications, films documentaries). All this treasures is threatened by the termites, the bad weather, the bad condition of storage etc. The digitalization project established in 2009 allowed us to ensure the saving of one hundred books on DVDs up to the end of the year despite the less appropriate equipment. The issue of the saving of the sound archives is still opened. As the guardian of the memories, the CELHTO should fight against the ruin and loss of this treasure.

#### IV. PERSPECTIVES

1) **A new denomination:** The acronym of CELHTO, as very restrictive, does not correctly reflect the new missions of the center. The oral tradition is a subject for study not only for linguistic and history. "The oral tradition through the language conveys the African cultures and includes the literary, artistic, historic, philosophic, social, religious etc heritage as well as the sacred or initiating rituals. It extends to various fields such as

pedagogy, gender, governance, democracy, human rights, tolerance, justice, solidarity, pharmacopeia....” As a result, the necessity of renaming this institution has been evoked in several documents produced by the center’s coordination and the reports of the evaluators. The main reason of that suggestion is that the name of the institution should faithfully and unambiguously define the extent of its mandate and current activities. The new denomination of the CELHTO will show that this structure is an African Union specialized institution in terms of culture. In so doing, the AU will fill a continental and beyond understanding gap.

2) **The reinforcement of the staff:** considering the limited staff number, the recruitment of technical permanent or not permanent personnel is necessary. The recruitment of a librarian-computer specialist, in charge of the reorganization of the library and sound archives as well as the development of the center’s web site ([africa-orale.org](http://africa-orale.org)) being completed, the recruitment of programme managers should be a priority in order to raise the expertness capacity of the center.

3) **The networking:** the confinement of the CELHTO in its implantation zone (Francophone West Africa) the low publication of its editions in the languages other than French, the limits in the collection of the oral traditions in North and East Africa are the main criticism addressed to the center. These weaknesses resulting mostly from the center’s limited number of personnel may be overcome by an intensive work through the network, involving the continent’s research centers and universities in the CELHTO programmes. For that, the CELHTO must enhance its visibility in order to increase its capacity of mobilizing technical and financial partners. The realization of the 2009 and 2010 programmes proved a considerable effort in this field.

#### **1) The steering committee**

The center has operated for a long time with the help of a scientific council called « Steering Committee » which convened its last session in 2007 in CAP VERT. Since then, the decisions about the programmes of the CELHTO are made by the coordinator, assisted by his team. Considering these new commitments, it is urgent to constitute a council composed of preeminent personalities from the culture world in order to have an external view on its orientation and give some advises about the programmes.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

• The development of a strategic partnership is one of the CELHTO's strength which permitted it to resist to the last years' up and down and incertitude. The center vehemently took advantages of the new missions despite the lack of personnel and a high budgetary restriction. Thanks to the partnership with actors from different fields of culture, the CELHTO achieved the coordination and implementation of its activities enabling the effective management of such an AU structure specialized in culture.

The governmental and private actors should intensively involve the CELHTO in the production of cultural activities all over the continent in view of their sustainability, capitalization of their experiences and extension of the projects with positive impacts to the other African people.

2010

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