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A CULTURAL POLICY FOR THE GAMBIA

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, YOUTH, SPORTS AND CULTURE
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INTRODUCTION

Culture, loosely defined, is a people's way of life - that which, over the centuries, has given some identity to a people, and afforded them viability within a delimited area. With the advent of nation states, it is therefore not uncommon for people of varying though often related ethnic backgrounds, to refer to a national culture - a blend or juxtaposition of lifestyles that, while offering variety, also provides unifying bonds; The Gambia is one such nation state.

There is a Mandinka saying that reads:

Ning i ye nyaato long, ye kunung ne fo i ye; Ning kunung mang fo i ye, i buka nyaato long.  
(if we don't know where we come from, how could we know where we are, let alone where we want to head for).

A principle implied here is that to progress we must move from the known to the unknown. Hence, national development must take due cognizance of the cultural milieu it is meant for, for it is through this vital association of the indigenes with what the nation intends to achieve that we can ever hope to gain the commitment, involvement and sustained participation of Gambians in our developmental efforts.

The village remains the cradle and authentic repository of our cultural heritage, and it is the same village that most developmental efforts are geared towards. Grassroots participation must be sought and obtained if we are to realize our developmental aspirations. This policy therefore attempts to provide the spring-board for meaningful involvement, commitment, and on-going participation by all Gambians, and indeed friends of The Gambia in the pursuit of our
developmental programmes, and nation building.

ETHNO - HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Gambian territory includes parts of the former River States of Niumi, Jokadu, Baddibu, Saloum, Niani, Sandu and Wuli on the North Bank, and Kombo, Fooni, Kiang, Jarra, Wuropana, Jimara, Tumanna, Fuladu and Kantora on the South Bank. The national borders of The Gambia were drawn by the Anglo-French Boundary Commission in 1890/91, thus defining the British and French colonial territories. Since Independence (1965), The Gambia's democracy unites a multitude of ethnic groups whose ancestors inhabited the North and South Banks of the River Gambia and other areas of the Senegal-Gambia.

PEOPLES OF THE GAMBIA

The indigenous people of The Gambia were Bainuuka, Joola and other minority groups. Most of the present Gambian Joola population are living in the Fooni and Kombo Districts of the Western Division where they still retain their traditional forms.

The Mandinka migrated from Manding, an Empire that stretched from the South-Western part of Mali to North-Eastern Guinea, and from neighbouring regions to the West between the 10th and 13th Century. With the exception of Fooni and the 19th Century founded Fuladu, they established the traditional Gambian States, thus shaping the cultural and political framework of the region.

The Wollof settled in the traditional Wollof States of Jolof, Kayor, Baol and Walo. They later extended their cultural and political influences to the River Gambia through their rule over Sine and Saloum. A considerable number of Wollof settled, on the North Bank of
the River Gambia and in Banjul (then Bathurst) in the 19th Century.

Most of the Gambian Fulas migrated from Macina (Mali) and Futa Toro (Senegal), and they form a significant population of The Gambia. Their growth greatly influenced the course of Senegambian history during the 19th Century, resulting in the decline of Kaabu and associated States, and the foundation of Fuladu. The latter included the former River States of Wuropana, Jimara and Tumanna. The Sarahuli originated from the population of the Ghana Empire. They mainly settled in the Upper River Division during the second half of the 19th Century. Their contribution to trade and the spread of Islam in The Gambia is profound.

The Serer migrated from Futa Toro to settle in Sine and Saloum. The Guelwar, the ruling class of the Serer Kingdom of Sine originated from Kaabu. During the 19th Century, Serer migrated into The Gambia because of the Soninke-Marabout Wars and the expansion of the French controlled colonial territories.

The ancestors of the Aku population of The Gambia were liberated Africans who came to The Gambia after the abolition of the Slave Trade (1807). These Akus were added to by a large number of young people from local families. Most of them have European surnames and are Christians. Their culture is Anglo-African.

Our ancestral ethnic groups were closely related to the people of the ancient Ghana and Mali Empires, the Kaabu States, the Wollof States and the political units of Sine, Saloum and the Casamance. Gambian history includes the migration of different ethnic groups and their mutual relations, the emergence of religious and philosophical ideas, the adaptation of economic techniques and skills, the formation of social classes based upon professions, and the foundation of the
traditional River States as mentioned above. It also includes the spread of Islam, and Christianity the expansion of West African trade relations, pre-colonial Western contacts, the establishment of the British colonial power, and the recent developments since Independence.

TRADITIONAL CONCEPT OF SOCIETY

In our traditional Gambian society, economic production, social and political organizations, religion, education and philosophy were heavily interwoven to form a comprehensive cultural concept that emphasized a close relationship among human beings, nature and super-natural powers. The observation of the environment (soil, trees, water places, animals), the development of procedures and regulations enhancing the economy and communal life, the role of children, adults, males, females and ancestors were creative components of a universal and comprehensive view of life. This comprehensive view of life was the basis of traditional cultural concepts. Its most important aim was the harmonious development of man and nature. Thus, the principal goals of any social community such as the village or state were harmony, peace and respect. It was expected that everybody contributed to the prosperity of the community, and that they in turn were rewarded with honour, recognition and material support.

This universal and comprehensive view of life assigned clear roles to ensure the full participation of the people in the welfare of the community. Not all the ethnic groups that settled in the Gambia region had exactly the same social order or institutions, but they shared in the practice of communal life similar structures which gave them a unifying bond.
ECONOMY

Agriculture, cattle-breeding, fishing, trade and handicraft were the main economic activities of our ancestors. They developed appropriate forms and techniques of production mindful of the natural environment and the needs and wants of the people. For example, there are traditional principles of self-reliance such as 'Tesito' and the corresponding community co-operation through work groups organized at the level of families, ethnically at the village level, and in peer groups. Tidal and rain-fed rice cultivation are elaborated technologies and know-how applied and developed by women for centuries.

EDUCATION

Traditional education employed methods which were primarily oral instruction, observation, imitation, and correction, until the skill or knowledge was perfected to the satisfaction of the teacher/instructor, and the community. The youth acquired the skills, knowledge and understanding through the participation in communal activities. The family, the elders, the village community, the koranic-schools, the initiation ceremonies, the peer groups, and the oral traditionalists (Griots) were the institutions and educators serving the education of the youth and the continuance and improvement of our culture.

NON-PHYSICAL AND MATERIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

Our non-physical cultural heritage comprises the comprehensive cultural concepts of mutually related ethnic groups as outlined above, and their social and political forms both represented in religious beliefs, morals and practices, the social classes and the political units.
There is also a great number of riddles, games, songs, music, theatre, masques, dances, feasts and sport competitions which may vary from one ethnic group to the other. These forms and activities are added to by the art of the oral traditionalists - the Griots. They were the specialists who elaborated the art of oral tradition and they are still the experts of oral literature who preserve the history and other valuable information. The Griots deserve highest esteem, since the spoken word and the composed tunes were our ancestors' most important means to transmit knowledge and skills and to express their worldly and spiritual views of life. The oral traditions of our people compare very closely to what is known today in our literacy circles as history, literature, philosophy etc. However, they need to be preserved, promoted and disseminated more determinedly because of their importance to the way of life of our people.

The material cultural heritage includes the stone circles, sacred places, tombs, groves, trees, and colonial buildings, monuments and the works of the craftsmen. Smithery, wood-carving, weaving, pottery, leatherwork, tailoring, and tie-dyeing served to meet daily wants and needs, as well as religious and spiritual requirements, and they stimulated the aesthetic conceptions and artistic skills.

The artisans and Griots, musicians, dancers and youth groups received patronage and encouragement until recently from ruling houses, the established trading families and village communities. Thus, arts and crafts were acknowledged economic, religious, educational and leisure time activities among our ancestral ethnic groups.
THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS POLICY ARE AS FOLLOWS

i  To preserve and disseminate knowledge of our cultural heritage in its many facets.

ii To foster pride in those aspects of our cultural heritage that could enrich our lives through systematic and concerted action.

iii To ensure that the content of education embodies Gambian values and civilization, and affords the promotion of life-long education through the use of national and other languages.

iv To enhance the status and development of national languages through their inclusion in educational programmes and their use in operational activities.

v To accelerate the pursuit of our developmental aspirations through the judicious utilization of our cultural resources, and through exogenous inputs that are promotional of knowledge, skills, and desirable attitudes.

vi To conserve and improve upon those aspects of our culture that foster the unity, identity, and dignity of all Gambians.

vii To encourage creativity in both the plastic and performing arts, and in the endogenous development of technology.

viii To participate in the global effort to promote understanding, mutual respect, co-operation, and collaboration in the
interests of peaceful co-existence and human fulfilment.

AGENCIES FOR CULTURAL ACTION

In the Public Sector, most of the agencies bearing the responsibility for cultural preservation and promotion are under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Youth, Sports and Culture (Department of Youth, Sports and Culture, the Oral History Division, the Museum and Antiquities Division, the National Library, and peripherally, the Formal and Non-Formal sectors of Education). Other Ministries involved in culture-related activities are as follows:

Information and Tourism

- Handicrafts markets and Tourist books/brochures;
- Cultural programmes on Radio Gambia.

Economic Planning and Industrial Development

- GAMCO for textiles and other artisanal products.

Local Government and Lands

- Department of Community Development and the Rural Development Institute for the endogenous development of technology.

Office of the President

- The Women's Bureau's seminars/workshops on cottage industries.

In the private sector there are a number of associations and clubs catering for various aspects of our culture. Among the most noteworthy ones are the Gambia Griot Society, the National Drama Association, the Gambia Black African Arts Club (GBAAC), the Gambia Association of Writers and Artists (GAWA), and the Gambia Arts Teachers Association (GATA). In addition there are sixty-nine cultural groups/troupes registered at the
Department of Youth, Sports and Culture, some of which receive subventions from Government. The activities of most of these clubs/associations/troupes have been rather sparse.

Though there is a Cultural Unit at the Department of Youth, Sports and Culture for the monitoring, co-ordination, and promotion of cultural activities, the unit has, because of severe resource constraints, virtually limited its activities to the performing arts, and its notable achievements have been the organization of festivals and the creation of an ensemble known as The Gambia National Troupe.

The dispersal of cultural agencies in various Ministries, and the poor monitoring of the activities of cultural clubs/associations/troupes in the private sector have militated against a unified sense of direction and an orchestrated effort in the attempt to preserve and promote our culture. Further, the fact that other agencies capable of sensitization, mobilization, and promotion in the area of culture eg. the educational system, have at most only been marginally involved points to the need for effective co-operation and co-ordination of cultural programmes, in order to ensure continued propagation of our cultural heritage. In effect, the current lack of dialogue, poor co-operation and ineffective co-ordination, calls for a new machinery that will enhance the chances for success in the implementation of plans of action geared towards the preservation, promotion and development of all aspects of our cultural heritage.
5.1 Sensitization and Mobilization

There is presently no systematic attempt at sensitizing and mobilizing Gambians to ensure a knowledge of and development of pride in our culture, la spite of the regular cultural programmes on Radio Gambia, the impact of modern technology, and increasing exposure to especially Western thought and lifestyles continue to threaten the alienation of Gambians from their roots.

In the short-term, a sustained programme of sensitizing for the preservation, development, and promotion of our culture by an appropriate co-ordinating organ in collaboration with the Department of Information and Broadcasting and the Formal and Non-Formal sectors of our educational system will be pursued. More audience participation in Radio programmes like panel discussions on customs, indigenous technology, diet, and historical sketches, and the encouragement of the writing of books and booklets for use in the educational system and quiz competitions are some of the activities envisaged.

Also in the short-term periodic cultural festivals would be organized at the national level while at the divisional and district levels such festivals would be organized even more frequently to ensure on-going grassroots participation.

In the long-term, the designated operational cultural agencies would be expected to help establish rural presses which would feature various items of our culture and other items.

5.2 National Languages
The status and development of local languages has only received token attention.

In the short-term, a national orthography for these languages will have to be developed by the CDC in collaboration with any other competent agencies. In order to accord the national languages some prominence, the three most widely spoken ones – Mandinka, Pulaar, and Wolof should be used as media of instruction for the first two years of basic education as soon as practicable and for adult literacy classes generally.

Following a summative evaluation of the project, the CDC should urgently develop appropriate learning materials suitable for teaching these national languages at basic education level as subjects, and as media of instruction nationally for the first two years of basic education. These measures would, supported by newsprint in the local languages, not only prevent a relapse into illiteracy, but enhance opportunities for life-long education.

Also in the long-term, the designated operational cultural agencies should, in collaboration with the Non-Formal Education Services, the Department of information and Broadcasting, and other press agencies, encourage the establishment of local presses and the publication of various newsprint by rural communities. Appropriate follow-up materials for post-functional literacy programmes and cultural education would also be produced.

5.3 The Creative Arts

5.3.1 The Performing Arts

In view of our financial and other resource constraints, Government can
no longer fully finance a National Troupe. The National Investment board shall therefore conduct a study, the objective of which shall be to make The Gambia National Troupe commercially viable and self-sustaining. Encouragement would also be given for the setting up of ensembles, troupes, and drama groups at the divisional and other levels.

In the short-term, some of our performing art forms would be introduced in the formal education sector as electives or regular extra-curricular activities. Skilled performers in any community with a school would be recruited to help introduce and sustain our cultural forms like dancing, singing, and drumming. Joint presentations of aspects of the performing arts by the school and community would be encouraged. Such presentations, with other inputs from other aspects of our culture would help bring the school and community closer together.

The Gambia College would, in its pre/in-service courses for teachers afford trainees more insight into our performing art forms, and the acquisition of some expertise in these art forms.

Also in the short-term, repertories of song, dance, and drama of national origin would be developed and the production of appropriate literary materials for these forms, with some form of recognition or acclamation given at the community, district, divisional, and national levels.

In the medium term, efforts would be made to augment the resources of the Department of Information and Broadcasting's Film Unit in order to facilitate the production of local films and documentaries.
The periodic cultural festivals envisaged would also help in the sustaining and development of these art forms.

The Visual Arts

Though the visual arts are featured in school curricula and are being helped by associations and clubs like GBAAC and GATA, no systematized approach to sustain these takes place outside the school system. Encouragement would be given to local artists by providing them with some materials and other support for the development and dissemination of the visual arts.

As talent is rather sparse in this area, good artists would be requested to help schools and other interested groups dig in their heels in this much neglected area, and the Gambia Arts Teachers Association would be given some support to help spearhead the promotion of the visual arts by, inter alia, organizing exhibitions at the national, divisional, district, and community levels, and through talent identification and development missions.

The Film Unit of the Department of Information and Broadcasting would also be expected to play a role in dissemination and development of these art forms.

5.3.3 The Plastic Arts

Carving, sculpture, weaving, pottery, smithery and leathercraft are some of the more popular forms of the plastic arts.

The Department of Tourism is doing a lot to sustain the plastic arts through the creation of craft markets for the tourist industry. Also, in the formal education system, some aspects of the plastic arts, especially weaving and moulding, are
featured in the art and crafts syllabuses.

Activities in this area would, in terms of nurturing appreciation, dissemination, and development be better co-ordinated by an appropriate organ.

Local artists would be provided with some incentive to help schools and other interested groups acquire and enhance these skills.

The plastic arts products shouldn't merely be seen as souvenirs for tourists, Gambians should be encouraged to procure these products and see them as part of our regular houseware.

Apart from the possibility of the plastic arts enhancing opportunities for self-employment or supplementary sources of income, they could, if sustained and propagated, go a long way in cutting down on imports of eg. ceramic products and furniture, and help to alleviate the foreign exchange burden.

**Indigenous technology**

The Department of Community Development, through its field programmes and the Rural Development Institute, continues to address itself to methods for the utilization and development of traditional technologies. More recently, the Indigenous Business Advisory Service (IBAS), the Gambia Artisan Marketing Co-operative (GAMCO), and the Department of Tourism have in their various ways helped to sustain these traditional technologies.

In the short or medium-term, it would be desirable to undertake the following tasks:

a) research into local materials for construction
of buildings, sanitation systems, and culinary gadgets.

b) dissemination of knowledge on weaving, pottery, leather works, and smithery in schools, and to interested adults.

c) the development and propagation of our traditional technologies to cater for some of our domestic requirements.

Among the long-term targets of this aspect of our culture would be:

a) The establishment of an effective marketing machinery for indigenous technology products.

b) The inclusion of traditional technologies in science syllabuses for the basic cycle of the education.

5.5 Sites, Monuments, and Relics

Though The Gambia has a fair share of sites, monuments, and relics eg. the Katchikali sacred pond, Fort Bullen, the stone circles at Wassu and Kerr Batch, interests in these at the national level has been relatively recent, and attention to them rather modest. The establishment of a Monuments and Relics Commission and the National Museum have helped to step up attempts to conserve some of these sites, monuments, and relics. Gambians must be made to be aware and to cherish these aspects of our patrimony, and be equally involved in our conservation measures.

In the short or medium term, it would be desirable to undertake the following tasks:

a) dissemination of knowledge of these sites, monuments, and relics, not only in schools, but among adults as well.
b) the compilation of a comprehensive inventory of monuments, historical buildings, and sites.

c) revision of the Monuments and Relics Act of 1974, to facilitate the enactment of by-laws for country-wide application in order to conform with recent developments.

d) the restoration and preservation of monuments, buildings, and sites that are of historical and cultural significance.

e) the systematic establishment of relics and other items of cultural interest exhibition programmes in the rural areas.

f) the establishment of outreach educational programmes at the National Museum and the encouragement of visits by various educational institutions and other groups.

g) the inclusion of our Monuments and Sites in Unesco's programme for the rehabilitation and preservation of the World Cultural and National Heritage.

In the attempt to ensure rural reach in the long-term, kiosk museums would be built initially at the divisional level, and later at the district level. Local sub-cultures of the Monuments and Relics Commissions would also be established at the levels indicated.

5.6 Research and Documentation

The spoken word has been the main vehicle for the transmission of our culture. The Oral History Division collects materials on oral history, literature, customs, music, and genealogies from the Senegambia
and Guinea-Bissau regions, some of which have been transcribed and published.

The National Library has both a Gambiana and an Africana section with material on The Gambia, and by Gambians, and from Africa.

The National Archives also has among its collection culturally-related materials in some of the official and other records, and works lodged with it.

In the short or medium term, it will be desirable to undertake the following tasks:

a) Continuation of in-depth geographical and historical studies on the precolonial states and empires north and south of the River Gambia, and their ethnic groups.

b) The collection and processing of oral traditions for publication.

c) The conduct of surveys for a compilation of potential historical sources, and the recording of culturally relevant information.

d) Linguistic research in local languages.

e) Support for the production of books and audio-visual materials for basic and secondary education, and for teacher training.

f) Improvement of storage facilities for information retrieval systems, materials, and the establishment of a sound library.
g) In-depth study of western and other contacts that have influenced the life and thought of Gambians.

h) Consistent enforcement of the Library and Archives Acts of 1976 and 1986 respectively, especially as these relate to the deposition of publications.

In the long-term, efforts would be made to achieve the following:

a) The establishment of branch libraries at all divisional headquarters.

b) The provision of adequate and suitable equipment and materials for proper preservation of archival holdings, and facilities for their effective use.

c) The teaching of Gambian and Senegambia history at the basic, secondary, and post-secondary levels, in addition to African history. Studies would be commissioned for the production of appropriate monographs and texts on historical materials of the Senegambia region.

5. 7 Sports and Recreation

Sports associations and clubs enjoy a lot of support at the national level. With the exception of wrestling, all sponsored sporting activities are of exogenous origins. The most popular one, soccer, and those of more recent entry like basketball and volleyball enjoy far more local patronage than the indigenous wrestling which, incidentally, is organized less frequently and is attracting fewer people. Games like 'wuri', 'yoteh', 'padinyadi', and 'Simba' have virtually disappeared from the scene.
The operational cultural agencies, in collaboration with the Department of Youth and Sports, and the Department of Education, and with the help of expertise in local communities, would design programmes for promoting some of our traditional games, especially in schools, and for various youth organizations. The periodic cultural festivals would provide a good opportunity for sustaining and developing traditional recreational and sporting activities through displays and competitions alongside imported forms.

5.8 A Multi-Purpose Cultural Centre

In the long-term, it would be desirable to have a multi-purpose Cultural Centre that would serve as a national venue for exhibitions, performances, and general manifestations of various aspects of our cultural heritage. Fund-raising activities, and contributions from both the private sector and external donors should be able to afford us this facility in say, the next five years, or sooner.

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR PRESERVATION, DEVELOPMENT AND PROMOTION OF CULTURE

As has been observed, agencies involved in cultural activities are dispersed and unco-ordinated. The Cultural Unit at the Department of Youth, Sports and Culture has, because of meagre human and other resources, been unable to cope with all aspects of our culture, let alone properly monitor and co-ordinate cultural activities.

6.1National Cultural Council

In order to provide a discernable and unified sense of direction in an effective monitoring and co-ordination of our cultural activities, a National
Cultural Council would be incorporated. Apart from playing a leadership role in the preservation, development, and promotion of our culture through its operational agencies, the Council would serve as an advisory body on policy matters to the Minister responsible for culture. The main agencies involved in cultural activities in both the public and private sectors would be represented on the Council, and outstanding individuals in the area of culture would also be called to serve on the council.

6.2 Operational Agencies

To facilitate the work of the Council, Operational Agencies would be created. These agencies would serve as the executive arm of the Council and would be composed of three divisions viz. The Creative Arts Division, the Museum, Sites and Monuments Division and the Research and Documentation Division. The Cultural Unit in the Department of Youth, Sports and Culture, the Museum and Antiquities Division, and the Oral History Division would constitute the nuclei of these divisions.

The operational agencies would liaise closely with all public and private institutions and agencies involved or going to be involved in the pursuit of policy objectives, and would ensure that policies adopted are implemented, closely monitored, and regularly evaluated.
Given the rather adverse economic climate likely to prevail in the foreseeable future, and given the burden already shouldered by Government in the way of various subsidies, ways and means would be found to link fund-consuming cultural services with fund-generating cultural industries and activities in order to offset expenditure on cultural services through the judicious use of earnings generated.

Though Government would continue to provide some financial assistance for the preservation, development, and promotion of our culture, the private sector would be expected to increase financial support for cultural activities in the implementation of this policy.

International organizations, foundations and other external donors would be approached for aid, especially to facilitate take-off for the cultural programmes envisaged, and for training both locally and abroad.

INTERNATIONAL CO-OPERATION

A cultural policy for The Gambia must have both inward and outward orientations. A reason why The Gambia must look beyond her borders is the arbitrariness of these borders, cutting across ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities and affinities; another is the tendency not only towards regiona-lization as in the case of ECOWAS or the OAU, but the increasing importance of various fora for co-operation and collaboration at the international level. In order to exert fundamental influence on world affairs and world culture, The Gambia, alongside the rest of Black Africa, must be heard and seen to be participating in the attempt to enhance the quality of life for all.
We are signatories to various bilateral protocols on culture, and shall attempt to increase such links at opportune times.

We shall continue to participate in cultural events at both the regional and international levels, and shall, when our means permit, host some of these events.

We firmly subscribe to the belief in the brotherhood and common destiny of man, and shall spare no pains in our attempts to enrich human life, and to foster understanding, mutual respect, and peaceful co-existence among men.