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"Oral traditions not for archives: the case of lobolo": reflections on the draft Heritage Transformation Charter

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ABSTRACT

The orally transmitted tradition of Lobolo is a common and widely practiced cultural tradition and an established marriage institution within African societies in Southern Africa, differing only in terms and minor variations of practice. Lobolo therefore has the status of being an intangible heritage and is acknowledged as such by South Africa's National Heritage Resource Act of 1999. Its role in society today on the one hand and its oral way of transmission on the other has placed it in the center of an ongoing post-colonial discourse, particularly around the standing of the African intangible heritage in post-1994 South Africa. The Heritage Transformation Charter, following its mandate by the National Heritage Council, intended to attend to and correct existing imbalances in the Heritage sector and its institutions. It also aimed to identify and establish ways for the preservation and continuation of African heritage. The study reviews the literature on Lobolo, highlighting the ways in which it has been described as a multifaceted cultural and social institution. In consideration of these findings it critically engages in a discussion of the Draft Heritage Transformation Charter, to assess its acknowledgement of the characteristics of living heritage. In doing so the study probes the ability of a policy guiding document such as the Heritage Transformation Charter, to accommodate and guide the survival of oral traditions such as Lobolo, as part of the intangible heritage of South Africa.

Keywords: Lobolo, Oral tradition, Intangible heritage, Cultural memory, Archive