

**THE CLANIC PANEGYRIC OF THE MAHI COMMUNITY OF SAVALOU AS A BASE FOR PROMOTING CULTURAL TOURISM IN THE TERRITORY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Nowadays, the neglect and disappearance of family eulogies can be seen, and the new approach to territorial development requires that cultural heritage be taken into account through its safeguarding and promotion. The general objective of this study is to contribute to the safeguarding and enhancement of the eulogies of the Mahi community of Savalou for the promotion of cultural tourism. To achieve this objective, the study combined both qualitative and quantitative methods applied to a sample of 139 people in the 09 districts that make up the Mahi community of the territory on the basis of questionnaires, inventory sheets and an audio recorder. This target group includes community intellectuals (dah...), large wives (nan, yao, houessi), senior citizens and some young people. The different collection techniques and tools made it possible to collect enough data. 20 family panegyrics have been identified in the community in terms of results, and are supported by at least 02 prohibitions each, 01 to 02 rhythms are associated with the declamation of the panegyric. At the end of the study, the need to safeguard the eulogies was noted, due to the young generation's lack of knowledge of this cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Cultural heritage, Intangible, Panegyric, Savalou, Houéssi.

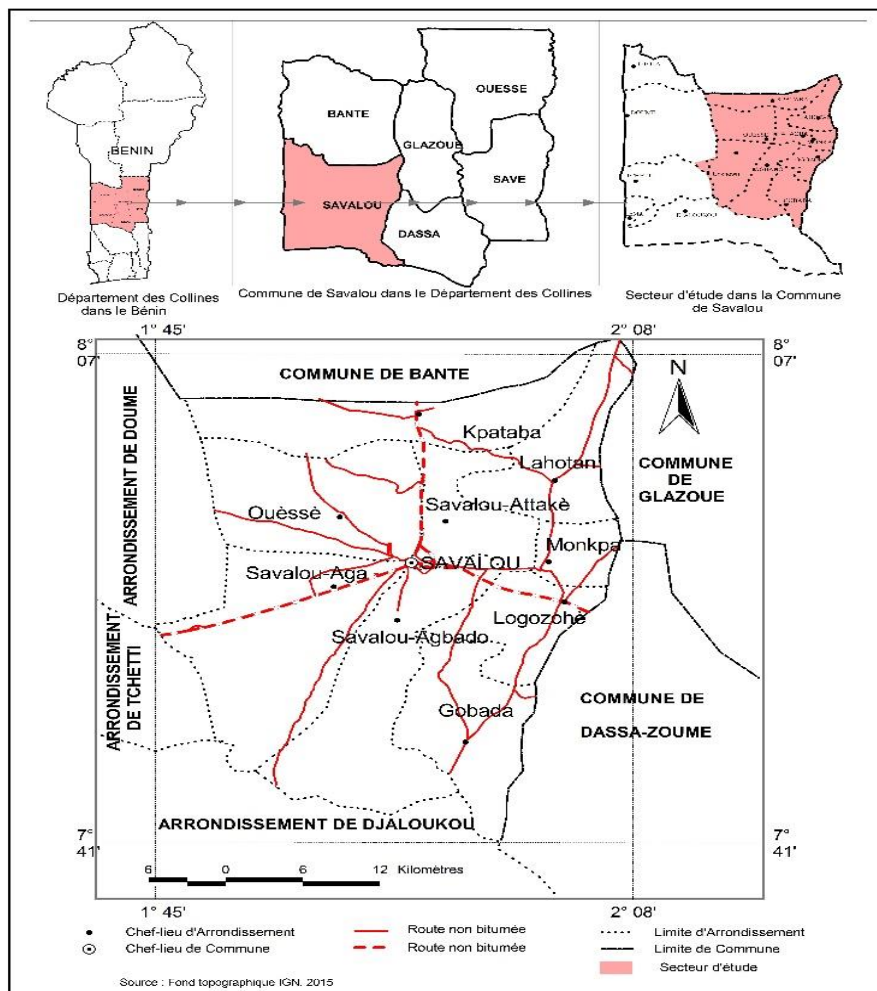
**1. INTRODUCTION**

Africa is a continent rich in tradition and attached to its cultural values. Benin, in particular, a West African country, has a rich centuries-old cultural tradition. It has a rich and varied cultural identity, diverse from one community to another. *Speaking of identity, it is a museum* that preserves cultural heritage, and from which people draw dead relics that have given meaning to the lives of past generations (F. Lieberherr-Gardiol, 1987, p.18). So the quest for the self is another idea that arose as an extension of the logic that cultural identity was ultimately a kind of "paradise lost". To do this, the great causes of social struggle had to collapse, and as traditional landmarks disappeared, social ties were loosened. Then, the identity of the group, no longer able to be built in action or in the perspective of "*being together against another enemy*", comes back to memory, a past, an origin to which we turn with nostalgia and which we wish to recover. This origin is concretized here in a territory, there, in a language, here in the resurgence of ancient customs, there in an ethnic group that had mixed and that must be purified, or in the rereading of religious values, or in the discovery of a social fact (P. Charaudeau, 2004, p.27). Thus, we can discover a particular fact, the panegyric, through an analysis of the mode of its functioning in

human communities with oral traditions. Indeed, to want to reflect on panegyrics perceived as founding and organizing texts of the existence of clans is to engage in the rather complex terrain where historical, literary, psychological, and sociological approaches are inextricably intertwined. In truth, two essential elements of the laudatory speeches that constitute panegyrics justify this observed complexity: the word and the content, and better still, the form and content of these oral pieces (C. Azonyiadja, 2004, p.36). In a more original sense, the panegyric appears as "a series of short, very alert sentences addressed in the form of greetings to individuals belonging to the same clan and having the same ancestor, often mythical" (F.A. Iroko, 2014, p.23). Knowing one's panegyric, then, is a way of returning to one's ancestral origins, mastering one's sources, one's culture, because to this day, "the panegyric remains a classic source of the history of several communities in Benin" (B. Cope, 2014, p.13). However, it is curious to note nowadays that identity can lose its original purity, since panegyrics are disappearing, especially with the rise of revealed religions. It should also be noted that in the face of major migratory movements that lead to the movement and mixing of populations, it is clear that some of them lose their culture of origin and partly appropriate a new culture (P. Charaudeau, 2004, p.13). And also, literacy and globalization are reasons that push people to neglect their culture, to no longer know their panegyrics which are constituents of their intangible cultural heritage or simply of their identity. However, two important questions arise: What is the significance of these panegyrics for the ancestral memory of the African community, particularly the Mahi community of Savalou in Benin? What strategies need to be developed to preserve the embodiment of this identity?

### **1.1 Geographical scope of the study**

The Mahi community of Savalou that is the subject of this study is located in the commune of Savalou located in the south-west of the department of Collines. This municipality is located between 7°35 and 8°13 North latitude on the one hand and 1°30 and 2°6 East longitude on the other hand. The Mahi community shares its borders with the commune of Glazoué in the east, the district of Djalloukou in the south, the commune of Dassa-Zoumè in the south-east and the districts of Tchètti and Doumè in the west. The Mahi community of Savalou is spread over nine (09) districts of the commune, four (04) of which are urban and five (05) rural where 80,376 inhabitants live (RGPH4, 2013). The framework of this study is shown in Figure 01.



**Figure 01:** Administrative and geographical situation of the Mahi community of Savalou

## 2. DATA AND METHODS

### 2.1 Nature of the data collected

The data collected relate to clan panegyrics, the social, cultural and touristic importance of this intangible cultural heritage left by the elders, the occasions for declaiming panegyrics and finally, conservation and sustainability actions for the maintenance of the community's cultural identity.

### 2.2 Data Collection Techniques and Materials

Several research techniques were used to conduct this work. These are documentary research, interviews with local authorities, (Mayor, the 1st deputy in charge of culture (01) deputies and the four (04) heads of urban districts, i.e. a total of 06 authorities), surveys of people of the 3rd age (dah, daagnonnou, houéssi, tassi, tassinon, traditional religious dignitaries...) to reveal the social practices of the communities. In addition, another 133 people were interviewed by chance

in the family communities concerned by the panegyrics and on their social perception. These people are made up of 57 daah or traditional dignitaries, 51 daagnonnou, tassinou, houéssi, tassi (paternal aunt, priestess, wife and aunt), 13 dignitaries of the royal palace of Savalou, 09 young girls and boys and 03 agents of the city's Tourism Development Agency. A total of 139 people were interviewed as part of this research.

The collection tools are mainly the questionnaire, the panegyric inventory sheet, the audio recorder and the interview guide. The latter was sent to the communal authorities while the questionnaire was sent to the targeted characters in the community. The recorder was used to memorize the recitation of certain panegyrics.

### ***2.3 Data processing and analysis of results***

At the end of the investigations, the tools (inventory sheet, interview guide and questionnaire) were grouped by category of actors and were processed.

As the data were mainly qualitative, a content analysis was carried out; a simple statistical treatment was also carried out through the calculation of frequency according to the formula  $F = (n_i/N) \times 100$  where F is the frequency,  $n_i$  is the number of people who provided the answer i and N is the total number of respondents. The results obtained were analysed using the SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) model.

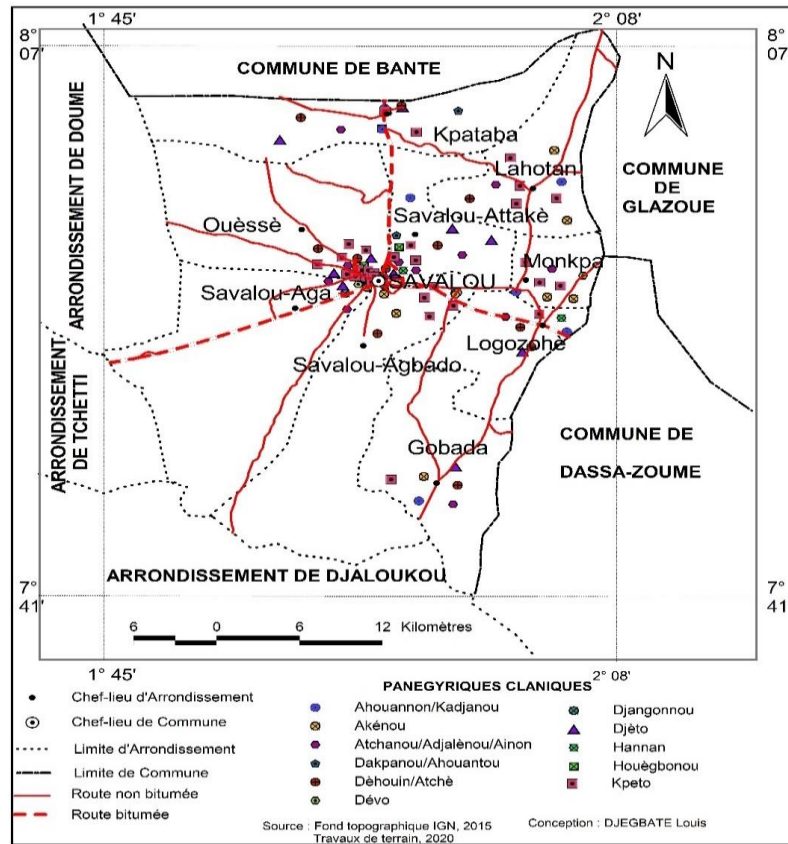
## **3. RESULTS**

### ***3.1 Essay on the inventory of panegyrics of the Mahi community of Savalou***

At the end of the data analyses, it can be affirmed that the Mahi community of the commune of Savalou has a diverse and impressive number of panegyrics which are:

*Adjalènou, adjonou, adjohouènou, ahouannon, ahantounvi dakpanou, akénou/aguénou, atchanou/adjanou, atchè, atolouvi gbadjinou, awègonou, ayato, dèhouin, dènon, dévo, djangonnou and its derivatives, djèto/ tchèto, hannanvi monlanou, houègbonou/houègbovi-guéyonou, kpéto and its derivatives and zougonou.*

These mother panegyrics inventoried in the Mahi community of Savalou have derivatives with obvious similarities. We can cite for example the mother and even royal panegyric of Savalou "kpéto" with 07 other derived panegyrics (guitchanou, sogannou, dagonnou, gbéssonou, yotanou, and madou), and the djangonnou panegyric with 03 derivatives (anannou and hounsanou, gbéouvi ahikonnou). The panegyrics of the Mahi community of Savalou and its derivatives are spatialized in Figure 02.



**Figure 02:** Spatial distribution of panegyrics in the 09 districts of the Mahi community of Savalou

We can conclude after analyzing this map that everywhere in the territory, there is a remarkable human presence, therefore, a diversification of panegyrics.

**3.2 Genesis and socio-cultural characteristics of panegyrics in the Mahi milieu of Savalou**

**3.2.1. Genesis**

Panegyrics owe their origins to the experiences of ancestors, following an act of bravery, humility or survival after a warlike expedition. Most clan panegyrics have their origins in the

pre-colonial period, before the arrival of whites. The ancestors were therefore concerned to share with their descendants, through panegyrics, the great events marking their lives, the birth of their socio-cultural groups and their exploits. In fact, in order to praise panegyrics, we arrange the facts of the ancestors, their lives and all that they had to do and that marked in one way or another their passage on earth, which makes the panegyrics differ from one lineage to another. Specifically, the levels/verses of praise in the panegyrics are the various acts performed by the ancestors during their lifetime, all extraordinary deeds, and bravery.

To assert, then, that the family litanies are at the origin of a veritable revival of the name and emblem of the founder of the clan, is not wrong. They allow the knowledge of the genealogy and display the vital principles of the group, highlight the origin as well as the quality of the target, they also constitute a verbal force that moves and informs the individual.

### **3.2.2 Social Characteristics**

Clan panegyrics are words that come from the social body of the individual, to accompany his physical body in a movement of modelling and appeasement, but which also allow us to pay tribute to the ancestors. Panegyrics thus make the junction of the social, the physical and the spiritual bodies between the living and the dead, in a gentle and harmonious way. The chanting, the rhythm, the flow, the intonation used, the coded character of the words, the characters and the mythical or sacred objects invoked, these elements put together or separated, give the notes or verses of panegyrics a magical, penetrating, extraordinary character, which catches, challenges and modulates effects in the subject from an early age.

The different occasions of delivery of panegyrics allow the individual to integrate well into his society because one can designate a clan as a small society in a larger one. This good integration fosters a good understanding between the members, allows for uniform passions and the achievement of common goals. In addition, panegyrics convey moral values, they contribute to a peaceful society while alleviating tensions within the group.

### **3.2.3 Cultural Characteristics**

The data collected brought out some information that we felt was relevant to present in the results. Most of this information comes from the participants in this research which had to be translated into French and synthesized.

Panegyrics are an exclusively African creation, as they do not exist in Europe. It is therefore an important dimension of African cultures in the sense that it is at the same time a mark of identity. Peoples identify themselves through panegyrics. They make it possible to situate each person not only in his or her environment but also in his or her ethnic group and in the history known by this family. To recite the panegyric, you have to start with the name of the clan, for example, *houègbonou* and then continue with the verses or *ayatô*, *anannou*, *djètô*. So clan panegyrics always start with the name of the clan before ending with the laudatory recitation. To recite someone's eulogy is to show him respect and consideration. When you greet someone with their eulogy, it makes them feel honored and valued. In the same way, to recite the panegyric of a person is to show him the level of knowledge held of his person not only individually but also in his family and collective environment. These are words of praise that nourish and ensure the spiritual health of the being.



Panegyrics link the individual to his or her culture. An individual must master the different behaviors that he must have when he belongs to a given clan: respect the prohibitions of the panegyric in order to be spiritually healthy.

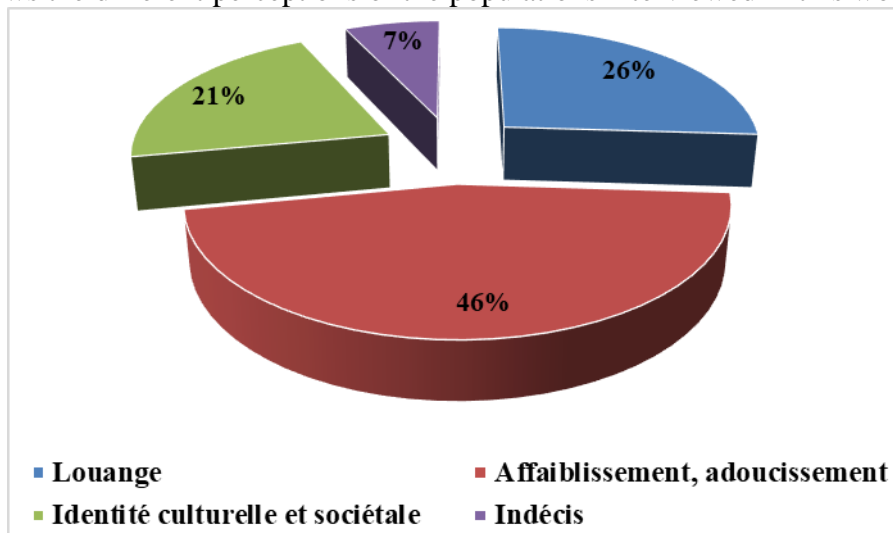
**3.3. Meanings, Functions and Virtues of Panegyrics**

**3.3.1 Meaning**

Clan panegyrics are laudatory poems specific to each family community, which serve to honour and greet its members (B. Comlan, 2019, p.43). They constitute a reference identity base for each family, each individual. The different phrases that constitute the praise of the panegyrics can be sung or just recited. These phrases each have a very important meaning, which honors the individual and blesses his or her day. They also emphasize the clan's nurturing activity, the profession of the ancestor, or the various exploits of the latter.

**3.3.2 People's perceptions of the virtues and functions of panegyrics**

Figure 03 shows the different perceptions of the populations interviewed in this work.



Source: Survey results, June 2022

**Figure 03:** People's perceptions of the virtues and functions of panegyrics

Of the 139 people surveyed, 26% of them said that panegyrics form a particular literature that serves to praise a family, a community, a clan. For 46%, panegyrics therefore carry values and virtues: heritage value, therapeutic value, affective value, emotional value. Moreover, the chanting of panegyrics has effects on the subject. He can recharge his batteries in the praise they appropriate, he can find in it appeasement, consolation, positive emotion, feel a weakening, an annihilation, a change of severe decision into another more peaceful, gentle, etc. There he "encounters" a basis of identification. In addition, spiritually the ancestor from whom they are descended is venerated. Spiritually, from the hereafter, the ancestor is content, he protects him, helps him avoid dangers, and provides him with (spiritual) benefits. Panegyrics therefore have two essential functions: a socio-cultural function and an identity function.

Clan panegyrics lead individuals to unite. A *Djeto* individual who meets another of the same panegyric anywhere in the world, already considers him as his brother or sister, even if they have

just known each other. Panegyrics even became the name of some individuals. Instead of calling you "Jules or Immaculée", the individual prefers to be called simply "dèhouin or houègbonou". 21% of the population recognizes that the clan panegyric, whatever it becomes, is part of the cultural and societal identity of the peoples, especially in Benin and in the Mahi community of Savalou. Of these, 07% are undecided and do not understand anything about the panegyrics. For them, this does not exist since they are acculturated youth or Christians of revealed religions, and then they accidentally become sons of Abraham and Jesus Christ at the expense of their identity.

### ***3.3.3 Diversification of panegyrics***

Every occasion for the declamation of panegyrics may lead us to say that there is a diversification in the praise of panegyrics. Each goal has its own way of declaiming and appreciating.

### ***3.3.4. Occasions for the recitation of panegyrics***

More than 85% of people agree that we can praise the eulogies of an individual when he is in distress, when he is called upon or when he performs an act of bravery. They can also be praised when a partner is offended, or to greet each other. A woman can ask her husband for money and even more for the market when she praises his panegyric to pamper him, pamper him, and beg him. It can also be done: to console a crying baby, to congratulate an individual who honors by dancing well in an audience, a parent can bless his child's day by declaiming his panegyric. To ascertain whether a subject belongs to a clan, one can simply chant the panegyric notes of that clan to check whether he recognizes himself in it or whether he is a worthy son of it by his sensitivity to panegyric verses. The declamation of the royal panegyric *kpéto* which means "hunter" in reference to the founding king of the kingdom of Savalou Ahossou-Soha Gbaguidi 1st who is a hunter gives him strength, bravery and self-sacrifice to continue to better manage the subjects of his kingdom.

### ***3.3.5 Strategies for safeguarding and promoting tourism of the panegyrics of the Mahi community of Savalou***

#### ***❖ Backup Strategies***

For some respondents, panegyrics are not in danger of disappearing according to our information on the ground, since the family community still exists, the origin of the family will never disappear, there are always relics of descendants in each clan in love with its identity, and if this were not the case, there is a risk of being uprooted. For others, however, the current generation no longer attaches great importance to panegyrics. They give more importance to revealed religions, to belief in God, and do not hesitate to say that their panegyric is "Jesus Christ." The panegyric, from day to day, no longer has all its value, all its content. They need to be upgraded at the risk of losing their cultural identity.

In order to safeguard this intangible cultural heritage, conservation measures different from those taken to safeguard the tangible heritage are necessary. To remain alive, intangible heritage must retain its relevance to culture and be regularly practiced and learned within communities and from one generation to the next. Safeguarding activities must therefore always involve communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals who are the bearers of such heritage. The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage emphasizes the processes involved in transmission or communication from generation to generation. Safeguarding intangible cultural



heritage means ensuring that it continues to play an active role in the lives of current generations and that it will be passed on to future generations to safeguard their identity. Safeguarding measures must aim at its viability, its permanent recreation, highlighting its good sides and its transmission. Possible initiatives for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage include the identification and documentation of intangible cultural heritage, preservation, promotion, enhancement or transmission, transcription mainly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of its various aspects.

#### ❖ *Actions to promote panegyrics*

The neglect of panegyrics nowadays is a hindrance to the cultural development of African nations in general and to the Mahi community of Savalou in particular. These should be promoted for better self-knowledge. This would be achieved by:

- raise awareness of the importance of clan panegyrics;
- to make parents know that teaching eulogies to children is a primary and parental duty;
- organize activities to promote intangible cultural heritage, for example, initiating a travelling festival for the recitation of panegyrics and/or an evening of learning how to recite or recite panegyrics with documents and prizes;
- write books and produce audio on the panegyrics of each community;
- organize games on the knowledge of panegyrics in general and on their praise in particular;
- initiate research on intangible cultural heritage in other cultural environments in the commune of Savalou, the department of Collines, Benin and in Africa in order to centralize it for better knowledge;
- Organize, in collaboration with the media, programs on local radio and television to publicize the panegyrics of the Mahi community of Savalou.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The results of this study showed that clan panegyrics provide information about the identity of the clan and the individual in particular. They are recited for several reasons, which has been confirmed by (F.E. Kpadonou, 2014, p.45), "panegyric praise constitutes an identity reference base for a clan, a family and an individual, they are transmitted from generation to generation. They are massively used during traditional ceremonies and other bathing and birth rituals, but also in daily life, to recall alliances, to appease the partner, to obtain forgiveness from the other, in situations of reconciliation, at funerals. Eulogical praise remains a soothing approach to mothering... ». They are also used to encourage and/or congratulate an individual who has proven his or her bravery. This is confirmed (M. Laplace, 1992, p. 23) when he states that we are proud to praise a man who, after an exile, was able to acquire absolute royalty. Each clan has its panegyric with its prohibitions and the rhythm associated with its declamation. This result corroborates that of (C. Azonyiadja, 2004, p.43), who states that "the clan panegyric is a doctrinal discourse that ensures in the foreground the awakening of the collective consciousness of the group through the relevant elements of its cultural identity, namely: the totem, the essential voodoo of the clan, the rites of integration linked to the mythical nurturing activity, purification rites, etc. Moreover, each level of the declamation of the panegyric corresponds to a form of integration of the individual."

Nevertheless, we note that young people do not attach any importance to the mastery of their panegyric, they neglect them at the expense of modern practices, (G.A.G. Gbaguidi and C.K. Atondé, 2015, p.313) justify this observation, "by the lack of interest given to these values by young people, the under-information of them, the erosion of family ties, but mainly by the influences of modernity which create the distance of young people from their traditional family nucleus. A situation that points to a defect in the transmission of panegyrics." Hence the urgent need to think of measures that can contribute to the safeguarding and proper popularization of this African intangible cultural heritage, so that they do not fall definitively, with the help of time, into oblivion. (F.E. Kpadonou, 2014, p.15) specifies and confirms that "at the end of the old tradition the current tradition must be woven for a better life. Transmission allows passage, transcription, advancement, continuity, perpetuation, alloying."

Speaking of safeguarding and promotion strategies, we have retained a number of points. And these results are comparable to that of (F.A. Iroko, 2019, p.59), who calls on the media: "We must dedicate appropriate programs to them. It is only in this way that panegyrics can be safeguarded by showing their usefulness and the importance of safeguarding and perpetuating them."

In addition, the richness of traditions found around the world has become an important motivation for travel: tourists want to get to know new cultures and to be confronted with the multitude of performing arts, crafts, rituals, cuisines and interpretations of nature and the universe that exist in the world. The cultural interaction that results from these encounters encourages dialogue, allows for understanding and in turn becomes a factor of tolerance and peace. Promoting the responsible use of this living heritage for tourism purposes can create direct, indirect and induced jobs, reduce poverty, stem rural exodus and foster a sense of pride within communities. Tourism provides very good reasons to preserve and enhance intangible cultural heritage, including eulogies, as the income it provides can be reinjected into initiatives aimed at ensuring the long-term survival of this heritage. It must be managed with the utmost care if it is to prosper at a time when globalization is accelerating. Only meaningful partnerships between communities and tourism/heritage sectors that genuinely take into consideration the aspirations and values of all parties can ensure the survival of intangible cultural heritage. To this end, the article that addresses the place of intangible heritage in tourism (Wikipedia, 2018, p.53), specifies that "cultural tourism is a fast-growing sector on a global scale. Living experiences in contact with cultures different from one's own is also a strong motivation to travel. The context is therefore favourable to the development of a tourist offer on the basis of intangible heritage lists. Inclusion on UNESCO's official lists is highly coveted, and this guarantees global visibility for local traditions but also commits the entire international community to the safeguarding of cultural diversity." (A. Kagermeier, 2014, p.59) confirms that "Tourism is one of the central objectives of cultural heritage conservation, which uses it as a basis for the establishment of tourism products. Since the 1970s, the protection of historical monuments has increased enormously in importance. Considerable efforts have been made since then to restore and preserve historic sites. One of the motivations and justifications was the possible use of these sites as tourist attractions."

## 5. CONCLUSION

The present study explored the issue of safeguarding and promoting family panegyrics in the city of Savalou for the promotion of cultural tourism. The various observations, opinions and interviews with the targeted social actors and the analysis of the existing literature made it possible to have a fairly broad view of the problem posed at the outset. The study revealed, following the actors' expressions, the lack of knowledge of the family panegyrics by the younger generation of the Mahi community of Savalou.

At the end of this study, it is important to remember that Savalou is still a kingdom in which the circulation of good cultural mores should be an asset, but we can rather see the disappearance of these morals, because in the more or less recent past in Savalou, families were endowed with customs and values that constituted the identity and distinctive signs of these within the community. Among these specificities, we were particularly interested in panegyrics or litanies of families.

Indeed, our results revealed that most of the connoisseurs of the litany of families are aunts, wives, some priests of the fa and people of the 3rd age. This state of affairs is justified in particular by the lack of interest given to these values by young people, the under-information of young people, and the neglect of family ties, mainly caused by the influences of modernity which create the distance of young people from their traditional family nucleus. A situation that refers to a defect in the transmission of panegyrics.

These young people have an eye on modernity, more on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). We should therefore think about reconciling ICT with the transmission of our customs and mores for a better reception of young people.

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