Accept my sincere greetings from Canada, here in North America. This is a great, advanced country in which I have resided for a numbers of years. It is sweltering hot, more like the Mombasa weather and likely hotter than at Ekerenyo.

Mogusii natebete buna 'ngongo n’ibere! I say so because we have come out of one of the coldest winters for all the time I have lived here. Today we swelter in the hot sun that can even kill!

The issue of culture is dear to my heart as it should be to all of us, MwaMogusii, and every Kenyan ethnic group. We all know the Kiswahili saying that msahau kwao ni mtumwa! Everyone human being, I believe needs cultural grounding; otherwise one would become other people’s slave.

Culture encapsulates many elements such as language (Ekegusii in this case), the norms of our lives such as behaviour patterns; the way we live as Abagusii that distinguishes us from all others; the food we eat, how it is grown and how it is shared within the community. And the spirit of society we demonstrate as a group distinct from all others.

Culture includes music and dance and occasions to which the music applies. It is about ceremonies be they the birth of our children, the rites of passage in the community such as initiation into manhood and womanhood, marriage and what marriage entails; it deals with death and how we handle our dead and many, many more facets that define a group of people.

Culture is passed down generations through various means of transmission. This can be through oral tales such as stories told by the fireside, in the fields or even in transport vehicles. It can be via the written word such as books or via music and dance.

My information is that Abagusii Culture and Development Council was formed to promote and preserve the culture of Omogusii. This is indeed a noble and timely cause for our people considering the degree to which our culture is under siege. A good example is to do with language, which is perhaps the most essential element of any culture. Here is what one UNESCO says about disappearance of languages:

"... out of the approximately 6,000 existing languages in the world, more than 200 have become extinct during the last three generations, 538 are critically endangered, 502 severely endangered, 632 definitely endangered and 607 unsafe." – UNESCO Language Atlas across the world

I hope your group will come up with sustainable ways of preserving Ekegusii for the sake of future generations for, as UNESCO argues, “the death of any language is equivalent to cultural annihilation”. We must not let such death of language to happen!

In our own way, through our publishing business (Nsemia Inc. Publishers), we are doing what we can to preserve our Kenyan cultures. It is in this spirit that we released Nemwel Atemba’s Abagusii Wisdom Revisited, a collection of Kisii proverbs and other gems of Mogusii wisdom. We have also released Enock Matundura’s Kivuli cha Sakawa, a fictionalized account of the legendary Kisii seer. This is work we expect
to be translated into Ekegusii soon for the sake of wider reach in the community. In the wider Kenya, we have recently published *Mucii ni Mucii*, a Gikuyu language novel. I name but three works, however there are many others on the way; and an indication of our commitment to the preservation and transmission of current knowledge for the sake of generations to come.

I highlight the above publications because I believe that in one way or the other, we can all be instrumental to our cultural preservation. You would be contributing to this preservation in one form or another, be it in composing and singing sons, or developing drama for entertainment. It may be through lessons such as the position of elders in our society and ensuring respect for them. You can also be involved in activities like those you are involved in today or facilitate needed evangelism intended to ensure that our culture persists.

Culture preservation is a serious challenge that must involve us all and the community at large. And indeed, as a country, we should do the same in all parts of the country. I am sure that we can get the government to hear us on this with some nudging.

As we all know, culture is not static. It changes over time so that what may be a norm today may not be so in days to come. Culture is often influenced by interactions with others of different culture. Mahatma Ghandi once said that “No culture can live, if it attempts to be exclusive.” Or as Mogusii said: *Beka Boko Bwa’mbura erinde toigame!* The fact is that no man, ethnic group or other is an island. There is a lot we can learn from others; there is also a lot others can learn from us.

As such as we work to preserve the culture of Omogusii, we must examine what is and worth keeping; we must also deliberately shed off those elements that may not be of use in modern times. In our society, let’s continually examine the role of women and how we treat them on a day to day basis. Across the nation and country, it is paramount that we examine prejudicial cultural biases aimed at Kenyans of different ethnic groups. Respect, rather than denigration or distaste is what we need regarding others that are different from us. We would also expect the same of them.

Cultural preservation will cost the community money and resources. While we seek government support in this endeavour, we cannot rely overly on government funding. In the competition between health care and culture, health care is likely to win; same applies to roads and education.

Yet other countries have found a way around this, lessons we must learn rather than re-inventing the wheel. It is the subject of *cultural tourism*. I’ll explain.

We could start by building a centre where we show case our way of life, past and present, in form of a museum. In the same complex we would have a hall for shows such as music (brining *Esagasaga* away from Nairobi, say), dance and serve food. In the same complex we would have a hotel where tourists, local and international, can spend time while enjoying our food, listening to our music and buying our souvenirs.
Now imagine that our neighbours the Maasai, Kipsigis and Luo did the same. We would have the world flocking to the place! With that would come employment in addition to preserving our culture; and let alone impacting others interested in who we are!

I am proposing that the next county government, once in place, starts on plans to realize such a dream!

And we must not be shy from benefiting this way from our culture because, as you may all be aware, most countries do it. Just visit Europe, Japan, North America and other parts of the world.

Cultural tourism, in my view, remains unexploited across Gusii and Kenya. My estimate is that we can double income from tourism simply by expanding to the cultural space across the country.

And potential for expansion exists. Do you know for example that there were forts (chindwaki) in Gusii used to keep away enemies? Isn’t it possible to locate these and restore them as historical sites? How about those places where many past leaders held court? For instance, I recently visited what came to be called ”Magen a'Moirongo”, where as a leader of our clan, my grandfather held court, dispensing justice and resolving disputes in the community.

I am sure that there are many such places, dotted across Gusii. It is about time we started mapping these out with the intention of restoring them and at the same time incorporating these into the cultural circuit.

Gose inaki bono?

Let me finish with expressing my gratitude the chance to be your guest at this event; I feel privileged and elated. Your work is commendable and needs support; it is worth emulating by many others interested in the preservation of our culture for posterity.

In my view, the journey has just started for what you have done is take the first step. That said, don’t forget that the way ahead is long and may offer challenges before realizing the desired full potential.

My challenge to you all is to stay on course in the worthy journey you have started. It is also my prayer that when the next county government comes to be, we shall implement many of the ideas many ideas you may have, including some alluded to in this speech. And that can happen only if duly qualified leaders make it to office.

Let me reiterate that msahau kwao ni mtumwa!

Matunda Nyanchama
Toronto, Canada
July 5th, 2011.