

## **THE MUSEUMS OF MALAWI AND DIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY, “SAFEGUARDING TRADITIONS” JOINT PROJECT**

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### ***Biography***

*Mike Gondwe has over twenty years of experience in the field of museums. Today, he is the National Education Coordinator (Curator) for the Museums of Malawi. He holds*

*a Postgraduate Diploma in Museum and Heritage Studies from the University of Western Cape, South Africa. As Museum Education Coordinator, he is at the centre of developing, planning and organizing public and school education programmes on HIV/AIDS, food security, malaria prevention, environment and poverty. Since 2006 he has been Southern Region Chairman for the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture’s HIV/AIDS Program. He has been invited to speak about museum work at conferences around the world, including Guernika in Spain, Cape Town in South Africa, Bacolodi in*

*Philippines, Liverpool in the UK, Abuja in Nigeria, Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya, Cape Town in South Africa and recently in Vancouver in Canada. He is very active on the international museum scene. He was the Vice Treasurer and Representative for Southern Africa, ICOM-Africa (AFRICOM) 2003–2006; Board Member of the Commonwealth Association of Museums (CAM); National Coordinator for the Group for Children in African Museums (GCAM), a branch of the Commonwealth Association of Museums; Regional Advisor for Africa with the International Network of Museums for Peace; Taskforce Chair for Africa-Recording, Documentation, and Information Management Initiative Partnership (RecordIM); and Country Team Leader of the current joint project on Safeguarding Traditions for Guatemala, Philippines and Malawi.*

### **Introduction**

Malawi is a small country in Southern Africa with a population of twelve million. Most people live in rural areas and depend on subsistence agriculture to survive. Population density is very high and pressure on land is great.

The Museums of Malawi was established in 1957. The name is a collective one representing the five museums around the country. The mission of the Museums of Malawi is to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of the nation. Today the Museums of Malawi are not object-based but human-based. As such, museums not only believe they have an opportunity to instigate change but a responsibility. Today the Museums of Malawi have become agents of change for sustainable development. They mirror events in society and become instruments of progress by calling attention to actions and events that will encourage development in society.

With these philosophies in place the Museums of Malawi have collaborated with other museums in the world of diverse cultures to address important topics in their geographical areas. The aim of this paper is to share with other museum professionals my experience about the Safeguarding Traditions joint project that affected pluralistic societies. In the project, we considered the significance of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to enhance knowledge and understanding. Further, the project in Malawi demonstrates value-driven museums that make a positive health contribution to a society.

### **Background of the Safeguarding Traditions joint project**

It is no secret to all of us in the cultural or museum profession that we are rapidly losing our intangible cultural heritage due to a number of factors. The growing influence of global modernization, the advancement of technology, the movement of trade and industry and information technology is disturbing the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. While we are aware that culture is dynamic, it is sad to note that some valuable traditions pose the risk of being forgotten. Time is running out. There is an urgent need to make an extra effort to safeguard these traditions. Although Guatemala, the Philippines and Malawi are located on three different continents, they have similar concerns; the loss of intangible cultural heritage. These countries have come together to develop strategies to combat this loss.

In the light of UNESCO'S General Assembly appeal in Paris, France, in 2003, which advocated the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage, three museums embarked on a joint project to increase awareness and appreciation of intangible heritage. These were Casa Kojom in Guatemala, Museo Sang Bata Sa Negros in the Philippines, and the Museums of Malawi. The joint project was financially supported by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) through the Swedish African Museums Program (SAMP).

It is a common concern among the three museums that there is poor appreciation of intangible cultural heritage. Hence, the project developed educational tools to increase its appreciation among children of the communities where the target group was identified. The three museums agreed to develop a DVD and a booklet for increasing appreciation of intangible cultural heritage with children and to be used by children. The Philippines and Guatemala focused on documenting aspects of music and dance while Malawi studied a traditional food of the Tonga. This staple food is called *kondowole*. It is pulp made of cassava flour.

*Ilong Bang Bang* music & dance was chosen and documented by Philippines, Guatemala chose to document Mayan marimba music.

The project will create awareness about intangible cultural heritage and will make the younger generation appreciate and preserve the rich heritage that is dying in many countries and currently leads to cultural poverty. It will contribute to diminish the negative effects of influence of contemporary cultural phenomena and increase dissemination to the public.

By working on this joint project, the three museums developed a cross-border approach for the benefit of their communities. In addition, the project was developed with the involvement of community representatives who contributed with their point of view and agreed to make it

relevant to their own people, as well as to fight cultural poverty in our identified communities. The target group consisted of children ages six to fifteen, of a selected community in each country, Guatemala, Malawi and Philippines, who gave input for the tools that were later to be used by teachers and museum educators.

The Museums of Malawi discovered that *kondowole* and its cooking methods were becoming an endangered tradition. In the last few decades, Malawians have grown dependent on maize as their staple food and abandoned other local foods. But when drought occurs, and the crops fail as they did in 2004–2005, Malawians starve. Therefore, cassava was chosen as the subject for the documentation project in order to encourage Malawians to eat *kondowole* as a staple food, thereby alleviating to some extent Malawi's food shortage.

### **Safeguarding *kondowole* traditions in Malawi**

The idea of safe guarding traditions on *kondowole* cooking methods was hatched at the local Malawi ALAS/SAMP meeting in November 2005. Chichiri Museum together with the Friends of the Museum came up with a list of intangible cultural heritage aspects that needed to be preserved, but the meeting chose *kondowole* because of several socio-economic factors. Some of the factors were:

- Malawi frequently faces famine because of droughts that are prevalent in Southern Africa, and yet famine could be alleviated by growing cassava, which is drought resistant. We interviewed local people who grew cassava and they all told us that they were not affected by the 2004–2005 famine. Instead people flocked to them either to buy or do piece work in return for some cassava.
- The government of Malawi could have saved billions of kwacha it spent on importing maize from abroad to feed its people.
- Cassava farming requires cheap labour and does not need application of fertilizer, which is very costly on the market.
- The old Agricultural Policy emphasized maize farming, which in a way downplayed the importance of cassava farming as a staple food crop along the lakeshore, especially in Nkhotakota and Nkhata Bay districts.
- The Illovo Sugar Company attracts an influx of job seekers and business settlers whose staple food is maize. As a result of this, today the local Tonga people grow more maize for sale to meet the demand of the Sugar Company employees and other settlers at Dwangwa, sidelining cassava farming.
- The practice of eating *kondowole*, especially by the youth, is threatened.

Therefore, the project on *kondowole* was worthwhile, as it was an attempt to encourage the youth of the Tonga people and Malawians in general to grow cassava and to eat *kondowole*, thereby preserving its traditional cooking methods since the best way to preserve our culture is by practicing it.

First, the Museums of Malawi conducted a survey in Nkhotakota district where people eat *kondowole* as their staple food. A conference was held with a team of two delegates from

Guatemala, two from the Philippines and six from Malawi. They documented with video the cooking methods of *kondowole*, such as the process of planting, weeding, uprooting, harvesting, peeling, soaking, drying, pounding in mortars, sieving of the flour, cooking and eating. Interviews were conducted with children and elderly women on these methods. This video footage was edited in Sweden and formed the basis of a DVD, which will be used as a tool for educational programs for children, community members, the media and learning institutions in Malawi. The second part of the project is the production of booklets specifically on intangible heritage. It is hoped that by using the DVD and this booklet together the three museums will contribute to the appreciation and preservation of intangible heritage.

On enquiring where people still ate *kondowole* as their staple food in Malawi, we were led to Chisangwala village. There the Senior Chief gave us very encouraging remarks when we met him. He said that he was very happy that the project would take place in his area. He advised us that the project should not die so that perhaps government could create a deliberate policy for every household farmer in the country to grow cassava.

The chief said that in his area cassava stood the test of time because it was the staple food of the entire population. He told us the cassava varieties that were commonly grown in his area. Some women were introduced to us as chefs to assist in the project. The chefs together with children demonstrated the stages involved in preparing *nsima ya kondowole* for documentation purposes. The documentation started in the field – how cassava was harvested, peeled, where it was soaked and for how long, how it was dried, how women pounded it into flour and sieved it, what utensils were used, who cooked *nsima ya kondowole* and what was required to cook it, etc.

The headmasters allowed their school children to be involved in the project. This was very important for the youth to be involved as they are the future custodians of our culture.

### **Expected outputs**

- Documented intangible cultural heritage at three communities with children.
- Developed tools to increase the appreciation of intangible cultural heritage.
- Seventeen project team members skilled in increasing appreciation of intangible cultural heritage.

### **Resources required and budget**

There was a need for resources in order to complete and implement the activities that were undertaken in the project. The resources needed were personnel, audiovisual equipment, facilities, materials/supplies, tools, time and communication (internet for emails, fax and telephone). The main costs for the project were for personnel, publishing the DVD and booklet, fieldwork, workshops, transportation, accommodation, supplies, facilities and equipment. In order to successfully complete the project Safeguarding Traditions, there was a need for about \$126,000.

### **Conclusion**

ALAS/SAMP believes that one effective way of developing museums is through international networking and having collaborations through joint projects. It is obvious that many museums from many countries still lack methods and tools that enable them to further develop and revitalize their work. The causes may be: lack of resources, lack of specialized personnel, lack of knowledge about new methods and tools, lack of support from our parent institutions, etc. Some effects of these problems might be: low community participation, low visitation, lack of income, poor experience in innovative museum work, poor exhibition/activities and unmotivated staff.

As museum professionals, we have a responsibility to provide services to our community. As we all know, most people think of exhibitions when they think of museums. They are the heart of museums. However, it would seem that international collaboration is an excellent way to service pluralistic societies and address contemporary issues. Museums crossing borders by collectively reaching out to those communities who cannot access the museum, can bring change to the public. Through this project in Malawi, it is hoped that in addition to maize *kondowole* will be regarded as another staple food by other ethnic groups.

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