

Enhancing Social Economic Development: The Museums of Malawi Case Study

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Abstract

In line with *Putting Culture First* and the *Commonwealth Statement on Culture and Development*, the Museums of Malawi are today not just object-based but also human-based. As such, museums not only believe they have an opportunity to instigate change but also a responsibility to do so. Today the Museums of Malawi have become agents of change for 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, with the aid of Lower Shire Heritage Centre, have reintroduced the ancient art of spinning and weaving in southern most Malawi. The traditional technology was all but lost. The traditional trade is used as a solution to reduce poverty. Now some twenty families around Lengwe National Park can supplement their income with sales of hand-woven cloth to national and international tourists. We have empowered and engaged people of Lower Shire Valley by involving them and they thereby are earning some income from it. This is in line with the Government's policy to eradicate poverty and achieve the UN Millennium Development Goals. Moreover, the revival of this ancient craft has started a reevaluation of ancestral knowledge and the often disparaged past. My presentation is basically visual. It depicts stages of indigenous cotton weaving technology and illustrates the community and stakeholders involved.

Introduction

The Museums of Malawi is a government department under the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Culture. Its mission is to collect, research, reserve and disseminate information to the public regarding the natural and cultural heritage of Malawi. The Education Department of the Museums of Malawi educates people on the same through permanent exhibits and temporary exhibits at Chichiri Museum in Blantyre and others across the country. The Museums of Malawi assisted Tisunge! Lower Shire Heritage Centre in southern most Malawi, with the revival of the ancient technology of cotton spinning and weaving.

Background

Development is a priority of the government of Malawi and poverty eradication is a Millennium Development Goal shared by the United Nations, the Commonwealth, NGOs and many other organizations. Malawi has always been ranked among the poorest countries on the UN Human Development Index. In terms of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) per capita, Malawi is indeed the poorest country of the world (UNDP 2007/2008). The Museums of Malawi, in collaboration with other stakeholders, has embarked on a campaign to fight poverty through the lens of culture. Some of the issues it has concentrated on include food security, HIV/AIDS, malaria prevention and poverty. Slowly, there is increasing awareness that there is direct link between culture and development.

Today Museums of Malawi have become agents of change for development; they mirror events in society and become instruments of progress by calling attention to actions and events that will encourage development in society. One of the fundamental objectives of the Museums of Malawi is to educate, and it is only the museum that has the capacity and ability to impart cultural education effectively as it houses the tools and materials for doing so in its collections.

What follows is an account of a project initiated by Mlambe Foundation, the Netherlands, which entailed the re-diffusion of indigenous knowledge harboured in the Museums of Malawi to its original

owners: the people of the Lower Shire Valley. It is the reintroduction of traditional spinning and weaving skills.

Cotton in the Lower Shire Valley

The Lower Shire Valley, the southern tip of Malawi, is known for its heat, mosquitoes, droughts and floods. Yet, the Lower Shire Valley has always been a hotbed of cultural activity.

From oral traditions and archaeology, we know of the original short-statured foragers referred to as *mwandionerapati* (Robinson 1973, Welling 2000). From about the 3rd century AD, farmers were attracted by the fertility of the Shire flood plains (Robinson 1973). These farmers brought with them knowledge of iron smelting and pottery making. Throughout the valley one can find the material proof of these early occupants in the form of small stone tools, potsherds and iron implements.

The Lower Shire had flourishing cotton weaving and iron smelting industries (Mandala 1990). The products were traded to remote areas, including that of the Mutapa Kingdom in what is now Zimbabwe (Monclaro 1572). The cotton cloth and iron hoes were widely known for their fine quality. Centuries later, when Dr. David Livingstone, a Scottish explorer and missionary, first set foot in the Lower Shire he made the same observation (Livingstone and Livingstone 1865). Notwithstanding considerable Yao and Portuguese raiding, it was the same Livingstone and the process of colonization he put in motion that brought an end to this period of high cultural and technological achievement. Machine-made colonial imports were much cheaper than the local products.

It is sad to observe the knowledge of these great traditions rapidly fading from memory, locally, nationally and internationally. In line with the current Malawi Government's major project to open up the Shire Valley, the Museums of Malawi, the Department of Antiquities, and the Mlambe Foundation attempt to revive and preserve the culture of the area for tourism. For this purpose, the Lower Shire Heritage Trust has been formed uniting all stakeholders. This trust has constructed a Lower Shire Heritage Centre by the name of Tisunge –let us preserve – at the entrance of Lengwe National Park behind the ancestral grove of Paramount Chief Lundu, who is the descendant of a powerful seventeenth-century king (Schoffeleers 1992). The centre includes a small museum, a library, children's club and outreach programs to the community.

Traditional Technology Revived

Chichiri Museum in Blantyre has on display the Lower Shire traditional cotton spinning and weaving, and occasionally its staff demonstrates the craft to visitors in the open air. The Museum's staff was taught the skill by two elderly men from Ngabu, Chikhwawa, some forty years ago. In the Lower Shire itself the skills had effectively faded from practice and even memory.

The spinning process consists of the following steps. First is the separation of the cotton from the seeds, and the cleaning of cotton lint using a small bow by plucking the string continuously through the cotton fluffs to remove dust and align the fibres. The cotton is then turned into a roving by hand twisting and is spun into yarn by a wooden drop spindle. If it needs to be stronger, double-ply yarn can be produced by twisting the cotton yarn obtained after the spinning. All of this is very tedious and time-consuming process. Understandably, with the availability of industrial yarn, the local product was quick to be replaced. An added advantage of the industrial yarn was the wide range of colours available. Most of the natural dyes used in the past just gave various shades of brown.

The weaving is done on a single heddle ground loom (Davison and Harries 1991). That is to say, yarn with alternative colours is stretched between two horizontal sticks that are attached to four wooden pegs some four meters apart. These lines form the warp. The weaver moves the shuttle with additional yarn back and forth through the warp, thus producing the weft. The weaver, sitting alongside the warp, thus starts at one end and slowly moves to the other as cloth is being produced. In this way, any length of cloth can be made. If two people work together, passing the shuttle back and forth, the width can be two arms lengths. Designs consisted mostly of stripes but also checkered designs were made, an example of which can be found in the repository of the British Museum, London, which holds a total of four pieces of

cloth and one loom collected by Sir Harry Johnston, the first British Consul to what is now Malawi. The pieces in the British Museum are mostly large pieces meant to be wrapped around the waist.

Through Tisunge, Lower Shire Heritage Centre, in 2006 Museums of Malawi were given the opportunity to re-introduce this indigenous knowledge for the first time since the 1930s. Initially, the skill of weaving was taught to ten groups from five different areas in Chikhwawa district. Admittedly, many of the participants took the lessons out of mere curiosity. Now, in a district where people by average earn less than a dollar a day, the hard-working weavers that continued now earn as much as \$50 a month, as the hand-made, naturally dyed products are sold to tourists and others that come to visit Lengwe National Park. The experts even teach family and friends and improve on the colours. They continue to experiment with new natural dyes, making shades of red/brown, yellow and blue/gray, using local barks, leaves and flowers by boiling them with the yarn and adding salt to prevent running.

But what is more, as the awareness of traditional weaving spreads children learn to appreciate the skills and knowledge of their forefathers. This is a positive turn of events, as since colonial times the local communities have been led to believe their heritage has little to offer.

Tourism further helps this development. It triggers local reflection on the importance of this technology as people coming from afar are taking an interest and are willing to pay good money for the cloth. Consequently, local cotton is given an added value, which helps alleviate poverty in the area, while imparting young and old with appreciation of ancestral knowledge.

Thus the technique of weaving that was thought to have died out has been revived with positive effects to young and old. In effect, as it turned out, the technique had not died out completely. In 2007, one old man was found still weaving with his sons close to Lulwe mission, a remote area on the Mozambique-Malawi borderland in Nsanje district. There the skill had survived in the face of modern technology for the production of waistbands, locally known as *mcheka*. The bands are used by traditional healers in a spirit possession ritual called *malombo*.

Malombo is a ceremony for the appeasement of neglected spirits of departed relatives (Schoffeleers 2008). Both healers and patients are donned with *mcheka*, besides other paraphernalia. No substitute for the cloth can be used as only authentic hand woven cloth has the healing power. Apparently ancestral science continued to find a market in the context of ancestral religion. Muller and Snelleman (1892) collected a number of these *mcheka* waistbands during their Zambezi expedition in the 1880s. These bands are now in possession of the Netherlands National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden.

Conclusion

The Tisunge Lower Shire Heritage Centre and the Museums of Malawi have revived traditional cotton weaving technology and linked it with income generating skills. They have helped the people at large, children and adults alike, in appreciating their indigenous skills and knowledge, which has taught them alternative means to fight poverty and unemployment. Social economic development is enhanced through informal learning and self-reliance instilled among the people. Community partnerships have been fostered and tourism promoted.

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4. Group Village Headman Singano, T.A., Ngabu, Chikhwawa, Malawi

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