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# INVENTORY OF MALAWI'S INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE VOLUME 1

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FOR UNESCO

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## PREFACE

The importance of preserving one's culture cannot be overemphasized. A nation is identified by its cultural values, beliefs, customs and tradition. Cultural practices are meant to preserve, unite and develop the practicing community. While culture is dynamic as it drops outdated practices and picks up new and sometimes foreign ones, this process must happen without complete loss of the identity of a people.

Elderly people are dying, thereby taking with them important cultural knowledge. We need to preserve these for the sake of future generations. Original dances, therapy, spiritual and harvesting festivities, marriages, funerals, initiations, installation, birth ceremonies, just to mention some, have to be documented and made known to the public. Besides, due to geographical and spatial separation, people living in different areas of the country are not knowledgeable of some cultural values, beliefs, customs and traditional dances, etc. as practiced by other ethnic groups. It is in recognition of this need that the Malawi National Commission for UNESCO in collaboration with Department of Culture embarked on the *Documentation of National Inventory of Malawi's Intangible Cultural Heritage*. The exercise was aimed at capturing different aspects of Malawi's Intangible Cultural Heritage with a view to raise public awareness on the same in order to safeguard them for national identity, unity in diversity and community development. Due to resource limitations the exercise targeted the common heritage of the nine out of 17 ethnic groups, namely: Lambya, Ngonde, Tumbuka, Ngoni, Tonga, Chewa, Yao, Lomwe and Sena. It is hoped that subsequent volumes will target the rest of the remaining ethnic groups.

This inventory though not representative of all the ethnic groups in Malawi will help raise public awareness on the importance of culture to the socio-economic life of the country and hence the need to preserve it. It shall assist stakeholders and policy makers on the need to prioritize protection of cultural heritage and a basis for recognizing cultural identity among different ethnic groups in Malawi. Lastly, the

inventory shall be permanent testimony of intangible cultural heritage of different ethnic groups in Malawi to future generations.

Francis R Mkandawire

**EXECUTIVE SECRETARY**

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Last but not least, **most sincere gratitude** also go to the custodians of our heritage, the traditional authorities, too numerous to mention each one, as well as men and women practitioners for their unwavering support and for organising themselves to share information on as well as demonstrate some of the heritage aspects documented in here.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

According to the UNESCO World Commission on Culture and Development, heritage is the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or a social group. It consists of both cultural and natural. Heritage is therefore, seen as what people have chosen to give and what the receiver wants to inherit. It can be natural or cultural, tangible or intangible. It includes not only arts and letters but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of a human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs. Cultural heritage will include things that have resulted from spiritual things e.g. churches, material evidence, emotional features such as graveyards etc. It also includes movable cultural objects e.g. ethnographic materials, archaeological objects, archival and library materials and works of art. Immovable cultural objects such as monuments, sacred/historical sites, prehistoric sites, structures like bridges, roads, cemeteries; expressive activities such as language, music and dance as well as drama and intangible heritage such as skills, folklores, rituals, intellectual property rights, beliefs, traditions and customs are all part of cultural heritage.

The natural heritage consists of both flora and fauna of the area plus the splendid spectacular features e.g. islands, mountains, canyons, waterfalls and geysers such as hot springs. In many societies, religious beliefs are shaped by the things found in an area such as water, mountains, rivers, etc.

The "Intangible Cultural Heritage" refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural aspects associated thereof that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible heritage, which is transmitted from one generation to another is constantly recreated by the communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity of human creativity.

## **2. IMPORTANCE OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

Intangible heritage have a crucial role to play in the development of the society and nation as a whole. Firstly, intangible heritage is used as medium of oral communication such as in singing and dancing. They are also a source of knowledge in cases where there is no written work. Oral performances are like moving libraries. Intangible heritage is a source of national or societal identity and prestige. Intangible heritage is also a very effective means of passing information on sensitive matters such as HIV/AIDS. Besides it is also used in the production of audio-visual teaching and training materials. Intangible heritage provides the moral code i.e. the laws that govern the behaviour of the society. This behaviour is normally covered by taboos that instill fear in the people not to do certain things for fear of misfortunes, diseases etc. Rituals provide medium for formal instructions on certain aspects of a particular society. Lastly but not least, intangible heritage promotes, protects and safeguards cultural heritage.

Despite the role intangible heritage plays in the development of the society, it took time for people to realize its importance and the need to safeguard it. Intangible heritage (oral tradition) was not regarded important because mostly this heritage is associated with poor nations. However, it is pleasing to note that the Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage was finally adopted by the General Assembly of UNESCO on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2003. This adoption came about as a result of realization that the value attached to an object is not meaningful unless the non-material aspects (intangible values) are also preserved. This project is about the development of national inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Malawi.

## **3. LIMITATIONS OF DOCUMENTATION EXERCISE**

Due to limited time spent in the field owing to limited resources, it was not possible to visit every place among all the nine ethnic groups planned in order to have a wider coverage of the various aspects of our intangible heritage. Therefore, this inventory is by no means comprehensive or representative of all the rich cultural diversity that this country is endowed with. Nevertheless it will provide a starting



point in our efforts to thoroughly document and safeguard Malawi's Intangible Cultural Heritage.

#### 4. THE NINE TARGET ETHNIC GROUPS

There are about 17 different ethnic groups in Malawi found across the 28 districts of Malawi (see Figure 1). All groups belong to one major African group of people called the Bantu. The Bantu are also found in other countries such as Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania, Kenya and others. Below are the 9 major ethnic cultural groups that were documented.



**Figure 1: Map of Malawi showing some districts.**

Source: *Malawi Primary Education Social Studies Pupils' Book 6. (1995)*

##### 4.1 Chewa

The Chewa, previously known as the Malavi or Nyanja, came from Uluba in Katanga Province of Zaire. They left Zaire between 1200 and 1500 AD. There are several reasons that led to the migration of the Chewa from Zaire. These include tribal wars against their Bantu neighbours and secondly, they were in search of more land for grazing their animals. When the Chewa arrived in the present Malawi, they

soon established themselves as rulers over the people they found because of their knowledge and influence in agriculture, traditional medicine, religion and a well-organised ruling system. As a result, their kingdom covered a wide area, from the Luangwa Valley in Zambia in the west; to the area beyond Ruo River in the east; then Dwangwa River in the north, and the Zambezi River in the south. Their language is known as *Chichewa*, which is also spoken in neighbouring countries of Zambia and Mozambique as *Chinyanja*. *Chichewa* is widely spoken in Malawi and assumes the role of a national language, though unofficially.

#### **4.2 Lambya**

The Lambya are a Bantu speaking people who came from the Bukinga in the Livingstone Mountains to South East of Tanzania. They might have migrated into Malawi after the 18<sup>th</sup> Century in search of more land and probably because they were running away from slave trade by the Arabs and Portuguese. Two groups entered Malawi independently, one headed by Mwaulambiya and the other one headed by Sikwese. The language for Lambya is known as *Chilambya*. Today, the Lambya are found in the northern district of Chitipa.

#### **4.3 Lomwe**

The Lomwe came from an area between Lake Malawi and the Indian Ocean in the present day Mozambique. They entered Malawi from the east. The Lomwe did not have an overall leader as was the case with other tribes when they entered Malawi because they came in small groups each with their own leader. They settled in the southern region of Malawi east of the Shire River. Their language is known as *Chilomwe*.

#### **4.4 Ngonde**

The Ngonde migrated together with the Nyakyusa from the north like all other Bantu tribes. The Ngonde were led by Syria, who was later known as Kyungu. They settled at the extreme area of northern Malawi in present day Karonga where they are still found today. The area was remote and as a result they did not suffer from

Ngoni and Yao raids. The centre of Ngonde is the sacred Hill of Mbande, which stands in the bed of the Rukulu River, about 13 km from Lake Malawi. Their language is known as *Kyangonde*.

#### **4.5 Ngoni**

The Ngoni fled from Shaka Zulu who defeated many Ngoni Chiefs in South Africa. The Ngoni that entered Malawi came in two groups. One group was led by Zwangendaba Jere and the other was led by Ngwane Maseko. After their defeat in 1819, Zwangendaba Jere fled with his followers and settled at Mabiri in Mzimba District. After a short stay at Mabiri, they left for Ufipa in Tanzania where they lived for eight years before returning to Malawi after the death of Zwangendaba. They finally settled at Ng'onga in the Henga Valley in 1855 where M'mbelwa was installed as Chief in 1857. The group that was led by Ngwane Maseko arrived in Malawi and settled in Ntcheu in 1837. After a short stay, they left for Songea in southern Tanzania where they lived for some time before returning to Malawi. They finally settled in Ntcheu in 1867. Today, the Ngoni of Ntcheu have spread to other districts such as Mchinji and Dedza in the centre, and Mwanza and Neno in the south. The Ngoni have their language also known as *Chingoni*.

#### **4.6 Sena**

Just like the Lomwe, the Sena also came from Mozambique. They entered Malawi through the south and settled in Chikwawa and Nsanje Districts where they are still found today. Their language of communication is *Chisena*.

#### **4.7 Tonga**

The Tonga came from Viphya to settle along the shores of Lake Malawi. They are an offshoot of several tribes who split from Tumbuka settlement at Jenjewe on the banks of Lupachi River. Kabundulu, from one of the split groups, was the leader of the group that moved to the east and settled at the Lake. The Tonga covers the area from Dwangwa River in Nkhotakota to as far north as Usisya, beyond Nkhata-Bay Boma. Their language of communication is called *Chitonga*.

#### 4.8 Tumbuka

The Tumbuka formerly known as the Nkhamanga are believed to have come from Congo. They entered Malawi through Tanzania. The people lived in family clans. Some of the most important clans were the Mkandawire, Luhanga, Kachali, Kumwenda, Msowoya, Harawa and many more. The Nkhamanga established their kingdom in northern Malawi. The kingdom was located between Nyika Plateau to the north, Dwangwa River to the south, Luangwa River to the west and Lake Malawi to the east. The main occupation of the Tumbuka was and still remains farming. They grow crops such as maize, millet. They also introduced iron smelting. The Tumbuka had no overall leader as was the case with the Chewa. But soon the Nkhamanga kingdom became popular with the coming in of the Balowoka. The Balowoka crossed Lake Malawi to enter Nkhamanga territory. They came from Ubena in the south of present Tanzania around 1850 AD. They soon became new leaders and formed a kingdom under Chikulamayembe.

Some of the contributions of Nkhamanga to present Malawi include farming, hunting, iron smelting, trade as well as language, *Tumbuka*, which is widely spoken in the northern Malawi and the neighbouring Zambia. The Nkhamanga kingdom declined because of the coming in of Europeans and Swahili traders who weakened their trade, rebellion by sub-chiefs and Ngoni attack who fought and defeated Chikulamayembe.

Today, the Tumbuka are under the Paramount Chief (Themba la Mathemba) Chikulamayembe whose Headquarters is in Bolero, Rumphi District.

#### 4.9 Yao

Just like the Lomwe, the Yao are said to have come from Mozambique. They entered Malawi from the east. The Yao did not have an overall leader; they had several leaders when they entered Malawi. When they entered Malawi, they settled in areas along the lakeshore. The Yao speak their language known as *Chiyao*.

## **5. COMMON INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE**

The Intangible Cultural Heritage as defined in Article 2 of the 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage is manifested in the following domains:

- Oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage,
- Performing arts,
- Social practices, rituals and festive events,
- Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe,
- Traditional craftsmanship.

There are certain aspects of intangible heritage that are common across all cultural groups in Malawi. The following are some of the common Intangible Cultural Heritage found to be common across the 9 ethnic groups that were documented.

### **5.1 ORAL TRADITIONS AND EXPRESSIONS**

#### **5.1.1 Mikuluwiko/Vinthanguni**

These are secret words or expressions that are used for communication among the elderly people when they are in the company of children. This is done in order to conceal the message so that children do not understand what their parents or elders are talking about. In almost every ethnic group found in Malawi, the locals have developed Mikuluwiko/Vinthanguni in their own language for this purpose

#### **5.1.2 Nthabwala/Myati/Ntchezero**

These are mere jokes that are directed at somebody with the view of making people happy. In any society, there are people that are good at cracking jokes. Jokes are part and parcel of human lives. They are used at different forums such as weddings, beer parties and during communal work where these jokes help to ease burden.

### 5.1.3 Zilape/Ndagi/nthanthi

These are riddles that require one to give an answer. Mikuluwiko or Nthalika are also used when proposing love to a girl. In this case, a girl may pose a question in form of riddles and if a man or boy fails to provide the correct answer, it is understood that he is still young and therefore his proposal is turned down.

### 5.5.4.3 Sansi / Kalimba

Sansi is another musical instrument that is made from a piece of wood and old nails known as keys. The keys are of different protruding lengths and are tied to a wooden board. The keys are plucked using thumbs or a combination of thumbs and fingers. The number of keys on a board range from 7 to 54. Free ends of the keys are positioned at different lengths and levels to produce varied pitches. The length of the vibrating end determines the pitch i.e. shorter keys produce higher pitches while longer keys produce lower pitches. Kalimba/Sansi can be played with or without a resonator. The sound is better if the wood is hollow or if a gourd is put underneath. Burnt decorations are sometimes made on the Sansi/Kalimba. In Malawi, Kalimba/Sansi is found among the Chewa of Central and Southern Regions of Malawi as well as the ChiMang'anja speaking people of Chewa origin found across the country.





#### 5.5.4.4 Mangolongondo / Ulimba

*Mangolongondo* (xylophone) is made from two long poles which are placed parallel on the ground. Across them are put some pieces of hard wood (Mbwabwa). A scale is then made by varying the shape of the pieces. The shorter the piece of wood, the higher the note. Wooden pegs are put in between to keep the distance. *Mangolongondo* is used in the gardens to scare away birds and animals from eating crops particularly in maize field when it is ripen. Where *Mangolongondo* are used to scare away birds, the sound of the instrument is accompanied by singing. There is another version of *Mangolongondo* which is played during funerals or wedding. This is called *Ulimba*. *Mangolongondo* and *Ulimba* are mostly used by the Sena in the districts of Chikwawa and Nsanje.

#### 5.5.4.5 Mangwanda/Njulu/Mangenjeza

These are rattles made of iron tied together by a string and striped round the ankles. They produce rattling sound and are used in such traditional dances as Vimbuza, Tchopa, Ingoma/Ngoma and others.





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