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Creating Festivals, Revitalizing Communities : Ongoing Cultural Movements in Zambia

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Creating Festivals, Revitalizing Communities: Ongoing Cultural Movements in Zambia

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Today, in many regions of the world, the construction of museums dedicated to specific local communities, ethnic groups, or kingdoms is underway to preserve and present their cultural heritage. There is also a movement for people to create or recreate their own cultures based on cultural legacies.

For example, in Zambia, in the 1980s, many ethnic groups revived or created festivals under slogans such as “let’s start our tradition.” In the 1990s, when the festivals were created, each group started planning to build its own museum to exhibit its cultural heritage. Some of the planned museums have already been established. The festival and museums are now important instruments for groups to construct their local or ethnic identity.

1. Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage

Since October 2003, when the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage was adopted, great interest in intangible cultural heritage has developed worldwide. Meanwhile, the World Cultural and Natural Heritage List has attracted much attention in every country.

As of September 2021, the World Heritage List includes 897 cultural, 218 natural, and 39 mixed properties in 167 state parties. From the program’s inception, there has been (and continues to be) a strong imbalance between the North and South. In terms of cultural heritage, almost half the total number of inscribed properties has always been occupied by Western European countries. In contrast, of 1,154 properties inscribed in the “World” Heritage List (897 cultural, 218 natural, and 39 mixed properties), only 98 properties are from Africa: 54 cultural, 39 natural, and five mixed properties. Needless to say, Africa is extremely rich in culture and civilization. The richness and significance of African cultural heritage cannot be dismissed. What is at issue is the validity of the so-called universal standard of “heritage.”

The adoption of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage by the 32nd session of UNESCO’s 2003 General Conference is more than welcome. It demonstrates global awareness of the importance of intangible cultural heritage in the history of human beings. The Convention can also be appreciated for the potential to revise the ongoing unbalanced recognition of heritage between the North and

South, and Europe and other parts of the world.

The notion of intangible cultural heritage is yet to be explored. According to the Convention, it refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills, instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003). The Convention also acknowledges that “the ‘intangible cultural heritage’ is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history, and provide them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” The intangible cultural heritage is manifested in domains such as oral traditions, including language as its vehicle, performing arts, social practices, rituals and festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, and traditional craftsmanship (*Article 2*). Thus, intangible cultural heritage is the basis of human existence and may well be called the bodily or tacit knowledge held by human beings, which continuously constructs and reconstructs people’s sense of identity through various social interactions. While carrying a sense of continuity, bodily knowledge is dynamic, changing with changing life. Once the dynamism of bodily knowledge is ignored, the notion of intangible cultural heritage is also denied. Hence, the “Safeguarding” of Intangible Cultural Heritage should not be taken as its “preservation” in the sense of maintaining the heritage in an unchanged condition. It should read as “safeguarding” or ensuring “dynamism” of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Yoshida 2004).

2. Creating Festivals

This study introduces ongoing cultural movements in Zambia, where I have had close contact for the last 40 years, to illustrate the dynamism of intangible cultural heritage.

In Zambia, there are few festivals organized based on the entire ethnic group. One of the few examples of this sort is *kuomboka*, a royal barge festival for the Lodzi people. “*Kuomboka*” literally means “to move out of the water.” At the end of the rainy season, when the water level of the Zambezi River rises, the Lodzi King, Litunga, travels in a large barge paddled by approximately one hundred paddlers from his rainy season palace called “*Lealui*” at the middle of the floodplain of the river to his dry season palace “*Limulunga*” located on the bank (Photo 1). The royal barge, called *nalikwanda*, is followed by hundreds of small boats and canoes. The *kuomboka* ceremony is quite important.

Having been stimulated by such a large-scale festival, in 1980, the *nchwala* ceremony, where the first harvest of the year was brought to King Mpezeni, was revived among the Ngoni people.



Photo 1 *Kuomboka*, a royal barge festival of the Lodzi people. Mongu. Western Province of Zambia. 1984. (Photo by the author)

The Ngoni people are a subgroup of the Zulu, who reside in the present Natal Province of South Africa. At the beginning of the 19th century, King Shaka of the Zulu brought a hundred Ngoni-speaking chiefdoms in the region under his control and established a powerful kingdom. In the 1830s, escaping from Shaka, a Ngoni leader, Zwengendaba led a small group of his warriors north through Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania. After Zwebgendaba's death, Mpezeni became the leader, and the warrior group finally settled in the eastern corner of present-day Zambia, where they married local Chewa women. Even after the settlement, the warriors raided surrounding ethnic groups while leaving their children under the care of their Chewa wives. Thus, in a couple of generations, the Ngoni people lost their language and now speak the Chewa language. After the settlement, in 1887, Mpezeni rose up against the British, who took control of Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, and was defeated. The Ngoni came under British colonial rule, and the custom of the *nchwala* ceremony, where the first harvest of the year was brought to King Mpezeni, was banned by the colonial government in 1898.

Meanwhile, the custom was maintained under the name of *incwala* by the Swazi people, an offshoot of the Zulu kingdom. In 1979, the present king, Mpezeni IV, was invited to the *incwala* in Swaziland and observed the ritual. Mpezeni was inspired to revive the ritual in his region, and the *nchwala* ceremony was revived in 1980 (Photo 2).

The creation of the *nchwala* acted as a stimulus to a neighboring ethnic group called Chewa. They created a harvest festival, *kulamba*, in 1984, based on an old custom of an annual tribute to their King. Here again, the festival was said to have been revived. I started my fieldwork in the region in 1984, and attended the first *kulamba*. Under the slogan "Ti yambile mwambo" meaning "Let's start our tradition," a ceremony was created, where each Chewa regional chief brings a bundle of the year's harvest to the King, Gawa Undi, as dancers in his region dance in front of the King (Photo 3). The performance always comprises two types of dances: men's *nyau* masked dance, usually performed for funerals, and women's *chinamwali* dance, usually performed during the



Photo 2 *Nchwala* ceremony conducted annually by the Ngoni people at Mtenguleni village, Eastern Province of Zambia, 1999. (Photo by the author)



Photo 3 The first *kulamba* ceremony created by Chewa people in 1984, Mkaika, Eastern Province of Zambia. Nyau masked dancers perform dances in front of the Chewa King and chiefs. (Photo by the author)



Photo 4 Girls performing *chinamwali* dances in the 2004 *kulamba* ceremony, Mkaika, Eastern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author)

puberty ceremony of girls called *chinamwali* (Photo 4) (Yoshida 1992; 1993). In 1984, while observing the dance, I said to the Chewa villagers, “After 50 years, anthropologists might well believe that this is a traditional ceremony of the Chewa.” Over 35 years have passed since then, and the ceremony called “*kulamba*, the traditional ceremony of the Chewa,” is held on the last weekend of August every year.

Following the Chewa, a rain-calling ceremony called *twimba* was started in 1988 by the Nsenga people, another neighboring people of the Chewa (Photo 5). *Twimba* is a pure invention by the Nsenga King, Kalindawalo. He delegated several research teams to every corner of the region to collect songs, old customs, and oral traditions related to rain calling. Based on the results, he composed the entire program of the ceremony. However, even the start of this ceremony appealed to outsiders as a revival of the “old tradition.”

Since then, the trend of creating ethnic festivals has spread throughout the country.



Photo 5 The King, Kalindawalo, is parading in the *twimba* ceremony conducted by the Nsenga people at Petauke, Eastern Province of Zambia, 1999. (Photo by the author)



Photo 6 A calendar of annual traditional ceremonies of Zambia. Published by the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services of Zambia. (Photo by the author)

Almost all major ethnic groups, 73 in total, now have annual festivals (Photo 6).

The annual festivals of ethnic groups were “revived” (actually “created”) within a short period in the 1980s. What was the background of this movement? The second half of the 1970s was when the Zambian economy started to decline drastically, and the government was obliged to reorganize the national policy. Since independence, the Zambian economy has been heavily dependent on the copper industry, neglecting agriculture. After the oil crisis in 1973 and the cessation of the Vietnam War in 1975, the price of copper dropped drastically, resulting in an economic crisis. Even maize, the staple crop of the country, ran short. Suddenly, agricultural development became a top priority for the government. The involvement of local authorities (i.e., the kings and chiefs of each ethnic group) was indispensable to implement the policy. However, the stagnation of copper mines accelerated migrant workers’ return to their homeland. Many men who had experienced multi-ethnic urban life in mining towns and become aware of their ethnic identity resettled in rural societies. Thus, ethnic consciousness rooted in the bond with the land spread throughout the country during this period. The revival or creation of ethnic festivals in the 1980s cannot be understood without considering this social context.

A festival is an effective medium for visualizing ethnic unity and strengthening

ethnic identity. However, it should not run counter to the national unity Zambia seeks to form as a nation-state. The tactics local chiefs and kings adopted was to declare the movement a “revival” of old traditions banned by the colonial government rather than the “creation” of new festivals. Thus, holding ethnic festivals can be conceived as one of the benefits from the end of colonial rule or a product achieved by the nation-state established by independence. Hence, newly created festivals should be described as a “revival” of old traditions.

Notably, the purposes and dates of the festivals and ceremonies are well-differentiated such that they may not overlap with each other. Ngoni’s *nchwala* is a ceremony to celebrate the first harvest of the year and is, thus, held in the mid-rainy season. *The Kulamba* of the Chewa is a harvest festival held during the dry season. Nsenga’s *twimba* is a rain-calling ceremony held at the beginning of the rainy season. Why are they differentiated in terms of dates and meaning? Chiefs and kings have unanimously explained: “Otherwise, our own ceremony is not covered well by television, and we also lose important occasion for logging appeals to the President and Ministers.” The central government supports these movements by transporting people and sending government representatives, even the president himself, to each festival.

Given various circumstances, there seem to be few options for many ethnic groups to make their identity appealing through festivals while getting along in harmony with others than to “revive” each group’s festivals in a short period. It is indeed a way of avoiding particular groups becoming prominent in the nation-state of Zambia.

3. Establishing Community Museums

In the 1990s, having created such festivals, each group began plans to build a museum to preserve and display cultural heritage. Some museums have already opened, most of which are located at sites of annual festivals. The Nayuma Museum, built by the Lodzi



Photo 7 Nayuma Museum, established by the people of the Lodzi kingdom in the Western Province of Zambia.
(Photo by the author, 2005)



Photo 8 One of the galleries of the Choma Museum, dedicated to the cultures of the Tonga people, Choma, Southern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author, 2008)

people in 1986, is a pioneering museum in the movement (Photo 7). The Choma Museum in Choma in the Southern Province, dedicated to the Tonga community, can also be mentioned in this context (Photo 8).

Another example is the Motomoto Museum, originally established by the French Canadian Catholic Priest Jean Jacques Corbeil of the White Fathers in the 1950s (Photo 9). He made a natural history collection, including an ethnographic one containing many objects used in the initiation ceremony for girls called *chisungu*, while working in Bemba land (Photo 10). The collection was donated to the national government, and the museum became a national museum in 1974. Given the character of its collection, the museum currently plays the role of a community museum of the Bemba people.

The most recent achievement is the Nsingo Community Museum, which opened last year in Ngoni land. The Ngoni people have converted the former municipal hall into their community museum (Photo 11).

As for the Chewa people, among whom I have been working for the last 40 years, their masquerades called *nyau* or *gule wamukulu*, together with another masked dance in Zamia, the *makishi* dance of the Luvale people, was proclaimed a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005 and was inscribed on the UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008. Afterward, the Chewa people, or more precisely the Chewa Traditional Counsel, established at the time of the first *kulamba* ceremony in 1984, decided to create a museum at the site of the *kulamba* ceremony. Although the building is not yet complete, the plan is well underway (Photo 12). A similar movement is also underway among the Luvale people.

One concern is that only two ethnic groups in Zambia have a masked tradition: *nyau* of the Chewa and *makishi* of the Luvale. However, only those two dances were in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and became representatives of Zambian cultural heritage. How will it affect the performance of other groups in Zambia? Are people from some ethnic groups without a masked tradition likely to start dancing with masks? Events in cultural scenes in Zambia after introducing the ranking system created by UNESCO are worth monitoring.

Thus far, there has been little impact of the system on local cultures because most villagers do not know UNESCO and, thus, are unaware of the inclusion of the two performances by UNESCO. However, 2007 saw an epoch-making event. In that year, three presidents of the countries where the Chewa people live (Levy Mwanawasa, the President of Zambia; Bingu wa Mutharika, the President of Malawi; and Armando Guebuza, the President of Mozambique) attended a *kulamba* ceremony and paid courtesy visits to the Paramount Chief of the Zambian Chewa, Gawa Undi (Photo 13). Chewa chiefs from Malawi and Mozambique also brought their dancing groups and allowed them to perform dances in front of Gawa Undi (Photo 14). To the best of my knowledge, this is the first instance in African history where the presidents of the states with the same ethnic group attended the ethnic group's annual festival. The speeches made by the three presidents, as if with a single voice, underline the importance of the intangible cultural heritage for any group rather than acknowledge the distinguished character of



Photo 9 The Motomoto Museum located in Mbala, Northern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author, 2004)



Photo 10 A reconstruction of the *chisungu* girls' initiation house in the Motomoto Museum, Mbala, Northern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author, 2004)



Photo 11 The Nsingo Hall is now being converted into a community Museum of Ngoni people, Feni, Eastern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author, 2019)

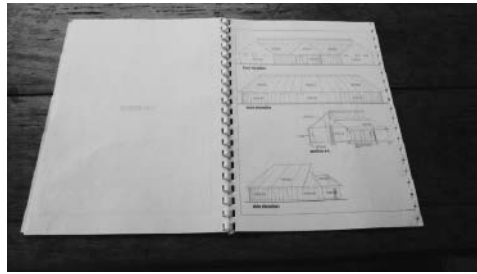


Photo 12 The Chewa Museum plan, Mkaika, Eastern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author, 2007)



Photo 13 Three presidents of the countries where Chewa people live, that is the President of Zambia (Center, Middle), the President of Malawi (Center, Right), and the President of Mozambique (Center, Left) attended a *kulamba* ceremony on August 25, 2007. (Photo by the author)



Photo 14 A *makanja* dancer from a Zambian chiefdom dancing in front of Gawa Undi, the Paramount Chief, in the 2007 *kulamba* ceremony, Mkaika, Eastern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author, on August 25, 2007)

nyau and *makishi*. Surprisingly, together with the Presidents, Chewa chiefs from Malawi and Mozambique paid courtesy visits to the Paramount Chief of the Zambian Chewa. Although the Chewa people have a vague notion that they belong to one ethnic group they call Chewa, they do not consider the Paramount Chief of Zambian Chewa as the ultimate King of all Chewa, including those of Malawi and Mozambique. However, through the 2007 *kulamba* ceremony, a seed of identity that all Chewa who live in the three countries are in one group under the Paramount Chief of Zambian Chewa emerged. After the ceremony, construction of the Chewa Museum was speeded up.

Thus, festivals and museums are now important instruments for groups to construct their ethnic identity. Notably, the target audience of these museums are local people rather than tourists, and the museums seek to strengthen people's pride in their culture and transmit their traditional culture. However, the notion of the museum is rather new to most local people, as they now grope for ways to create museums.

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This movement of self-representation is welcome and must be promoted further. However, it would result only in creating a nationalistic ideology if the identity strengthened or created by these movements is narrow-minded. Identity museums are to create should be open-minded and admit cultural diversity. Therefore, networking museums, nationally and internationally, is indispensable.

In Zambia, the National Museums Board based in Lusaka, the capital, supports the movement of establishing community museums by networking them. I too assist by connecting the network with various programs that our Museum, the National Museum of Ethnology, conducts.

The National Museum of Ethnology, jointly with the Japan International Cooperation Agency, hosts a four-month-long museology training course every year by inviting 10 museum curators from different countries worldwide. The course started in 1994, with 269 participants from 54 countries and regions by the end of 2020. As for Zambia, when nine curators had participated in the course, they started organizing a museology workshop every year since 2004, targeting those who could not come to Japan. In these workshops, people involved in building or managing community museums are invited to share their knowledge and experience in museology. Members of the National Museum of Ethnology and affiliated researchers also attended the workshop as facilitators (Photo 15). Accordingly, a database containing information on the collections of participating museums has also been constructed (Photo 16). When you use the database, apart from unique items owned by each ethnic group, cultural elements shared by many ethnic groups, regions, or countries may also be found frequently. They also demonstrate a common cultural identity. Similar workshops have been organized regularly since then as part of the endeavor to foster an open-minded identity.



Photo 15 Members of the National Museum of Ethnology and researchers affiliated to the Museum have been regularly attending the workshop on museology as facilitators, Livingstone Museum, Southern Province of Zambia. (Photo by the author, 2005)

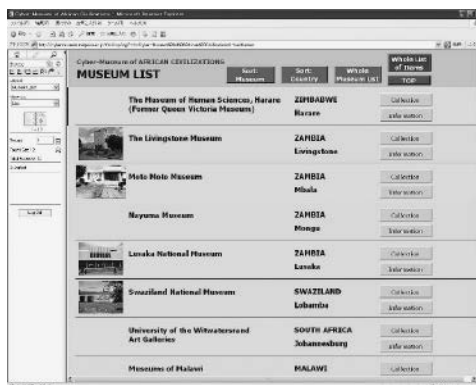


Photo 16 A database containing information of the collections of participating museums. (Photo by the author, 2008)

Museums have long been considered a place of representation, preservation, and conservation of the tangible cultural property of the past. From this viewpoint, museums seem to have little room to contribute to “safeguarding” or ensuring the “dynamism” of the intangible cultural heritage. However, museums are a store of tangible objects of the past and a platform for accumulating and disseminating intangible cultural heritage of local or ethnic communities (i.e., knowledge, memory, and technology transmitted from one generation to another in the community) and, thus, a base for creating people’s pride in (or identity of) the community.

Museums’ role as an apparatus for constructing culture and society, rooted in the community and yet equipped with a sense of open-minded identity, will certainly become increasingly vital in the coming age.

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