

The Conservation and Management of Traditional Heritage: a key to sustainable Development

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Executive Summary

The aim of this proposal is to request for funding to carry out the research of sacred shrines found in Karonga District. The Karonga District is strategically located between two geographical regions with natural heritage sites—thus the Serengeti and all other wildlife protected areas in Tanzania and the Luangwa National Park in Eastern Zambia. The sites are frequently visited by many tourists for they are merited for their vast eco-biodiversity. Karonga lies mid-way between these two geographical zones thereby opening great opportunities for tourism development in the area and the nation as whole. The area is rich in natural and cultural heritage which need to be thoroughly surveyed, identified, appropriately documented, well developed and rightly promoted in order to attract as many tourists as it possibly can. To kick-start tourism development in the area, the Cultural and Museum Centre Karonga (CMCK) spearheaded by the Uraha Foundation Malawi (UFM) inspired by the Karonga Development Trust (KADET) is constructing a museum. The museum will display among other things prehistoric fauna recovered from the area which includes *Malawisaurus*, an early Cretaceous dinosaur from Sitwe south of Karonga and remains of two early hominids, the *Homo rudolfensis* and *Paranthropus boisei* aff. from Uraha area and Malema excavation site respectively. Besides, Karonga is bestowed with a diversified range of cultural heritage by the indigenous groups of people of Karonga and that left behind by the British and the Arabs. The Livingstone Mountains across Lake Malawi, in Tanzania, vast waters of Lake Malawi, the undulating mountain ranges of the Nyika Plateau and indeed the mountain ranges lying between Chitipa and Karonga command beautiful panoramic views that will greatly attract tourists. The main focus of this account, however, is about the conservation, development and management of ancient shrines (sacred sites) for posterity, education, ecological sustainable development,

recreation and socio-economic development.

Introduction

The Proto-Ngonde People and the Snake Cult

The Karonga plain was already occupied by the ancient inhabitants when the Ngonde people arrived in area sometime between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These ancient inhabitants include the Mwenelupembes of south Karonga, the Mwenekisindile of north Karonga and the Mwenendekas of west Karonga. Their areas of settlement are still known as Lupembe, Kisindile and Mpata respectively. The basic social and political unit was a kinship group, the clan, and each clan occupied a zone that was named after it. Each clan had its own head who looked after the welfare of its members. These people, like many African societies, believed in the spirits of the departed, *basyuka* (ghosts). The *basyuka* maintained their interests in family affairs, and acted as intermediaries between the spiritual forces of the world and the living. The *basyuka* were capable of causing disaster if and whenever they felt unhappy with the living. It was, therefore, necessary to make sure that they were appeased and in the event of trouble, such disease, sacrifices were made by the head of a lineage at a shrine, erected at a place selected for the purpose. Such an offering was a lineage affair and did not go beyond clan boundaries. These people had their own shrines, where the clan gathered to pray to the spirits of their ancestors. They believed in the supreme being, *Mbamba* (lightning), to whom was attributed the creation of the earth and all its inhabitants.

Since *Mbamba* was considered to be too remote to be directly involved in the everyday affairs of people, it was possible to approach him through an intermediary spirit who, it was believed, took the physical form of a big snake. There are a number of places in the Ungonde area that were associated with this snake: the *Chibondo pool* south of Karonga, the *Nthola lagoon* in the centre, *Kambwe forest* and a nearby *lagoon* in the northeast, and the *Filauli hill* west of Karonga. The snake (the African Python) was mostly concerned with health, wealth and the fertility of the whole land. It is believed that if it passed through the foundation of a new cattle shed or near a feeding pasture, cows would produce more milk. Traditions of the proto-Ngonde indicate that the divine snake had two symbolic implications. When the snake was in a lagoon or pool, it was associated with disease, and whenever it appeared in a forest or mountain, it indicated rain. The divine snake was believed to move from place to place, and its movements were detected by the blowing of the wind from one location to the other. For example, if heavy winds blew from *Kambwe* in the direction of *Filauli*, elders knew that it had changed residence.

It is not clear whether this religious system had any connection with that of the region south of Ungonde, the area that is today inhabited by the Henga of Mwafulirwa. In this area, there was one divine snake that was resident at a small hill island at Chilumba. The custodian of the island and the medium of the spirit was the head of the Mponela clan, one of the established families in the area. According to the present head of the Mponelas, this snake was visible only to the medium; the other inhabitants of the area were able to tell of the movements by the shaking of the lake waters. This snake often went to Chombe hill, not far from the present headquarters of the Livingstonia Synod, and again, the Henga knew of its having changed residence by the shaking of the lake waters. Its journeys to Chombe were regular and were viewed by the Henga as visits to its friend at Chombe. This snake was also said to have had connections with other such snakes, and, in the words of the medium at Chilumba, they visited each other.

The most important residence of the ancient inhabitants' snake would appear to have been at *Kambwe* in the village of Kisindile, and Mwenekisindile seems to have been the chief custodian of the place. Whenever there was an epidemic such as smallpox or a natural disaster such as locasts, all elders of the plain gathered at Kisindile where they prayed and made offerings to the spirits with flour placed in a basket, chickens, and sometimes meat. Mwenekisindile was evidently an important person in the area.

Snake reverence would appear to have been of ancient origin in Africa. It is not clear whether the head of the Mwenekisindile clan used his position as guardian of the *forest* and *lagoon* at *Kambwe* to influence the other inhabitants of the plain in favour of the *Kyungu*, it seems highly plausible that he did.

The Ngonde People and their Chiefly Cult

The traditions covering the first century of the establishment of the Ngonde Kingdom saw several developments. Having achieved power, the *Kyungu* (the paramount Leader) was able to impose a new order upon the indigenous people. He required them to show allegiance by performing services such as sending tribute and working in the royal gardens. To further consolidate his position, the *Kyungu* and his advisers married into some of the established families. A few kilometres from Mbande, at a place called Kyibwe, a new ritual centre was established where prayers were said at the beginning of the rainy season, just before the harvest period and when droughts occurred. Mulwa, a senior official at Mbande became the custodian of the centre, and though *Kyungu* did not personally attend the rituals he gave his blessings to Mulwa before going to conduct them. It was the duty of Mulwa to inform the *Kyungu* of such trouble as a prolonged epidemic, and on a chosen day to perform the purification ceremony, *ukutunga ikikungu*, when all the fires in the land were extinguished and the ashes thrown at Kyibwe. A similar ceremony attended by

adult residents of the Kingdom was held annually at Kyibwe to renew allegiance to the *Kyungu*. The royal fire-symbolising the omnipotence of the *Kyungu*-burned constantly at Mbande, and during the renewal of the allegiance, all the old fires were quenched and new ones provided from the royal fire at Mbande.

At Kyibwe prayers were said through the ancestors of the *Kyungu* and not through the divine snake. The cult of the *Kyungus* developed, with royal ancestral worship replacing the worship of spirits. The eclipsing of the religion of the ancient inhabitants by the chiefly cult would appear to have taken place gradually, making the transition from the pre-*Kyungu* to the *Kyungu* period acceptable to the indigenous people. Kisindile now Kambwe, with Mwenekisindile as custodian was retained as a ritual centre, but offerings were not made there by the chief as had been the case in the past. Alongside this development the *Kyungu* emerged as the divine ruler, becoming priest king and communicator with God. As such if angered, he would affect the environment by means of causing drought or disturbing animal reproduction. This made regular and plentiful tribute to him all the more important. Mbande became self-sufficient as a result of this regular tribute. People went to work in the royal gardens -*milasa* and after work people were fed there. He alone had direct contact with the ancestors, and could pray for the welfare of the people and their land. As in other parts of Africa where divine kings reigned, the Ngonde believed in the purity of their ruler, his health determining their well being and prosperity. To prevent the contamination of his living representative of God, he was confined to his residence, and at the first sign of illness, he was quickly smothered by his councillors who were also known as *makambala*. The actual administration of the Kingdom was left to six court officials (*makambala*): Katenga, Mulwa, Kyumba, Ngosi, Mboma, and Mwenitumba, whose ancestors had accompanied the *Kyungu* most of their time. They established the bureaucracy at Mbande. The office of the *likambala* became hereditary as this represented stability and continuity of the Ngonde society. It was only the *makambala* and heads of the ancient inhabitants' clans who could meet the *Kyungu*. Nobody could see the *Kyungu* but with authority from the *makambala*. They often dealt with complaints without consulting the *Kyungu*, received tribute on his behalf, and distributed it without his knowledge between themselves.

The tribute that went to the *Kyungu* was in kind and labour. Food was taken to Mbande at the beginning of every harvest season by subjects from different sections of the *Kyungu's* domain. Heads of villages presented gifts of food to the *Kyungu*, hunters too surrendered part of their kill to Mbande, in case of elephants one tusk, known as royal tusk, was presented to the *Kyungu*.

The mutual transference of gifts became more evident during a funeral of a *Kyungu*. The period of mourning usually lasted a year, during which subjects took cattle and food to Mbande to pay their respects to the *Kyungu*. These cattle were slaughtered and used to feed the mourners.

The decline of the Ngonde Kingdom and the subsequent loss of traditional values

The integrity of the Ngonde Kingdom and all traditional beliefs and custom begun to disintegrate after the invasion of the Karonga plain by the Arabs and their notorious slave trade, the settlement of the missionaries in the area and the colonization of Nyasaland by the British. The activities of slaving in the area disturbed the consistency of traditional religious performances. The missionaries had a negative influence on the traditional beliefs and customs, since these beliefs and customs were regarded as evil before the eyes of God and therefore it was a taboo to follow them. Many people were discouraged from following them and were converted to Christianity. The declaration of Nyasaland to become a British Protectorate in 1891 helped to bring about the down fall of the Ngonde Kingdom. This meant that for the first time there was some authority above Kyungu- the Nyasaland protectorate government which reduced some of his powers over his territory. The Kyungu was also made to collect taxes from his subjects that made people to distrust him. As a result some people run away from their villages to Zambia or hid in the bush and only returned to their houses at night. Some people became at loggerheads with their leader because of taxes imposed on them by the colonial regime. This lowered his prestige from Semi-divine. The kingdom was named North Nyasa District. To further diminish the powers of the Kyungu, his village headmen: banyafyale Kilupula, Mwenemisuku, Mwenewenya, Kameme, Mwafulirwa, Mwenenthalire and Kyungu himself were made principal headmen. However, Kyungu was later elevated to Paramount Chief. Mbande remained the highest court. The traditions of the Ngonde were now being deserted as Kyungu had to obey all orders from the government.

The objectives of the project

To document the tangible (shrines) and the intangible (customs, rituals, beliefs) heritage

To conserve and preserve the heritage sites to sustain their integrity and authenticity

To develop, manage and promote the heritage sites to boost cultural tourism in Karonga and the region.

To promote and revive the almost abandoned cultural heritage of the proto-Ngonde and Ngonde people

Strategies

To formulate the conservation and management plans for the heritage sites

To declare these cultural heritage sites as national monuments to ensure their legal protection

To revive and enforce traditional legal statutes to protect these shrines from being destroyed

Activities

To carry out background research and field-survey to collect information on the site and on its environment, including its boundaries, its history, its physical environment, its recent history, its traditional legal norms as well as information on other related heritage sites. The possible sources of information to be looked at will include documents, publications and archives. This will involve looking at and studying such things as previous reports, oral history, maps, historic photographs and other related documentary evidence.

Oral interviews will be conducted to known persons. These are people who may have information on the sites or may give information on people who know something about the heritage sites in question.

To carry out fieldwork which will involve survey of the sites and also its environment i.e. the landscape, wildlife (fauna and flora), geology, soil, structures, archaeology, ethnographical materials.

The aim of the research and survey of the sites is to understand the historical development of the sites, the ecological significance of the sites, land use history and the landscape value of the setting of these sites. The information will provide data to help assess the significance of the sites, to develop the conservation and management plans of the sites.

Description of the ancient shrines (sacred religious heritage sites)

The Kambwe Forest and nearby lagoon

The Kambwe Forest and nearby lagoon is a shrine located at a distance on the shore and the confluence of the North Rukuru, north of Karonga Boma. The site was founded by the Mwakisindile people long before the Ngonde people came to established their Ngonde Kingdom in the Karonga plains. The Mwakisindile people practised the snake cult-where people believed in the departed spirit, *basyuka* (ghosts)

The Vilauli Hill

Vilauli hill is another sacred site where the ancient people went to offer their sacrifices to appease their spirits each time there were some troubles in their villages. The hill is located some 40 Kilometers to the west of Karonga Boma on the road to Chitipa. It is one of the highest points in the surrounding areas of Karonga which command a spectacular panoramic view into the lake shore to as far as Kyela in Tanzania and Mwenelondo in the south and the rolling mountains of the Nyika plateau to the south. There are still some stories that say

there are white chickens in the forest. These are chickens that were taken there and used for paying sacrifice to the departed spirits for forgiveness. Not all chickens were slaughtered, some were left free in the forest when it was seen necessary to do so.

The Nthola lagoon

The Chibondo lagoon

The Chombe Hill

The Link of the project to the national development agenda

The impact of the project will be to sustain the integrity and authenticity of these cultural landscape heritage sites. The preservation and protection of the heritage sites link well with the *Vision 2020* goals on culture that aims to ensure vibrant cultural values that support socio-economic development. The emphasis is stressed on the promotion and preservation of cultural values that ensure good management of resources and the environment.

The project will ensure that the general public has been provided with relevant information of the necessity to understand, know and realise the social-economic importance of such heritage sites and therefore the need to preserve and protect them. By so doing, the promotion and development of the cultural heritage in Malawi will be enhanced. To cite some examples, the socio-economic significance of the monuments is realised through cultural tourism. Tourism is an industry that creates employment that generates income for the people of Malawi. The employment opportunities range from non-skilled to skilled, uneducated to educated and trained personnel. Beside, cultural heritage is a source of education. Education plays a crucial role in the development of the country. All these concepts are focused on the national goal of poverty alleviation and sustainable development in the country as stipulated in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) of Malawi.

The project execution and management

The project will be carried out and managed by professionals from the Department of Antiquities in Lilongwe, others relevant professionals from other sectors i.e Department of Forestry, the Environmental Affairs Department, National Herbariums and botanical Gardens and the Museums of Malawi. The

Department has an experienced personnel backed by their university academic reputation from within Malawi and abroad.

The proposed project activities will be carried out together with other partners. These partners include: the media such as Malawi Broadcasting Corporation (MBC), Television Malawi (TVM), Malawi News Agency (MANA), The Museum and Cultural Centre Karonga (CMCK), Department of Forestry, The Uraha Foundation Malawi, The University of Malawi (Biology Department) and Karonga Development Trust (KADET).