

Representation of Minority Languages and Indigenous Cultures in Zimbabwean Museums

by Tendai Fortune Muringa, Lecturer: Department of African Languages and Culture

Midlands State University in Zimbabwe email: tendaimuringa@gmail.com

Abstract

In such countries as Zimbabwe there are diverse languages through which people disseminate and express their unique identities and cultures. English stands as the official language, Shona and Ndebele are national languages whilst such languages as Kalanga, Venda and Tonga are regarded as 'small' or minority languages. Language regardless of its status, it carries the culture of a people and as such it is the vehicle to transmit skills, ideas, values and symbols that are peculiar to each indigenous community. The interconnectedness of culture to language entails that attention is accorded to small languages especially by museums which are storehouses of Zimbabwe's traditional and contemporary culture. It is unfortunate that such national institutions, through their exhibitions and education programmes, tend to have prime focus on English language and in some cases Shona and Ndebele languages. Minority languages are included in exhibitions mainly to name the object and not to elaborate on the cultural context which lead to creation of such symbols. Captions with brief description of objects are given in a foreign language meaning that national institutions, with a mandate to safeguard indigenous cultures in Zimbabwe, are the ones plucking out certain components of a people culture and presenting them to the public in a different language. Therefore, what does this mean in relation to representation and development of minority languages and cultures in Zimbabwe? This paper seeks to reveal the underlying significance of minority languages and cultures in the integral vision of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe and critically analyse effects of excluding such groups which form part of the national identity.

- Keywords: minority languages. indigenous cultures .museums

Introduction

National Museums and Monuments (NMM) is the institution with a mandate to safeguard heritage in its diversity in Zimbabwe. Mahachi and Kamuhangire (2008p49) confirm that an Act of parliament entrust management of both movable and immovable heritage in the hands of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ). Under the custody of NMMZ are public museums, community museums and site museums covering cardinal points in the country. Such efforts to increase accessibility of museum services to the public are welcomed with gratitude however; a point of concern is the representation of minority languages and indigenous cultures in these museums. The aim of this paper is to analyse how NMMZ as an institution present minority languages and indigenous cultures to members of the public and the implication of such representation to concerned communities.

Minority Languages

Zimbabwe is a country whose official language is English whilst Shona and Ndebele are national languages. Magwa (2010p9, 12) avers that the language of the government is not the language of the governed for English is elevated above indigenous languages. In addition to Shona and Ndebele there are a number of indigenous African languages in the country such as Tonga, Sotho, Kalanga, Venda, Xhosa, Nambya, Tshangane, Chikunda, Chewa, Sena, Hwesa, Barwe and Tshawo which fall under the category of minority groups. The map in **Fig 1** illustrates areas where some of the indigenous languages in the country are commonly spoken. It is also interesting to note that there are established museums in the south, north, west, east and central regions of the country. These museums are strategically positioned increasing possibility of promoting minority languages and indigenous cultures in the country.

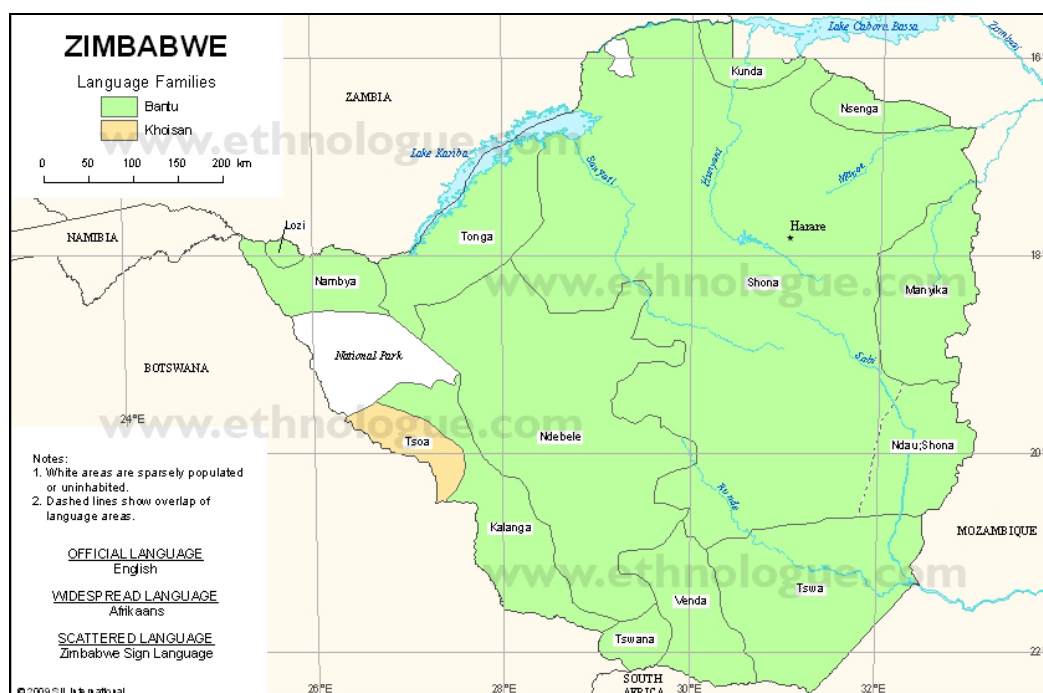


Fig 1 Language Map of Zimbabwe (adopted from <http://www.ethnologue.com> accessed 09 May 2012 at 11:50 am)

Minority Groups and Indigenous Cultures

The exclusion of minority groups in spheres of influence has existed for a long time in Africa. Boylan (2006p57) attests that traditionally attention has been given to writing communities, elevating their history and cultures at the expense of oral traditions and culture. Although this has been the case, it is important to note that the heritage of a people whether in developing or developed countries is recorded and preserved in verbal terms rather than physical object. Kottak (2004p393) also argues that the spoken language has been the primary source of communication before existence of formal writing systems and language is part of culture. This understanding credits value of spoken languages which contributed in recording and preserving human cultures for present and future heirs.

The interplay between language and culture is stressed by WaThiongo (1986p13) who is of the idea that any language has a dual aspect as a means of communication and carrier of culture but this character is unique to people whom this language is a mother tongue. This means that it is the indigenous language by which members of a community are taught which is able to carry their history and culture even if minority groups are bilingual and multilingual speakers. Expanding on this intrinsic relationship, WaThiongo (1986p15) further argues that,

Language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from the language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from one generation to the next.

Therefore, language is the bearer of beliefs, knowledge, values, standards, customs, traditions, and other learned behaviour patterns passed from generation to generation. Grisworld (2004p12) also adds that culture presents the expressive side of human life including behaviour, objects and ideas. The expressive element which embraces the history and cultural objects of minority groups is key focus in this paper.

Representation of Minority Languages and Culture in Zimbabwean Museums

Minority groups are often found in remote or secluded areas in the country however, their cultural objects and memoirs of their history have found their way into the museum collection from the colonial period to date. An array of ethnographic objects in museums show unique designs of the Tonga, Kalanga, Venda, Nambya, Sotho and Xhosa among other minority groups. Grisworld (2004p16) acknowledges that cultural objects have single or multiple creators and receivers of these objects may be different from the intended or original audience. Whichever the case cultural objects from varying cultural groups have found their way into the museum storerooms and made accessible to the public through research, exhibitions and education programmes. This paper focuses on exhibitions and education programmes.

Exhibitions

A number of museums show diverse cultural objects of indigenous communities in Zimbabwe and Grisworld (2004p13-16) argues that, each object is a meaningful component which helps in understanding the wider system referred to as culture and these objects are meaningful expressions which can tell the story of a people. The story commonly told is that of the Ndebele and Shona cultural groups respectively. The Natural History Museum in Bulawayo focuses on the Ndebele culture excluding minority groups such as the Xhosa, Sotho, Kalanga and Tswana who formed the conglomerate 'Ndebele' group in Zimbabwe. The recently mounted exhibition on 'Nehanda Nyakasikana' at Museum of Human Sciences accounts how the great Shona heroine, 'Mbuya Nehanda' became a source of inspiration during the first and second Chimurenga Wars. In addition most of the cultural objects on display are of the Shona people. The BaTonga community museum is the only museum which has given prime attention towards a minority group in Zimbabwe focusing on the Tonga speaking people. This is a rural museum project initiated in Binga by a Danish Non Governmental Organisation. This organisation later handed administration of this museum to NMMZ (Mahachi and Kamuhangire 2008p 49).

Naming of Objects on Exhibitions

Most cultural objects in museum exhibition are displayed, named and given brief descriptions as shown in **Fig 2** and **Fig 3** below. When naming cultural objects from indigenous communities a local name is often included together with an English translation. This is case at the BaTonga community museum in Binga where there is use of both Tonga and English languages to name objects. For example the 'Smoking Site' is referred to '*Incelwa*' and the 'Traditional Flute' as *Neele* in a local language. Similarly at ZMHS cultural objects are also named in English and Shona languages and in some cases Ndebele for example:

Object Name- English	Shona Name	Ndebele Name
Drum	Ngoma	Ingungu
Rattles	Magavi	Amahlwayi

Table 1: Developed from section on Musical Instruments- ZHMS- Harare

Table 1 shows the use of English the official language and the two national languages Shona and Ndebele to name musical instruments. However, minority languages such as Barwe and Chikunda are not included in naming of cultural objects regardless of the fact that these groups also visit the institution to learn about the national history and culture.

Cultural Objects and Captions at Pomongwe Site Museum in Matobo Hills



Fig 2 Quiver



Fig 3 Stone Arrows

The photographs in **Fig 2** and **3** show a quiver and stone arrows which resemble objects from the indigenous community. These objects are named in English with no provision of a local name in Kalanga or Ndebele seeing that these are languages commonly spoken in this area. The use of a foreign language at this site museum can only meet the needs of visitors conversant in this language, whilst local community members may require a translator or tour guide to help them understand what is said about their own culture. The absence of a local voice on these cultural symbols means that the original name of object is hidden from the visitor.

Object Description

Brief and elaborate texts often accompany exhibitions describing the history and culture of the object. Grisworld (2004p13, 16) argues that cultural objects have shared significance embodied in form and people should be able to hear, read, understand, participate and remember these objects. In trying to create this experience for the visitor, English language in its written and spoken forms is commonly used as the medium of communication to educate people about the rich indigenous cultures in Zimbabwe. This is done irrespective of such museums being in the vicinity of indigenous communities. A good example is the BaTonga community museum which has cultural heritage of the Tonga people but the local language go as far as naming object as '*neele*' (flute) or '*nswanga*' (winnowing basket). The rest of the description on use and significance of cultural objects is given in an English language. It therefore becomes the duty of the tour guide to explain to the local people what is presented about their heritage. Therefore, is including local languages in naming of object meant to be received with gratitude?

Site Description

Pomongwe is a Site Museum in Matobo Hills and there is no use of indigenous languages in elaborating on the culture and history of the site. Place names such as Maleme, Njelele, Pomongwe testify that formerly there were indigenous inhabitants in this area. Msindo (2005p86) affirms that the Kalanga people were concentrated in the Matopo and Insiza area. The origin of the name Pomongwe itself is not known as admittedly captured in **Fig 4**. The Kalanga people interacted with shrines in this landscape and referred to Njelele shrine as ‘*Dombo letshipoteleka*’, a local name which means the hill looks different as one walks around it. However, the history and culture of the Kalanga in the Matopo Hill is not explicitly told at the site museum except that the famous Njelele/Matojeni shrine is found in Matopo Hills. The exclusion of minority groups is also evident on the interpretive panels at Victoria Falls, which is commonly known by the local people as Mosi oa Tunya. When Livingstone named site after his Queen Victoria the local name Mosi-oa-Tunya was therefore disregarded. In this present day the local name is included on the welcome signage but interpretation of site does not elaborate on the culture of indigenous communities around Victoria Falls. Panels describing formation of the natural wonder are presented in an English language. The section describing indigenous people of Victoria Falls focuses on human evolution in the African continent and evidence of stone tools in the area not the local people’s way of life. This shows that it not only indigenous languages which has been removed from the public sphere but the whole testimony of how these communities contributed to existence of present sites through their traditions and belief systems (illustrations in **Figs 4, 5 and 6**).

Site Descriptions

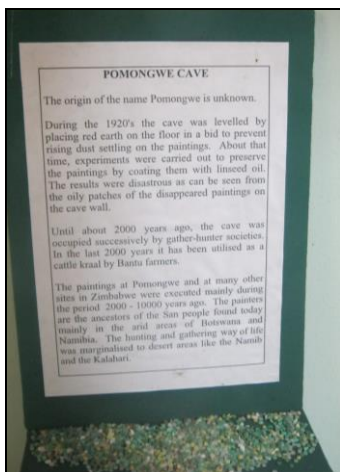


Fig 4. Site description- Pomongwe Cave



Fig 5 Welcome Signage at Victoria Falls

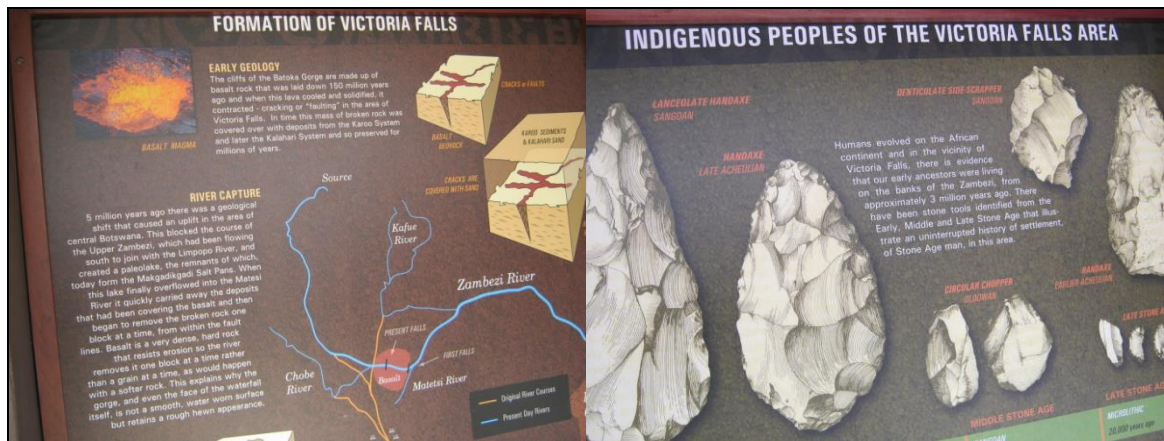


Fig 6. Panels describing formation of Victoria Falls and the history of indigenous people in the area

Discussion

The inclusion of minority groups in museum programmes is questionable in Zimbabwe. Magwa (2010p11-12) is of the view that minority groups have potential to contribute meaningfully to the development of a country and this potential can only be realised if these indigenous languages are given opportunity to do so. Grisworld (2004p16) is of the idea that both cultural objects and people who created them are not floating freely but are anchored in a particular context. This means that the rich cultural diversity in the country has to be presented in its totality. The irony is that whereas minority languages are excluded in the wider framework, cultural objects from these speech communities find their way into the museum collection. WaThiongo (1986p15) argues that languages as communication and as culture are products of each other for communication creates culture and culture itself is a means of communication. Therefore, the creation unique symbols which are part of the museum collection is owed to the language which disseminated the skills, ideas and creativity from generation to generation. Van Huy (2006p37) proposes that,

With regards to people, the museum's first priority is to emphasise the equality of all cultures and peoples. This means that the museum is equally concerned with presenting the cultures of groups with large populations and of groups with small populations, and is equally interested in groups residing in urban areas as well as those found in remote areas.

In relation to a balanced representation of all cultures and people Zimbabwe is yet to reform to this cause. Minority languages and cultures are mentioned in passing in an entire exhibition or incorporated to just name the place or cultural object. The cultural object which has already been removed from its social context is further deprived of its 'lingual right'. Boylan (2006p58) observes that in such countries as Spain and France 'ancient regional languages that were suppressed by the state' are being promoted through use of bilingual and multilingual labelling of exhibitions. The idea of bilingual and multilingual labelling of exhibition exists in Zimbabwe mainly to name places or cultural objects thereafter elaborate texts are given in a foreign language. A few exceptions are found when Ndebele or Shona is

included to describe objects or sites. It is taken for granted that minority groups would understand the local Shona or Ndebele languages. Therefore, what matters in the collection are the uniquely designed pipes; snuff boxes, wooden plates of the Tonga, Xhosa, Nambya and Sotho groups but not the language which was used to communicate the art behind these pieces? The unique Tonga smoking pipes have been used in Quiz competition programmes but are equally identified in a foreign language. One might then question what it means about inclusive representation in a national museum?

One of the arguments raised by curators is that English has the ability to communicate the message to a wider audience and it is a neutral language understood by different ethnic groups. In the event that the visitor has challenges in understanding the foreign language the multilingual tour guides would help interpret the message on exhibition in language comfortable to the visitor. This however, comes at a cost meaning to say that even the local people would pay an extra fee to have a tour guide interpret their culture in indigenous languages. Chong-pil (2006p9) urges museums to recognise cultural diversity, and when this is done different ethnic groups respect and appreciate each other leading to development of each people's culture. Therefore, the unique movable heritage within minority territories need to be recognised and presented in indigenous languages particularly those that carry meanings and cultural value attached to these objects.

Conclusion

When cultural heritage of minority groups is excluded from the public domain or included without meaningful descriptions it is a challenge to promote these languages and cultures to both present and future generations. It also does not follow that a museum has to teach the public in languages common to their regions but stretch wings and embrace other minority groups yearning to be recognised. The philosophy of life which was orally transmitted in minority languages led to creation of unique objects and landscapes that are attracting the foreign tourist and regardless of their status they need to be respected in their own right. Selecting the object and not the language leaves a burden to local members to retell their story to children in indigenous languages. When a language is already a minority there is more reason to make these languages open to the public domain so that they would be recognised as influential languages. Each and every language has a function in society, and loss of minority languages is loss of culture and identity. Therefore, when NMM continue to perpetuate exclusion of minority languages and cultures they are subtracting from the national bank of cultural diversity in Zimbabwe.

References

- Boylan P,J (2006) *The Intangible Heritage: A Challenge and Opportunity for Museums and Museum Professional Training* in International Journal of Intangible Heritage Vol 2, Seoul, The National Folk Museum of Korea
- Chong-pil C (2006) *International Journal of Intangible Heritage* Vol 2, Seoul, The National Folk Museum of Korea
- Grisworld, W (2004) *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, 2nd Edition, Carlifornia Sage Publications Company
- Kottak, C, P (2004) *Anthropology- The Exploration of Human Diversity*, 10th edition, New York, McGraw Hill Companies
- Magwa, W (2010) *The Language Question in the Constitution Reform Process in Zimbabwe A Close Look at Policies Outlined in the Kariba Draft Document* in Zimbabwe International Journal of Languages and Culture, Vol 1 No 1, A Journal of Science Research and Consultancy Trust accessed 06 May 2012 at 11:14 am
- Mahachi, G and Kamuhangire, E (2008) *Administrative Arrangements for Heritage Resources Management in sub-Saharan Africa* in Ndoro, W etal (2008) *Cultural Heritage and the Law, Protecting Immovable Heritage in English-Speaking countries of sub-Saharan Africa*, ICCROM Conservation Studies 8, Rome
- Msindo E (2005) *Language and Ethnicity in Matebeleland: Ndebele-Kalanga Relations in Southern Zimbabwe, 1930-1960*, in The International Journal of African Historical Studies, Vol 38 No 1 pp 79-103 Boston University African Studies Centre, website <http://www.jstor.org/> accessed: 09/05/2012 at 05:04
- Van Huy, N (2006) *The Role of Museums in the Preservation of Living Heritage; Experience of the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology* in International Journal of Intangible Heritage Vol 2, Seoul, The National Folk Museum of Korea
- WaThiongo, N (1986) *Decolonising the Mind- The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers

Interviews

Interview with Curator of Ethnography, Mr Chabata, Museum of Human Sciences, 22 April 2012

Interview with Curator of BaTonga Museum Mr Chikozho 09 May 2012