

**THE COX COLLECTION, THE MUSEUMS OF MALAWI AND  
THE POLITICS OF REPATRIATION, 1892-2016**

A mini-thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts in History, in the Department of History, University of the Western Cape.



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Submitted: November, 2016

## DECLARATION

I, Comfort Tamanda Mtotha, declare that **‘The Cox Collection, the Museums of Malawi and the Politics of Repatriation, 1892-2016’** is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

**Comfort Tamanda Ingrid Mtotha**

Signed: 

11<sup>th</sup> November, 2016



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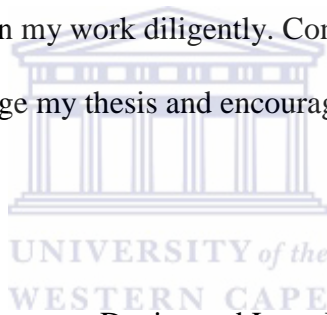
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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Davies and Lucy Mtotha, who nurtured in me a hardworking spirit. They inspired me and reminded me during the whole journey of writing this thesis to stand, strive and believe in myself. Their encouragement gave me a certain drive towards my work and I hope this thesis serves as a tribute to their love and moral support.



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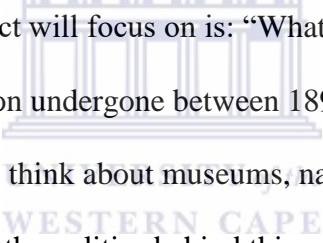
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## ABSTRACT

A wide range of scholarly inquiries have engaged with how museums all over the world deal with societal issues and the way the public interacts with the museum as a space of transaction and knowledge production. In Malawi, only a small proportion of literature deals with the museums and their relationship to the wider understanding of the country's history and the question of nationalism. However, as modern museums are transforming and reconfiguring themselves in dealing with histories of collection and calls for repatriation of ethnographic objects and human remains from their European counterparts are being made, there is no scholarly work or a nuanced representation on these issues for the Museums of Malawi. This study engages with a biography of a collection to think about museums, nationalism and the politics of repatriation. This biography begins when this collection of objects was collected from the tea plantations of Malawi and how it metamorphosizes from souvenirs to artifacts of rarity and then to "national treasures." The life of the collection is analysed and understood through its multiple journeys from Malawi to Europe and then to the United States of America where it attains a new meaning in a museum before its return to Malawi for a nationalist cause.

## INTRODUCTION

This is a mini-thesis about the “Victor and Theodore Cox collection” that sits in the stores and display cabinets of Museums of Malawi (MoM). The study looks at the ways in which the collection came into being in the 1890s and locates the place of the Cox collection in a wider framework of the making and remaking of Museums of Malawi. Objects in this collection are used as the main archive. The study aims to examine this “archive” and interrogate the reasons the Museums of Malawi uses 1941 (the time this collection entered the space of Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington, USA) to claim the starting point of its (the Museums of Malawi’s) own collection.



The central question that the project will focus on is: “What changes in meaning has the Theodore and Victor Cox collection undergone between 1892 and 2016?” This study engages with a biography of a collection to think about museums, nationalism and the politics of repatriation. It attempts to explore the politics behind this process, to investigate closely how the objects found their way to the USA and then how they returned to Malawi. In this way, the research aims at interrogating the repatriation process by focusing on the back story of the negotiations.

But to begin this account I want to start off by referring to two sets of stories. The first one is about my appointment as a researcher in ethnography in the Department of Culture, Museums of Malawi in July 2011.<sup>1</sup> My post was at Top Mandala Museum in Blantyre. This museum which is housed in an 1890 colonial building serves as storage for collections and as administrative headquarters of all government museum centres in the country. Before

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<sup>1</sup>The Museums of Malawi consists of five Museum facilities which explain the plural name. The five Museum facilities are: Top Mandala - the Old Museum Building, Chichiri Museum, Lake Malawi Museum, The Regional Mzuzu Museum and Gallery, and Mtengatenga Postal Hut Museum.

accommodating the museum, the two storey-building served as residential quarters for the employees at the African Lakes Corporation (A.L.C) from 1893.<sup>2</sup> In early 1958, the colonial government deemed the building to be unfit for human habitation due to termites and beetles that bred both in and outside the premises threatening “the safety of the building and the comfort of its occupants.”<sup>3</sup> There was a tremendous effort later in 1958 in destroying these insects which became the “sole tenants.”<sup>4</sup> In 1959 this building which is also referred to as “Old Mandala Mess” was leased from the African Lakes Corporation to accommodate a temporary museum.<sup>5</sup> It was renovated after the appointment of a curator in July 1959 and showcases were constructed.<sup>6</sup> The ground floor of the building served as exhibition rooms for “Ethno-History and Archeology; Natural History; Picture Room and Aquarium Room” while the upper floor “owing to the precarious state” was meant for the offices and storage of reference collection.<sup>7</sup> The lower floor was preferred as an exhibition space partly due to the concrete flooring unlike the upper floor that was made of hardwood floor which rendered it unsuitable to support the load emanating from both the mounted showcases and the visitors to the exhibition rooms. Despite all the fixing up, insects entered the building from the chimneys and remained a big problem up until the late twentieth century when a relentless battle was “waged against these creatures” through the use of insecticides, pest traps and the sealing of chimneys and holes on windows.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> A.L.C. which was earlier known as the African Lakes Company started operating in Malawi as Livingstonia Central Africa Company in 1878. The founders, John and Frederick Moir came to Malawi as businessmen in response to the second of David Livingstone's two requirements for the abolition of the slave trade-Christianity and legitimate commerce. See Owen J.M. Kalinga, *Historical Dictionary of Malawi*, (Plymouth, UK: The Scarecrow Press, 2012), 20 and F.L.M. Moir, *After Livingstone: An African Trade Romance*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923).

<sup>3</sup> The Nyasaland Museum, “Museum file” *Annual Report and Bulletin: 1960-1961* (1960), 6.

<sup>4</sup> The Nyasaland Museum, “Museum file”, 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> The first curator was Mr. Peter Hanney. He indicated that about 52,000 people visited the museum when it opened in 1960 and nearly 82% were Africans. See an article by G.D. Hayes in the *Society of Malawi Journal*, “The Museum of Malawi,” Vol. 20, No. 1 (January, 1967): 49-57.

<sup>7</sup> The Nyasaland Museum, “Museum file”, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



**Figure 1:** The Mandala Boarding Mess, photo: taken by P. Cole-King in 1960. © Society of Malawi.

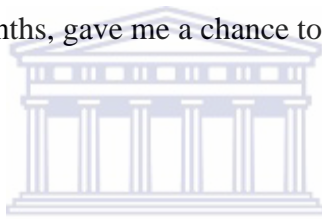
As a keeper of ethnographic collections, one of my initial duties was to work on establishing a database of this collection for all five museums across Malawi. My appointment in 2011 came at a time when Museums of Malawi had just received funding from the United States Embassy through the U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP). The Fund was launched by the United States in an effort to reposition itself as a global champion of cultural heritage preservation as encapsulated in their mission statement:

Cultural preservation offers an opportunity to show a different American face to other countries, one that is non-commercial, non-political, and non-military. By taking a leading role in efforts to preserve cultural heritage, we show our respect for other cultures by protecting their traditions.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, *Annual Report:2011-2012* (2012), 5. Accessed on April 5 2016 at [https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/afcp\\_2011\\_annual\\_report.pdf](https://eca.state.gov/files/bureau/afcp_2011_annual_report.pdf).

The foregoing is what Christina Luke referred to as “cultural diplomacy.”<sup>10</sup> The U.S. Ambassador’s Fund awards grants in support of the preservation of cultural heritage projects worldwide. The projects include the preservation of cultural sites, cultural objects, and forms of traditional cultural expression such as traditional dances, music, poetry, language, and crafts.<sup>11</sup> These various projects are geared towards preservation attempts to show “the depth of America’s respect for the cultural heritage of other countries.”<sup>12</sup> The project with Museums of Malawi aimed at improving storage conditions at Top Mandala house through preventive conservation. Besides preserving almost 4000 objects from further deterioration, the project also focused on documentation of all archaeological artifacts, ethnographic and historical objects that “represent Malawi’s diverse cultural heritage.”<sup>13</sup> Working assiduously on this project for close to six months, gave me a chance to familiarise myself with the collection.



My first encounter with the storage area made me realise how museum objects are considered to be valuable. I could not stop paying attention to the rules and regulations which were pasted at the entrance. The rules spoke volumes on the handling of the objects.<sup>14</sup> The conservator who stood firmly at the door highlighted that “humans are the greatest enemy to the collections.”<sup>15</sup> By this, he meant that all the activities carried by human in the storage area if not regulated, subjects the objects to the risk of further deterioration. For that reason, he

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<sup>10</sup> Christina Luke’s term “cultural diplomacy”, as quoted by Noëleen Murray and Leslie Witz in *Hostels homes museums*, (Cape Town, SA: UCT Press, 2015), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, “Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP),” accessed on April 5, 2016 at <http://eca.state.gov/cultural-heritage-center/ambassadors-fund-cultural-preservation#sthash.inJxgbnI.dpuf>.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation, *Annual Report*, 2.

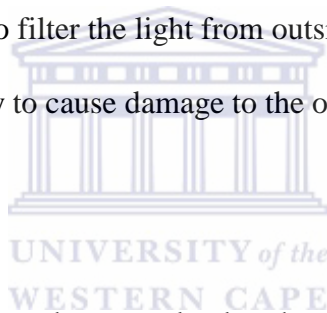
<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Apart from the rules of handling objects and other preventive conservation measures, more rules included security measures on the objects. For instance, keeping the door shut at all times was essential and carrying of bags in the stores was prohibited.

<sup>15</sup> Philip Jailos is the Conservator, who took me around the Top Mandala collection store of the Culture History/Ethnographic section of Museums of Malawi on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, 2011.

gave me latex gloves for handling the objects as he led the way to the store. I followed quietly.

When he opened the stores, cool air rushed to my face. I felt a chill all over because the room temperature was lower than that outside. My eyes immediately looked up. There were ceiling fans and to my far, right air conditioning units were affixed to the wall. With an enthusiastic concern for the objects, the conservator turned to me and told me that “fans are used to regulate the temperature and mostly to improve air circulation in the stores...if the air is still, there is moisture, and fungi may attack and destroy the collections.” I assumed that the air conditioners and a dehumidifier performed the same function. A quick glance at the windows showed that they were modified to filter the light from outside. This indicated that exposure to external illumination was likely to cause damage to the objects. Hence, the room was lit with fluorescent bulbs.



A step further into the room, my eyes became glued to the neatly arranged objects on metallic shelves. It was my first time seeing units of shelves with hundreds of objects hidden away from the public by the museum for safekeeping. In fact, up until that point in August 2011 not only had I never been in the stores, but I had also not been to the national museum. The shelves were covered with transparent polythene sheets and were tightly sealed with velcro. The conservator told me that the covers protected the objects from dust and dirt since they do not absorb moisture. Out of curiosity I wondered why the shelving units were made of metal. I also pondered on the reason individual objects were covered either with polythene foams or tissue paper and placed on what appeared as cotton knit fabric. The conservator, as though reading my mind, told me that “acid-free materials whether boxes, file folders or paper are used because they do not cause any chemical damage to the objects.” He continued to say



“acid-free cloth is also placed on the metallic shelves to prevent direct contact with objects, limiting any chemical reactions.”

I made a move to touch the objects and to interact with them. I was stopped in my tracks by the conservator. The objects were fragile and this ethnographic collection was regarded as having extreme value and they were to be treated as living objects. A barrier needed to be set between the objects and myself. The idea of objects being alienated from audience is also expressed by Souleymane Bashir Diagne who argues in relation to exhibitions (and not stores) that:

Ethnographic museums are a negation of art because they prevent the objects on display from really looking at us. Because ethnography is constituted, at its colonial origins, as a science of what is radically other, it is in its nature to fabricate strangeness, otherness, separateness. An object in an ethnographic museum is kept at a distance, prevented from touching us because it is petrified...<sup>16</sup>

As we walked around the storage area, rather than the exhibition area which was the main concern of Diagne, I became interested in how the collection was being classified. The collection was defined according to the cultural context, type and its functionality in everyday life, attributing ceremonial, material and domestic use. One serial collection I noticed was carefully placed on shelves and in drawers which I supposed was collected from several communities in Malawi and it was petrified in the catalogue according to “tribe” such as Chewa, Ngoni, Lomwe and Sena. There were groupings of masks, baskets, clay pots, bark cloth, axes, shields, spears, beads, drums, walking sticks, mats, clubs, headrests, cowrie belts, shells, medicine gourds, neck ornaments, grinding stones, musical instruments, dancing regalia, domestic appliances and other associated items. There was also as a collection of the

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<sup>16</sup> Souleymane Bashir Diagne, *African art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude*, (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011), 48.

King's African Rifles (KAR) uniforms, KAR regimental drums, weapons [firearms] and flags. I then saw a few oversized chairs including one identified as Queen Elizabeth's and the other as belonging to the first Prime Minister of Malawi after independence, Hastings Kamuzu Banda.<sup>17</sup>

Subsequently, the museum conservator narrated a history of the museum and its collection. To my surprise, he told me the earliest collection in the museum database appears to be in 1941. I could not stop thinking how this was possible since he made it clear to me that the museum was only opened on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1960 as the Nyasaland Museum while Malawi was still a British Protectorate and part of the Rhodesia and Nyasaland Federation. The conservator continued to explain that the establishment of the Nyasaland Museum was due to the interest expressed by Nyasaland Society who promoted the literary, historical and scientific matters of Nyasaland. He emphasised that the Nyasaland Society together with several government officers actually began collecting what they regarded as "objects of interest" for the museum in 1955.<sup>18</sup> He briefly mentioned that a Museum Ordinance was enacted in May, 1957 and a Board of Trustees appointed the British Governor, Sir Robert Armitage as president.<sup>19</sup> Given the brief history, I came to wonder how the museum could collect and keep objects for sixteen years before the establishment of the institution.

This motivated me to gain more insight into the narrative of the museum collection and it connects to the second set of events that happened in 1989: the return of Victor and Theodore Cox collection from the United States of America to Malawi. Given the brief history of the museum collection by the conservator, I began to interrogate this particular collection that

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<sup>17</sup> In the following sections, I will refer to Hastings Kamuzu Banda as Banda or Kamuzu Banda. He was a medical doctor by profession.

<sup>18</sup> The Nyasaland Museum, "Museum file", 7.

<sup>19</sup> The Nyasaland Museum, "Museum file", 1.

dates back to 1941. It appeared to fall outside the framework of the museum records whose sequence of collection commenced in 1960. It is even more curious because a record of objects collected by the Nyasaland Society in 1955 does not appear in the database. Nevertheless, the objects that date 1941 were indicated in the catalogue to have been collected by the Coxes who were brothers that came to Malawi (then Nyasaland) from Britain in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Victor arrived in 1892 barely a year after the British declared Nyasaland (then British Central Africa) as their colony and Theodore followed two years later in 1894.<sup>20</sup> The Cox brothers became farmers of tea, coffee and tobacco in Thyolo District in the southern region of Malawi.<sup>21</sup>

During their time in Malawi, the brothers collected arts and crafts from the communities in the area of their plantation. Little is known about their lives before 1892. To date, it is not clear whether they came to Malawi as independent planters or as employees of Blantyre and East Africa Limited which was one of the first companies to be established by the colonial government. On several occasions while in Malawi (or then British Central Africa and Nyasaland), Victor and Theodore Cox sent a collection of material culture as gifts to their brother, Ernest Cox in England.<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that the nineteenth century saw a growing number of Europeans purchasing and collecting objects in the colonies. The objects were held in private stores and often regarded as “trophies,” mementos or objects of

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<sup>20</sup> Colin A. Baker writes that the country was declared a British territory “to safeguard the small British population of missionaries (largely Scottish) and traders, and to forestall Portuguese territorial claims –in May 1891, and was named British Central Africa. It was remained Nyasaland in 1907.” See Colin Baker, *The evolution of local government in Malawi*, (Ile-Ife, Nigeria: University of Ife Press, 1975), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Museums of Malawi. “Exhibition file,” *Top Mandala Museum Minutes* 21 (1989), 2.

<sup>22</sup> Retrieved from an official Letter titled “Malawi Arts and Crafts- formerly private property of Victor and Theo H. Cox.” This letter was written by the Malawi Ambassador in Washington DC, Timon Mangwazu to the Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi Mr. R. Nkomba dated April 21, 1987. It was provided to me by the Honorary Consul of Malawi in the US, Donal Brody in June, 2015 from his private collection. Hereafter, I will refer to the Donal Brody’s collection as DBC.

wonder.<sup>23</sup> Some were displayed in their respective homes and spoke implicitly of the travel experiences of the owner. The Cox brother's collection was moved by Ernest Cox in 1918 from England to the city of Bellingham, Washington State in the United States of America. After he died in 1940, the collection was donated to the Whatcom Museum by his family members.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time this collection was in Whatcom Museum, Malawi was under the colonial rule and it became part of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1953. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a wave of African independence which gave Malawian nationalists an agency to advocate for the dissolution of the federation. Led by the Prime Minister Kamuzu Banda, his campaign slogan was "slavery within federation or freedom and independence outside the federation."<sup>25</sup> After several efforts to break-up the federation, it was dissolved in December, 1963 leading to Malawi's independence from British rule in 1964. Banda became the first president of the new nation, which became to be known as Malawi. Owen Kalinga argues that Banda's own exploration of the geographical history of the region contributed to the change in name. His assertion which led him to create a new geographical history was that Malawi was part of the Maravi polity during the pre-colonial era.<sup>26</sup> Banda "maintained that the present borders of Malawi are not a reflection of the historical situation of the area because the Maravi state was much bigger than the entity created by the British at the end of the nineteenth century."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Annie E. Coombes. *Reinventing Africa: Museums, material culture and popular imagination in late Victorian and Edwardian England*. (Yale: University Press, 1997), 71-74.

<sup>24</sup> Information retrieved from an article by Mike Kamwendo, "Back Home to Africa," 1989, 56. The article was provided by the Smithsonian Libraries - African Art Index Project DSI. Subject: Museums of Malawi, Whatcom Museum of History and Art. Topic: Art, Malawi-Repatriation Cultural property-Repatriation. Call number: AP2. T674.

<sup>25</sup> K.K. Virmani, *Dr. Banda in the making of Malawi*, (Delhi: Kalinga Publications, 1992), 130.

<sup>26</sup> Kalinga shows that the ancient Maravi covered only part of the Nyasaland Protectorate.

<sup>27</sup> Owen J.M. Kalinga, "The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s: The Legacy of Sir Harry Johnston, the Influence of the Society of Malawi and the Role of Dr Kamuzu Banda and His Malawi Congress Party," *Africa Affairs*, 97 (1998): 539-540.

25 years later, during the week of Malawi's silver jubilee celebrations, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1989, the Victor and Theodore Cox collection was officially handed back to Malawi. The collection was repatriated on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, 1989 after a series of negotiations between a Malawian representative in the USA, Donal Brody who was the Honorary Malawi Consul General, and the Mayor of Bellingham, Tim Douglas with other authorities from Whatcom Museum. The collection was exhibited and housed at Chichiri Museum in Blantyre close to where the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations were held. During this occasion, Malawi government officials likened the return of the collections to a biblical story of the return of the prodigal son. It was depicted as a collection that had been lost but now found.<sup>28</sup>

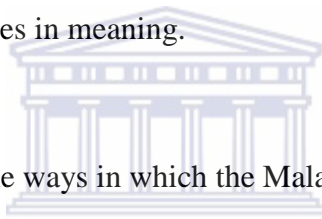
After my brief investigation of these two stories, I felt it is important to write a biography about this collection but dwelling more on the process of repatriation. Firstly, it was claimed by the government of Malawi that it was the "first of its kind" account of repatriation in the country involving the return of indigenous art and cultural artifacts concerning two nations, Malawi and the United States of America.<sup>29</sup> The period when this collection was repatriated to Malawi is also significant. The 1980s and early 1990s saw a growing number of requests for the return of items from the collections of museums, especially those classified as cultural treasures. These included calls for the restitution of Benin bronzes from Britain to Nigeria, the Elgin Marbles [ancient Greek sculptures] from Britain to Greece, ancient Egyptian artifacts from USA and Britain to Egypt, and the return of ancient indigenous artifacts from Argentina to Peru and Ecuador.

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<sup>28</sup> Speech made by the Principal Secretary, Isaac C. Lamba on behalf of the Minister of Education and Culture during a dinner at the handover ceremony of the artifacts from Whatcom Museum, Bellingham, USA to Malawi on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1989 at Mount Soche Hotel. The speech was taken from Museums of Malawi letter collection for the 1989 exhibition. Hereafter, I will refer to the Museums of Malawi collection as MMC.

<sup>29</sup> See the speech made by Lamba during the handover ceremony of the Cox collection on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1989 (MMC).

Secondly, it is important to give an account of this story because it slowly became apparent that the collection had undergone many changes which include acquiring a new identity and a new meaning in the museums it was kept. It should be noted that most of the collections taken from Africa were displayed in ethnographic museums which are usually “perceived as warehouses of colonial loot...charged with divesting non-Western works of the significance they once carried, in the heat and dust of ceremony, in the movement of dance or oratory, on the bodies of their former owners, in the flow of life.”<sup>30</sup> James Clifford substantiates this argument by highlighting that “collections, most notably museums - create the illusion of adequate representation of a world by first cutting objects out of specific contexts (whether cultural, historical, or intersubjective) and making them ‘stand for’ abstract wholes.”<sup>31</sup> I wanted to account for these changes in meaning.



Thirdly, it is important to know the ways in which the Malawi government dealt with the issue of repatriation by making it into a national story and not merely an event involving two museums. The repatriation processes began with the period when there were dramatic political developments in Malawi. In 1989 when Malawi was celebrating 25 years of independence there were tensions, political unrest and allegations that the life president Kamuzu Banda’s rule was “synonymous with torture, extrajudicial killings, detentions without trial and severely circumscribed civil and political liberties.”<sup>32</sup> For this reason, I wanted to investigate whether there was an association between how the government developed forms of mediation to stabilize the apprehension and the festival of celebrating Malawi’s silver jubilee and the return of the cultural artifacts.

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<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Thomas, "We need ethnographic museums today – whatever you think of their history," *Apollo: The International Art Magazine*, March 29, 2016, 12.

<sup>31</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century ethnography, Literature, and Art*, (New York, NY: Harvard University Press, 1988), 220.

<sup>32</sup>“Human Rights Watch, 1989. Malawi”, Human Rights Watch, accessed September 12, 2015 at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1989/WR89/Malaw.htm>.

In order to engage with the collections and repatriation issues, I will employ several themes and explore how Malawi fits into the broader notion of claims of return. I am also interested in a political history of Malawi as a background to various events that arose during the repatriation process and during the time the objects were collected. I will also draw on a body of literature in regard festivals. This is an extension of Malawi's history and how events are used as a way of constructing nations.

### **Issues on Repatriation and collections**

For the past three decades, there have been contestations and debates around the notion of bringing back artifacts, human remains and other cultural objects to the societies that were conceived as sites of origin. Some of the debates have been on the issue of morality, memory and ownership. This conception of bringing back has arisen as a quest of remembrance, memorialisation and the rewriting of history especially in former colonised societies. If today, we look at the return of Cox collection, we may call it a form of repatriation, a term that has become prominent in the world of museums. At that time though it was referred to as a gift for the silver jubilee independence and the term "handover" was continually used.<sup>33</sup>

Repatriation according to Patrick O'Keef, conflates two concepts: that of demand and that of return. He asserts that what is claimed and what is seen as capable of return are questions that can only be negotiated by the parties concerned. He shows that repatriation claims are mostly in the power of the holder of an object who may decide on its return and it rests on a moral or

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<sup>33</sup> Retrieved from a letter dated March 10, 1988 from the Director of Whatcom Museum George Thomas to the Ambassador of Malawi in the USA, Timon Mangwazu. (DBC).

legal basis.<sup>34</sup> Lyndel Prott looks at repatriation and argues that it should not be limited to physical return as interpreted historically rather it should be seen as a “restoration of connections and histories that have been ripped asunder.”<sup>35</sup> She claims that repatriation should not only apply to returns between countries but also between institutions and communities in the same country.<sup>36</sup>

Ciraj Rassool argues along the same lines with Prott when he refers to repatriation of human remains. He believes that the idea of repatriation and reburial should be negotiated.<sup>37</sup> Rassool demonstrates that repatriation and reburial becomes a symbolic healing and a settlement of the past, after centuries of colonial violence, colonial racism and atrocity.<sup>38</sup> He also adds that repatriation becomes a symbol of national significance. Repatriation becomes a way of decontextualising old meanings and establishing new ones.

Other debates on repatriation have centered on the issue of ownership. The concept of ownership can be looked at from three different perspectives: the issue of universalism, nation, and cosmopolitanism. The work of Prott shows that from the 2000s there was a shift in meaning as regards collections in the major museums and research institutions in Europe and America. These museums, including the British Museum, jointly signed a Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums.<sup>39</sup> According to Prott, this declaration opposes the returning of art works to their original owners. The understanding of this declaration was

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<sup>34</sup> Patrick O’Keef, “A Comparison of the Washington and Vilnius Principles and Resolution 1205,” in *Witnesses to history: A compendium of documents and writings on the return of cultural objects*, ed. Lyndel Prott. (Paris: UNESCO, 2009), 158.

<sup>35</sup> Lyndel V Prott, ed. *Witnesses to history: a compendium of documents and writings on the return of cultural objects*. (Paris: UNESCO, 2009), xxiii.

<sup>36</sup> Prott, *Witnesses to history*, xxiii.

<sup>37</sup> Ciraj Rassool, “Human Remains, the Discipline of the Dead, and the South African Memorial Complex.” in *The Politics of Heritage in Africa*, ed. Derek Peterson et al. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 148.

<sup>38</sup> Rassool, “Human Remains,” 135.

<sup>39</sup> Prott, *Witnesses to history*, 116.



that the objects acquired, whether by purchase, or exchange of gifts becomes part of the museums that have cared for them.<sup>40</sup> These objects also become part of the nation's heritage.

David Wilson argues in favour of these universal museums giving a case of the British

Museum:

The British Museum...is a considerable element in the cultural heritage of the world; to start to dismantle it by bowing to unthinking, if understandable, nationalistic demands would be to start a process of cultural vandalism...I have tried to stress the unique quality of the museum in international terms; if one domino falls, the rest will surely follow. If the British Museum is the first to give in, the other great museums of the world would be under pressure to follow suit and the spirit of man would be the poorer. In a period when all our aspirations are based on the hopes of international agreement, we cannot let narrow nationalism destroy a trust for the whole world.<sup>41</sup>

This assertion of universality as well as the consideration of universal museums as rightful guardians of objects is opposed by George Abungu. Abungu demonstrates how these museums have hidden behind the idea of universality to escape from repatriating objects. He claims that fear of repatriation is the driving force of the universal museums.<sup>42</sup> He argues that these museums fear that they would be left empty or with hardly any collections worth talking about.<sup>43</sup> Abungu probes further on the criteria used for museums to be included as universal museums since all museums share a common mission and a shared vision, "do universal museums claim to be universal on the grounds of their size, their collections, how rich they are?"<sup>44</sup> Based on Abungu's arguments, the claim to be universal museums appears to be one that is self-authorizing.

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<sup>40</sup> Prot, *Witnesses to history*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> David M. Wilson, *The British Museum: Purpose and Politics*, (London: British Museum Press, 1989), 117.

<sup>42</sup> George Abungu, "The Declaration: A contested issue," in *Witnesses to history: A compendium of documents and writings on the return of cultural objects*, ed. Lyndel Prot. (Paris: UNESCO, 2009), 121.

<sup>43</sup> Abungu, "The Declaration," 122.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

Another debate has risen on the issue of repatriation and the nation particularly where the cultural objects originated from. Levitt argues that by displaying artifacts from other lands, countries merely demonstrate “their ability to collect and control the world beyond their borders.”<sup>45</sup> To her understanding, “museums not only created nations but also justified their imperialist projects.”<sup>46</sup> She argues that most claims of repatriation from the formerly colonised countries come from this context. These museums want to position themselves as national through their objects. Yet, to others, the return of these materials becomes a reminder of colonialism in the past and of continuing inequalities in the world of the present. Annie Coombes presents an example of how elitist and neo-imperialist attitudes sought to prevent repatriation. She uses Nigeria to make her point by arguing that despite its persistent demands for the restitution of Benin bronzes, it has not been granted by Britain.<sup>47</sup> In the same way, Elgin Marbles of Greece which are in the British Museum have not been repatriated despite the growing calls from Greece and the Marbles priceless value. Tiffany Jenkins argues against the idea of repatriation of objects in this regard and questions the museums that literally summon and advertise for the return of cultural objects being held in their own museums:

There is a self-loathing at the heart of it... There’s a real lack of faith in both the meaning and power of cultural artifacts and their history. Because many museums are not interested in that anymore. They’re far more interested in making themselves feel better about a past they had nothing to do with.<sup>48</sup>

Lastly on the debate of ownership, Anthony Kwame Appiah dismisses ideas of both the nation and universalism in repatriation claims. He argues that we need to go beyond the nation and recognise we all have claims on this issue of ownership of objects. For instance,

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<sup>45</sup> Peggy Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances: How Museums Put the Nation and the World on Display*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Levitt, *Artifacts and Allegiances*, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Coombes, *Reinventing Africa*, 198.

<sup>48</sup> Tom Slater, "Museums are not agents of the elite," *Spiked Review*, March 2016, 1.

the British Museum should not hide behind the idea of universalism to maintain its hold on collections. At the same time, previously colonised nations should also not insist in claiming its national treasures as belonging to their particular nation. Appiah argues that “cultures produce a great deal of variety, but also much that is the same.”<sup>49</sup> On that point, he does not entirely believe in the idea of return:

The mere fact that something you own is important to the descendants of people who gave it away does not generally give them an entitlement to it...It is a fine gesture to return things to the descendants of their makers-or to offer it to them for sale-but it certainly isn't a duty. You might also show your respect for the culture it came from by holding on to it because you value it yourself.<sup>50</sup>

According to Appiah these objects show us how we are all related to one another. He argues that we may appropriate these objects and put them into differing contexts, for instance, showing how the objects change meaning, and how knowledge and its significance has changed. Therefore, the objects do not belong to an individual nation but they may show us linkages and associations between people. From his point of view, he argues that objects can be entry points to cross-cultural conversations.<sup>51</sup> Once we see that we have some shared ideas, we can revise and open up to other ways of thinking. It must be stressed that this is not a universalism but a cosmopolitanism which recognises changing and shifting meanings and associations.

### **Historicising Malawi, the people and the land**

The repatriation of this set of objects known as the Cox collection occurred before the debates highlighted above were so prominent. To understand what happened with this

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<sup>49</sup> Anthony Kwame Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (Issues of Our Time)*, (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2007), 96.

<sup>50</sup> Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, 131.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

specific collection one needs to delve into a history of Malawi and how this collection fits into that history. Much is written about the history of Malawi, about imperial expansion, the development of a plantation economy and resistance. White's work on the plantation economy is significant as he argues that the estates were established with the intention of making profits in the colonies, and became spaces of exploiting people using *thangata* system (labour rent system).<sup>52</sup> White's work on plantation politics looks at some of the violent and brutal mechanisms that were employed on the plantations by focusing on the Magomero estate in Chiradzulu. He emphasises on the inhumane practices by the estate owner, Alexander Livingstone Bruce, grandson of David Livingstone. White highlights that *thangata* system enslaved the peasants who were deemed as serfs. Coercion was seemingly seen as a fundamental tool to control labour on the estate.<sup>53</sup> Many of the Malawi's cultural objects found in Western museums are reckoned to have been collected in several villages during the period when colonialists settled and owned plantations in the country. There have been some writings by Michael Kumwenda on the Cox collection and other collections taken from Malawi in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.<sup>54</sup> He argues that these objects could have been acquired through purchase or barter since there was "monetary value" involved.<sup>55</sup> He goes further to argue that most expatriates who owned private collections of ethnographic objects took advantage of lack of awareness from the communities. As a result, Kumwenda stipulates that they may have been duped in giving the objects away.

Robert Rotberg gives an account of the rise of nationalism in Malawi from colonial to post-colonial era. He looks into politics of Malawi and the emergence of Kamuzu Banda. He

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<sup>52</sup> Landeg White, *Magomero: Portrait of an African Village*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), 211.

<sup>53</sup> White, *Magomero*, 212.

<sup>54</sup> Kumwenda, Principal curator has written in Ndiwula magazine on cox collection and presented a paper on illicit trafficking on objects in general from Malawi.

<sup>55</sup> Michael G. Kumwenda, "Illicit Traffic of Cultural Property in Malawi: Problems and Prospects," Paper presented at the seminar on illicit traffic of cultural property: Arusha, Tanzania, 28-29 September, 1993.

writes on how nationalists in the 1950s put pressure to the colonial government to attain their independence. David Williams concurs with Rotberg and examines the political, economic and judicial life in Malawi that led to Banda's rise in power. He writes on the return of Banda in July 1958 from overseas and his leadership in the Nyasaland African Congress which later became Malawi Congress Party (MCP). Williams portrays Banda as an authoritarian, a ruthless man of substantial astuteness, courage, and political discernment.<sup>56</sup> He further argues that between 1970s and 1980s, Banda used his powers to control and acquire land owned by anyone in towns or rural areas by force. In addition, he examines the press restrictions during Banda's reign and shows how expatriate journalists were deported and Malawi journalists sent to detention camps for passing "false information" to the public. John Lwanda to the contrary rather points to what he sees as some of Banda's achievements which relates to the concepts of progress, nation building and national unity. Lwanda acknowledges that Banda was aware of how the country was "mysteriously 'regionalized' or rather 'provincialized' during the colonial period" which led to conflicts.<sup>57</sup> He argues that the crafting of stiff laws was a way of maintaining both "peace and stability," along with "law and order."<sup>58</sup> The 1989 repatriation of the Cox collection would in Lwanda's terms, be a symbol of national unity against the odds of imperialism and colonialism which the country was under for 73 years. This recent work of Lwanda is trying to resuscitate the image of Banda in contrast to the interpretation of Williams and Rotberg's work.

Kalinga argues along the same lines as Williams, drawing attention to the rule of Banda after Malawi attained its independence in 1960s through to 1980s. He argues that as the first president of Malawi, Banda wanted to create a new nation different from the coloniser's.

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<sup>56</sup> David Williams, *Malawi: The Politics of Despair*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978).

<sup>57</sup> John L. Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi: A Study in Promise, Power, and Legacy*, (Zomba, Malawi: Kachere Series, 2009), 271.

<sup>58</sup> Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi*, 277.

Kalinga strongly argues that Banda carefully manipulated oral traditions and history to consolidate and legitimise his power, also declaring Chichewa, his mother tongue, as the national language. Kalinga brings in the idea of “restoration” which Banda became engrossed in. He shows that Banda managed to change the name of the country which was until then referred to as Nyasaland and he relocated the colonial capital city Zomba to Lilongwe.<sup>59</sup> For Banda, “Nyasaland” and “Zomba” were both associated with colonisation. Lilongwe was deemed by Banda “as the natural centre of the new Malawi and it was closest in spirit, language and tradition.”<sup>60</sup> The idea of “repatriation” links to his understanding of “restoration.” Repatriation could have been a way of positioning the nation to a new way of thinking, to continue to assert a break from a colonial past that associated such ethnographic collections with “primitiveness” or “timelessness.” Kalinga argues that “Banda attempted to establish a modern state while at the same time being concerned with preserving and, in some cases, inventing Malawian culture.”<sup>61</sup> This ambivalence shows in a greater way that Banda may have had a both pro-colonial and anti-colonial imagery. His pro-colonial imagery was portrayed among other areas in his modern form of English dressing which comprised of homburg top-hats and dark suits.

There are several instances that Banda is portrayed as projecting his own image to popularise himself. Sarah Worden who writes on the production of cloth in Malawi shows implicitly how popular culture was used through political party cloth images. She shows how women were required to cover themselves from head to toe in Banda’s party cloth during political and national events. Worden demonstrates how this fabric “decorated with life size images of

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<sup>59</sup> Kalinga, “The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s,” 549.

<sup>60</sup> Lwanda, *Kamuzu Banda of Malawi*, 294.

<sup>61</sup> Kalinga, “The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s,” 549.

the president's portrait...promoted his power and prestige."<sup>62</sup> In addition, the images projected Banda's legitimacy.<sup>63</sup> She finally shows how the cloth was used in 1978 during a commemoration of Banda's twenty-year return from Britain to Malawi. Worden shows that the cloth's design symbolised "Banda's role in freeing Malawi from colonial rule."<sup>64</sup>

Reuben Chirambo draws links with the idea of Kalinga on how Banda's regime manipulated tradition to legitimise his power. He gives an account of the manner in which popular culture was used by Banda to reinforce and sustain what he calls "Kamuzuism." Chirambo demonstrates how the messianic songs which were composed, and the performance of activities contributed to the political discourse that advanced "Kamuzuism" as a hegemony.<sup>65</sup> Chirambo explores how in the 1980s, the subaltern in Malawi attempted to express resistance to Banda's regime by using popular culture, in particular songs to highlight the severe repression including allegations of northern domination. The songs spoke tactfully that "despite Banda's own insistence that there were no divisions along ethnic or tribal lines...but just Malawians, in practice Banda confirmed the regional and tribal divisions of the country."<sup>66</sup> Repatriation on the other hand is not a popular culture but rather, an elitist culture. According to Ivan Karp, "elite culture claims its authority on the basis of its possession of cultural resources and experience."<sup>67</sup> Even though the objects went to the museum and the call for repatriation became part of nationalism, Banda did not use this claim as a populist move. Populism, as practiced by Banda still remained in the field of dance and songs.

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<sup>62</sup> Sarah Worden, "Chitenje: The Production and Use of Printed Cotton Cloth in Malawi," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* 888 (2014), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Gilman, *The Dance of Politics*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Worden, "Chitenje: The Production and Use of Printed Cotton Cloth in Malawi," 4.

<sup>65</sup> Reuben M. Chirambo, "Culture, Hegemony, and Dictatorship in Malawi: Song, Dance, and Politics in Malawi, 1964–1994." (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Chirambo, "Culture, Hegemony, and Dictatorship in Malawi," 286.

<sup>67</sup> Ivan Karp, "Festivals" in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 283.

Lisa Gilman recognises other external influences which include speeches from Banda's fellow comrades in the freedom struggle, music and dance that played a role in the form of his rule. In emphasising this point, Gilman quotes Henry Masauko Chipembere's letters of invitation to Banda.<sup>68</sup> Chipembere summoned Banda to become their leader, a saviour and a face of the independence struggle:

Human nature is such that it needs a hero to be hero-worshipped if a struggle is to succeed... This publicity could be used with advantage and it would cause great excitement and should precipitate almost a revolution in political thought...<sup>69</sup>

Gilman also looks at music and dance that were used by activists as political tools for liberation and for asserting their national identity and embracing their African culture. These projected Banda as the "political saviour," "lion," "ngwazi (conqueror)" and a "doctor" coming to cleanse Nyasaland of what was referred to as "the cancer of Federation."<sup>70</sup> By depicting him as a hero and a symbol of hope with the messianic attributes, Gilman writes that it helped Banda's government to transform "what was the liberatory practice of political activists in the independence movement into a widespread mechanism for controlling the population."<sup>71</sup> It is clear that the repatriation of the cultural objects came during Banda's leadership. For that reason, one can begin to draw linkages to the messianic attributes he appeared to possess. His imagery was not just of one leader who leads his country out of the bondage of federation, but during his reign, these objects which were repatriated were

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<sup>68</sup> Henry Masauko Chipembere fought along Banda in the freedom struggle. He is the one who invited Banda from exile to become a political figure and a "messiah", a fresh face in the liberation struggle.

<sup>69</sup> Lisa Gilman, *The Dance of Politics: Gender Performance and Democratization in Malawi*, (Philadelphia, USA: Temple University Press, 2009), 37.

<sup>70</sup> Gilman, *The Dance of Politics*, 38.

<sup>71</sup> Gilman, *The Dance of Politics*, 5.



described as “national treasures and an unbelievable intersection of people, places, time and objects” that were returning to a place called home.<sup>72</sup>

### **Festivities, Nationalism and Museums**

The repatriation of the Cox collection took place during and was part of the 25<sup>th</sup> independence anniversary festivities in Malawi. Pertaining to festivals, Leslie Witz shows how some festivals are organised as national events. He further argues that the idea of festivals includes notions of inclusion and exclusion even though they are supposed to be a moment of inclusivity.<sup>73</sup>

In relation to Malawi, Kalinga argues that Banda promoted various cultural dances and art with an idea of celebrating multiculturalism at national festivities. Kalinga further argues that festivities were used as a drive for national unification. It should be noted that the collection of art in the museums which comprise of various ethnic groups even those from other African countries plays a role as a vehicle of nationalism and pan-Africanism.<sup>74</sup> For this reason, museums may become part of festivities even though the museum is an elitist institution.

Karp attempts to make linkages between museums or exhibitions and festivals. He demonstrates how museums appear to set up “barriers” between the audience and the display.<sup>75</sup> He argues on the other hand that festivals are seemingly inclusive as they allow involvement of the audience to become performers. Karp strongly argues that as a result of its

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<sup>72</sup> A direct quote from Donal Brody, the former Honorary Consul of the Republic of Malawi in 1988 when he visited Whatcom Museum of History and Art (DBC).

<sup>73</sup> Leslie Witz, *Apartheid's Festival: Contesting South Africa's National Pasts*. (Bloomington, USA: Indiana University Press, 2003), 188.

<sup>74</sup> Janet Hess, “Exhibiting Ghana: Display, Documentary and ‘National’ Art in the Nkrumah era,” *African Studies Review* 44, (2001), 63.

<sup>75</sup> Karp, “Festivals,” 283.

inclusivity nature, a festival becomes an attractive forum for the exhibition of other agendas.<sup>76</sup> This gives an indication that museums or exhibitions can become part of the festival. Karp tries to show that though museums may seem to be limiting and exclusive while festivals may seem to encourage openness and transgression of the norms, it is easy to see linkages as the festival is as carefully regulated as the museum.<sup>77</sup> Giving an example of folklife festivals in Richard Bauman and Patricia Sawin's work, Karp articulates their argument that these particular festivals "often force performances into an ill-fitting frame."<sup>78</sup>

With reference to Zambia, Lawrence Flint argues about the complexities and dilemmas in the Kuomboka annual festival in the Upper Zambezi valley performed by Lozi people. Flint brings out a debate in relation to Lozi people and Zambians at large that festivals are deemed as strong symbols of identification in society. He argues that by displaying a strong sense of cultural identity, festivals extend into the dialectical realms of citizenship.<sup>79</sup> Flint further shows that festivals become a unifying pillar as in the case of Lozi culture. He demonstrates this by highlighting that the Lozi people attend Kuomboka as a pilgrimage which appears to bring unity. Flint concludes that festivals have a notion of inclusivity when he argues that, "Kuomboka is a heritage festival that is at once inclusive, participative and experiential."<sup>80</sup>

Lastly, by referring to "pageants", Peter Merrington categorises them as festivals that are performed for national events. By referring to the great pageant during the opening of the first parliament of the Union of South Africa, in 1910 Merrington demonstrates that festivals cannot be entirely separated from showing the nation as a site of progress. In addition,

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<sup>76</sup> Karp, "Festivals", 284.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>79</sup> Lawrence Flint, "Contradictions and Challenges in Representing the Past: The Kuomboka Festival of Western Zambia," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32, (2006), 704.

<sup>80</sup> Flint, "Contradictions and Challenges in Representing the Past," 708.

festivals may be seen as “an attempt to construct a new national culture by means of reinterpreting, classifying, and appropriating the past.”<sup>81</sup>

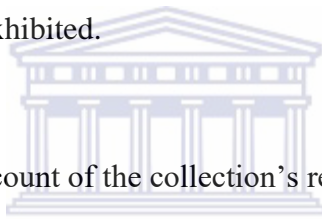
In the Malawi context, the repatriation of the objects was infused and intertwined with Malawi’s twenty-fifth anniversary festivities of which the idea of unity, inclusivity and diplomatic relations were highlighted. During the celebrations, the leadership of Banda was commended through speeches, imagery, songs and dances which were rather a political move. In a greater way, the repatriated collections were given a nationalist meaning and were likened to Banda’s return to Malawi in the 1950s. This represents an attempt to reassert his hegemony considering the political tensions which were allegedly happening in Malawi.

But the festival and the return are near the end of the story I want to tell. I start with exploring the lives of the Cox brothers and in the first chapter I introduce Victor, Theodore and Ernest Cox. They become important in starting the process of giving the collection life and for building its archive. The chapter interrogates the reasons the Cox brothers may have collected ethnographic artifacts from the people in the surrounding area. It tells a story of the travel between spaces of Cox collection from Malawi to Europe and later to the United States where it changes meaning, from memento in a private collection to a museum collection at Whatcom Museum of History and Art. The chapter focuses on the early years of this collection from its birth in Malawi in 1892 to 1941 when it starts a new life in a museum. It also looks at how the collection acquires a new identity through accessioning and classification. The Whatcom Museum is central because that is where the body of this collection was formed and established.

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<sup>81</sup> Peter Merrington, “Pageantry and Primitivism: Dorothea Fairbridge and the ‘Aesthetics of Union.’” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21, (1995), 656.

In Chapter two, I give an extensive account of how the collection was rediscovered in the 1980s by a Malawian representative. These objects upon their rediscovery were held by the government of Malawi as symbols of pride and were hailed as national treasures of the country. For that reason, issues of nationalism become central in understanding the politics of return of the collection. The chapter also gives a detailed and complex account of the process of negotiations prior to the return of the objects from the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham to Museums of Malawi. This process of negotiations involved several stakeholders including notable figures such as the Malawian Ambassador in the United States of America and the Mayor of Bellingham in the Pacific Northwest region of USA. The chapter further shows that the collection in its last days in the USA was no longer locked away in stores in Whatcom Museum. It became known and exhibited.



In Chapter three, I give a brief account of the collection's return to Malawi. Its return coincides with Malawi's silver jubilee independence in 1989. The collection was received in Malawi as a gift of independence from the United States. In this chapter, I analyse the exhibition of the Cox collection which was mounted at Chichiri Museum about 1.7 kilometers from where the festivities of independence took place. This collection remained on display for eight years. I will examine how the collection was brought into a national political narrative. I will further examine the reflections of people upon the collection's return to Malawi. This will provide connections with the making and the remaking of the museum where 1941, before the museum was even conceived of, becomes the starting date of its collection.

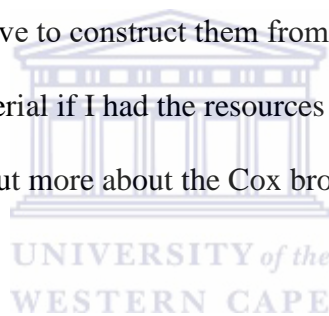
## CHAPTER ONE

### TRAVELLING BETWEEN SPACES: THE COX COLLECTION FROM MALAWI TO EUROPE, 1892- 1940

My journey into this research started in March 2015 with my supervisor Leslie Witz. I was anxious in finding an engaging research topic. At the back of my mind though, I was contemplating on writing how Museums of Malawi had transformed and how it has attempted to shake off the shackles of colonial imagination in regard to the interpretation of its exhibitions and classification of its collections since its inception in 1960. In the midst of our discussion, Witz told me how important it is to tell a story that “will not turn into a predictable narrative of the twentieth century African museums, of doing away with colonial pasts of displays and process of conservation.” Evidently, I could deduce that he was guiding me towards a direction of writing something unique, a story that could give a strong sense of a moment in time at the museum. With my interest in objects of art as a researcher and curator in ethnography, I wondered if this could be an opportunity to tell a story of my encounter with “Victor and Theodore Cox collection” that appears in the Museums of Malawi database as a donation from the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington State.

The idea of writing a biography of the Cox collection seemed important considering the ways that it had travelled over a period of almost a century: from Malawi (then Nyasaland) to England, on to the United States of America and then back to Malawi. With this idea in mind, Witz emphasized that “every museum goes into changing moments which is a natural process.” In the same way, I should consider that “museum objects have a life.” While realising the significance of the story of the Cox collection, I became aware that I might have limitations given what might be a very small archive, essentially the collection itself, the

catalogue in the museum, Nyasaland Society Journals, Tea Association of Malawi publications and Museums of Malawi minutes for the exhibition. This small archive had several limitations too. Firstly, I came to understand that many of the tea industry publications were largely publicity material. Secondly, the material was more broadly about tea and was not very specific on Cox brothers. Thirdly, the catalogue at the museum has little information on the provenance of the collection. In addition, the repatriation had taken place 27 years ago and most of the current employees at the museum were unaware of the processes that had occurred. There has been little subsequent communication with Whatcom Museum who I assumed could have more information on the objects. I therefore need to reconstruct a story of how the body of the collection was formed given that “objects cannot tell their own biographies - we have to construct them from the materials available to us.”<sup>1</sup> There might have been more material if I had the resources to travel to England. I might, for instance, have been able to find out more about the Cox brothers and their life before coming to Malawi.



From the background, this chapter looks into the fragments of the life of the Cox brothers in the plantations of Malawi. The chapter also intends to blend the story of the Coxes with the social, economic and political context of Malawi in the 1890s. I am also keen to explore how the Coxes brought the objects together to what later became a “collection.” This entails that the chapter looks at the objects’ journey to England and then the USA where they accumulate different meanings and values. By undergoing different phases, Igor Kopytoff demonstrates that objects’ life can be juxtaposed to that of people.

One would ask questions [about objects] similar to those one asks about people...Where does the thing come from and who made it? What has been its

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<sup>1</sup>Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles, *Collecting Colonialism: Material Culture and Colonial Change*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), 23.

career so far, and what do people consider to be an ideal career for such things? What are the recognised “ages” or periods in the thing’s “life,” and what are the cultural markers for them? How does the thing’s use change with its age...?<sup>2</sup>

### **Victor and Theodore Cox in the plantations of Shire Highlands<sup>3</sup>**

In 1891, Malawi (then British Central Africa and later Nyasaland) was declared a British protectorate. During that year, there was an influx of Englishmen who came to settle. Many of them saw an opportunity of establishing themselves as a result of the abundant fertile land which was suitable for agriculture. A good number of these Englishmen prior to this period were missionaries, while others were transporters and ivory hunters.<sup>4</sup> With the colonial government in place, the European settlers were encouraged by the British governor Sir Harry Johnson to establish plantations of coffee and tea given the “abundance of cheap native labour...as he [settler] cannot do himself, in a tropical sun.”<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that all this was done in order to generate profits and produce wealth in the colony from industrial farming. McCracken states that over a million acres of land was taken from the communities by the colonial government and distributed to British growers in order for them to grow cash crops. He further mentions that some chiefs were given “small quantities of goods” in exchange of “large amounts of land” and yet others particularly the Yao chiefs in the Shire highlands, gave away deserted land as a result of famine.<sup>6</sup>

Victor J.N. Cox came to Malawi in 1892 at a time when the administration of the British Central African Protectorate had issued legal titles in form of “certificate of claim” to almost

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<sup>2</sup> Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 66.

<sup>3</sup> Shire Highlands include those districts in the southern part of Malawi comprising Blantyre, Cholo (now Thyolo), Mlanje (now Mulanje), Chiradzulu, and Zomba districts).

<sup>4</sup> John McCracken, *A History of Malawi, 1859-1966*, (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2012), 77.

<sup>5</sup> McCracken, *A History of Malawi*, 77.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

all the land acquired by Europeans up to 1891, or at least claimed by them.<sup>7</sup> Cox's name appears to be amongst the 59 claims even though he is deemed to have come a year later. As an ambitious man, Victor Cox established a coffee, tea and tobacco plantation in 1892. Though Cox was enthusiastic and optimistic about his coffee operations, it proved unsuccessful as a result of a coffee disease caused by a borer beetle.<sup>8</sup> Tea on the other hand was initially not considered as a good option because of its continual results of unproductiveness.

In 1878, a tea seed from the Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh was experimented in Blantyre, Malawi at the Church of Scotland Mission garden where it failed and in 1886, only two seeds imported from London's Kew Gardens survived.<sup>9</sup> These tea bushes were taken by Henry Brown, a Ceylon (Sri Lanka) farmer who planted them in his estate known as Thornwood and some of them were planted in Lauderdale, an estate of his colleague John Moir. Both of these estates were in Mulanje District, an area with "acid soil and high rainfall."<sup>10</sup> It is claimed that one of the seeds that survived at Blantyre Mission Garden, the mother of these reputable tea estates in Mulanje, still exists today.<sup>11</sup> This story of the tea tree plant seems a bit mythological and it is presented as self-publicity for the tea industry in Malawi. I went to the mission gardens to see this legendary tea tree plant for myself but nobody could point it to me. It should be noted that, the success of Thornwood and Lauderdale estates marks the beginning of the tea industry in Malawi and inspired Victor Cox to grow tea on a large scale as a substitute for coffee whose production was uncertain due to "antestia beetle,

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<sup>7</sup> McCracken, *A History of Malawi*, 77.

<sup>8</sup> Malawi - Tea, *Tea in Malawi*, (The Tea Association (Central Africa) Ltd: University Press of Africa, 1968). 1-64.

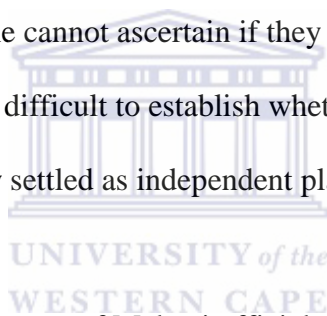
<sup>9</sup> Malawi - Tea, *Tea in Malawi*, 13.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> G. G. S. J. Hadlow, "The History of Tea in Nyasaland: An address delivered to the Nyasaland Society." *The Nyasaland Journal* 13.1 (1960): 21.



overcropping, failure to maintain soil fertility and over production in Brazil.”<sup>12</sup> After spending two years in the Protectorate, Victor saw the difficulties under which other estates were going through especially in running their operation. Aside from transport problems, the planters and their families suffered “considerable hardship from disease” resulting in ill health and they also faced challenges of water supplies.<sup>13</sup> As with many of the farmers, Victor’s concerns were with the labour required on a large plantation that needed tilling, and close supervision. Considering his options, Victor called upon his brother Theodore to assist him with the operation of the plantation. According to Whatcom Museum official documents on the Coxes, Theodore joined his brother two years later in 1894 after the establishment of the plantation.<sup>14</sup> I did some research to find out about their lives before 1892 but found very little about these two brothers. One cannot ascertain if they came with their families or by themselves. In the same way, it is difficult to establish whether they came as employees of the colonial government or if they settled as independent planters.



Nonetheless, I gathered from Museums of Malawi official exhibition write-ups that Victor and Theodore first settled in Thyolo District, Ntambwa village whose headman was Nkautuka.<sup>15</sup> Thyolo which was then referred to as Cholo is a district in the Shire highlands. It is surrounded on the North by the Blantyre District and on the east by the Chiradzulu and Mulanje Districts.<sup>16</sup> A 1931 annual report of Thyolo (some 40 years later) describes the district as characterized by fertile soils with natural green vegetation and Thyolo Mountain being the most outstanding feature. In addition to this, the whole district is referred in the

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<sup>12</sup> J. A. Hutson, "An Outline of the Early History of the Tea Industry in Malaŵi." *The Society of Malawi Journal* 31.1 (1978): 42.

<sup>13</sup> Malawi - Tea, *Tea in Malawi*, 15.

<sup>14</sup> Document dated the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June, 1988, Whatcom Museum of History and Art, “The Cox Collection –Or How the Legacy of Malawi Found its Way to Bellingham.” It was provided to me by Donal Brody in June, 2015 from a private collection of Janis Olson. Hereafter, I will refer to the Janis Olson collection as JOC.

<sup>15</sup> Museums of Malawi. “Exhibition file” *Top Mandala Museum Minutes* 21 (1989), 7.

<sup>16</sup> Malawi National Archives, “Annual Report” *Report on Native Affairs for the Cholo Districts* (1931), 1931, 10.

report to be “well watered by innumerable small, but permanent streams.”<sup>17</sup> The Cox brothers settled in this land of the Mang’anja who were the earliest known inhabitants of the district. The official colonial source of the 1930s says that slave trade amongst the Yao, and the famine in the Portuguese Territory that led the Nguru (Lhomwe) and Akakola to Malawi made the population in the area diverse.<sup>18</sup> The majority of the people living there today are the Mang’anja, Lomwe, Yao and Ngoni.

In 1908, Victor with assistance from his brother Theodore planted out tea on his plantation, Bandanga which he took from Lauderdale estate. According to the Tea Association of Malawi publication, Bandanga is the first estate in Thyolo District to plant and produce the tea crop.<sup>19</sup> In 1910, the Coxes are said by the tea industry publication to have built a bungalow with a thatched roof supported by poles made from blue gum (*Eucalyptu*) trees. Many planters in the Protectorate between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a similar style for their buildings. The bungalows were large “with high ceilings and top lights, surrounded by a wide ‘khonde’ [verandah], all designed to keep the house cool.”<sup>20</sup>

During a site visit as part of my research to establish the Coxes early life, I had an opportunity to go to Bandanga estate. It was difficult getting there as I could not locate the place. Most of the people I inquired from had no idea of the actual place and a couple of times I was given incorrect directions. I underestimated distances and found myself on other estates. Before going there, I had a faint idea of how the bungalow might appear having had a sketch of it from the Society of Malawi library. As I drove from Thyolo town’s centre, I followed a dirt road that I assumed was impassable but it later took me to a small community

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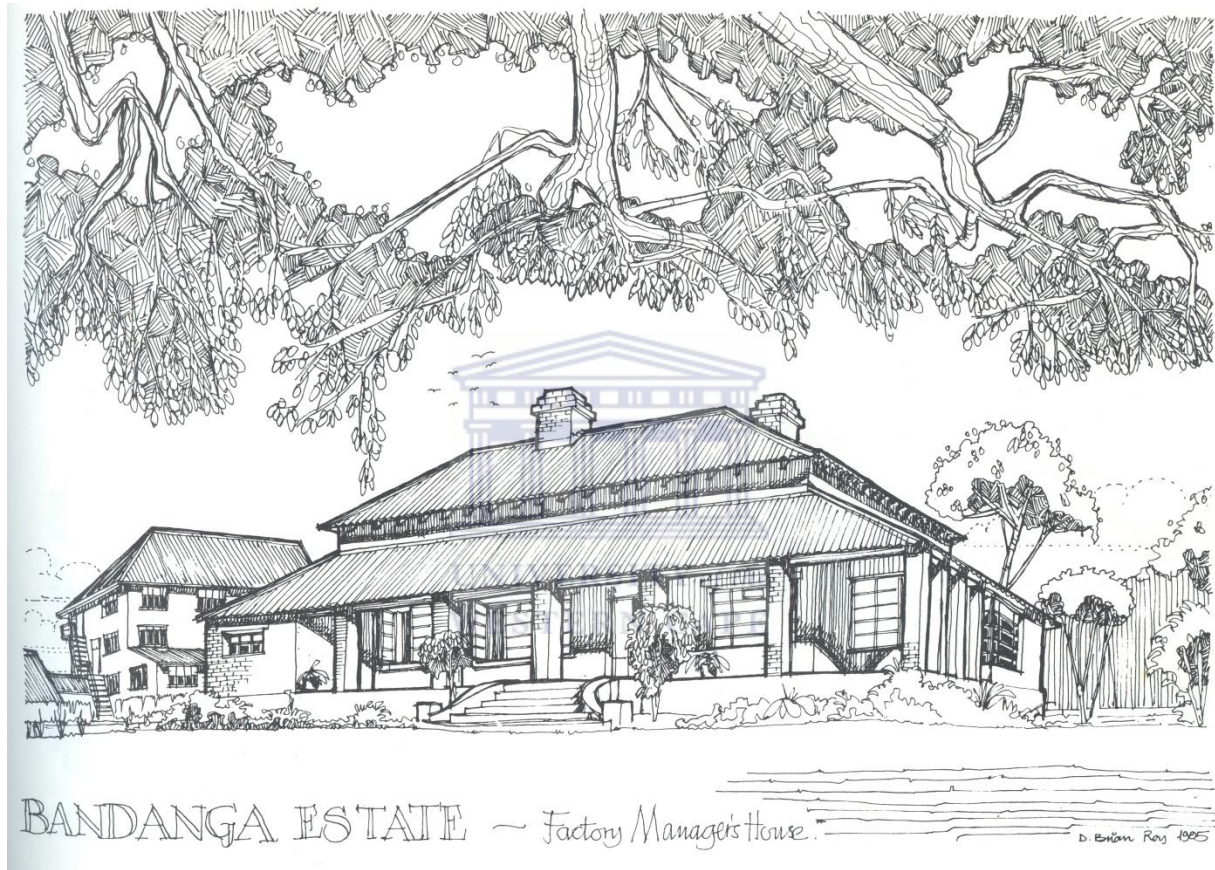
<sup>17</sup> Malawi National Archives, “Annual Report,” 10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>19</sup> The Tea Association of Malawi, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1936-1986, Tea Vignettes*, (Blantyre: Blantyre Print and Packaging, 1986), 12.

<sup>20</sup> The Tea Association of Malawi, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1936-1986, Tea Vignettes*, iv.

and an estate. With keen interest, I saw what looked like a factory and a residence with a barbed wire fence. To my great excitement, I established that this was Bandanga Factory and the building next to it was the Managers house [Coxes bungalow] though it looked quite modernized with galvanized iron sheet roofing. According to the Tea Association of Malawi, this factory was the first to be built on the estate by the Coxes in 1912.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2:** Coxes estate in the early 19th century, published in The Tea Association of Malawi handbook during their 50th Anniversary in 1986.

Unfortunately, I was not allowed to enter the premises or to speak to the site manager as there was a lot of work going on in the factory and their overseer was not around. I could tell that I was mistakenly thought of as a journalist trying to take photos or to make film footage of the working conditions in the factories based on the type of questions that were posed to me. The Bandanga estate was sold in 1925 to a group of well-known personalities of the time

<sup>21</sup> The Tea Association of Malawi, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1936-1986, Tea Vignettes*, 12.

including R.S. Hynde and W. Tait-Bowtie and there have been more changes in ownership from the 1990s to present:

In 1937 the company transferred its seat to the UK, where it became a public company quoted on the London Stock-Exchange, and later its secretaries and agents were Dickson Anderson & Company, who also acted in that capacity for many other UK owned states in the country.<sup>22</sup>

Apparently, it has expanded and they grow and produce coffee and macadamia nuts. This initiative to engage into food retailing business started with Bandanga Holdings Limited which was a subsidiary of Normans Group PLC, another UK based company.<sup>23</sup>

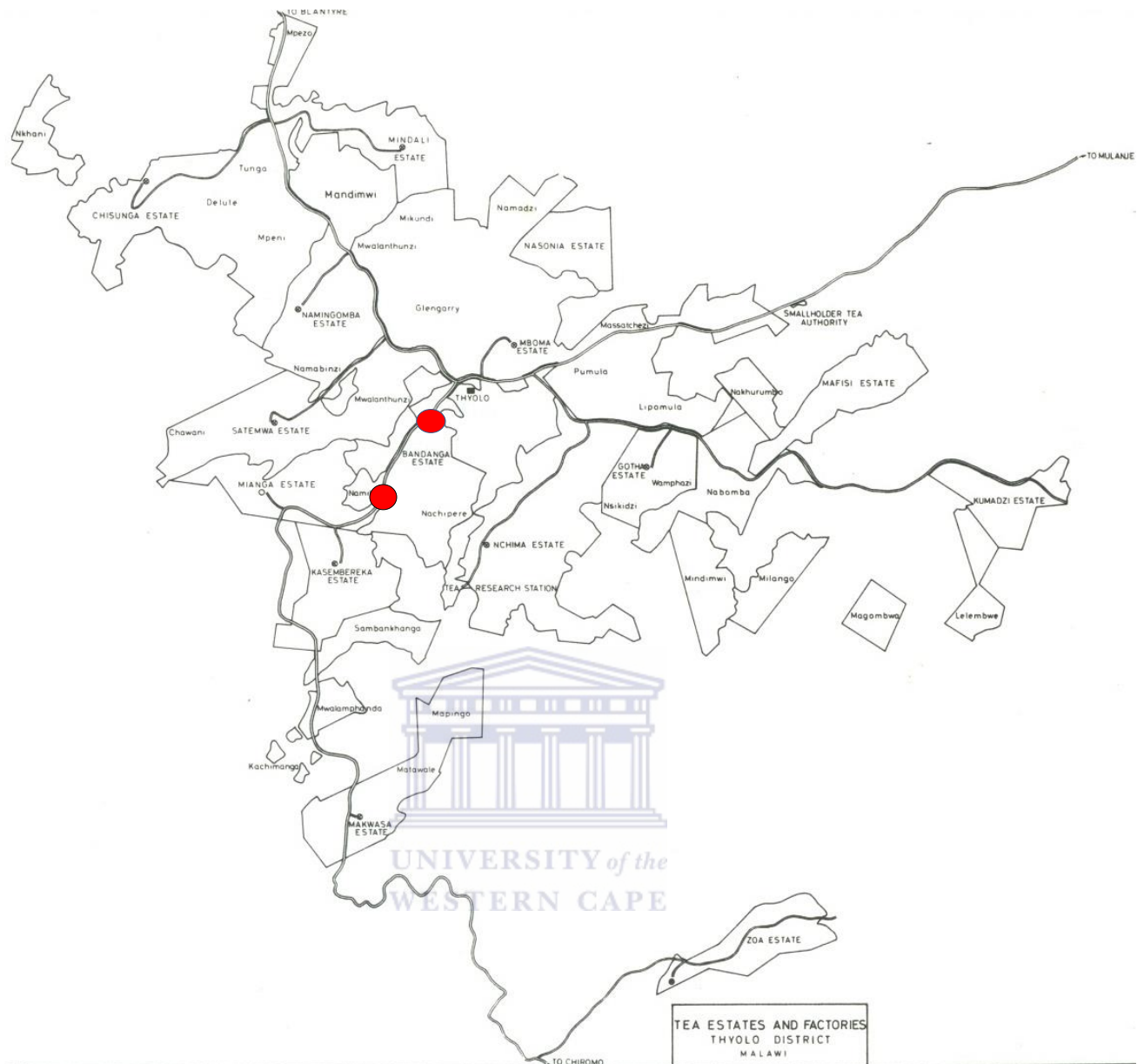
Before selling the estate, the Coxes tea business started picking up. Their tea began to be exported to European markets. The brothers used steamers as a means of ferrying their products to the coast of Portuguese East Africa (modern day Mozambique). As a result of their success and growth in cash crop business, the Coxes separated and established another estate a short distance further south at Namitete.<sup>24</sup> Namitete Estate was smaller than the Bandanga Estate.

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<sup>22</sup> The Tea Association of Malawi, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1936-1986, Tea Vignettes*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> The Tea Association of Malawi, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1936-1986, Tea Vignettes*, 12.

<sup>24</sup> Museums of Malawi, "Exhibition file" *Top Mandala Museum Minutes* 21 (1989), 7.



**Figure 3:** Tea estates and factories of Thyolo District, taken from The Tea Association of Malawi publication. The map highlights Bandanga and Namitete estates.

The social life of Victor and Theodore was slightly different. Research demonstrates that Victor was perceived to be more active of the two. Victor was a high jumper, a member of the Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce and the first postmaster of Thyolo.<sup>25</sup> The 1986 publication of Tea Association of Malawi indicates that all mail for the residents of Thyolo was deposited at his house as the first collecting point. When the mail arrived with the mail

<sup>25</sup> See Museums of Malawi, “Exhibition file,” 7.

runner in the post bag from Chiromo [in Nsanje District, then Port Herald] he was always very enthusiastic.<sup>26</sup> With help from his brother, he raised a flag on the highest nearby point “that could be seen by the neighbors advising them that mail had arrived.”<sup>27</sup> Victor was described by the Museums of Malawi in 1989 as being a people’s person and “concerned with the welfare of Africans and European alike...his efforts in helping his neighbours in time of need did not go unrecognised.”<sup>28</sup> The accuracy of such a statement made by Museums of Malawi is debatable and throughout my research, I failed to verify it since most of the Coxes personal information remains unknown in Malawi.

Victor Cox is known to have contributed in an early issue of *The Central African Times*. He was reported that he firmly believed that the “tenga-tenga system must stop.”<sup>29</sup> The displays at Mtengatenga Museum in Chiradzulu District, Malawi which I visited on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2016, describes tenga-tenga [Mtengatenga] as a system used by the Nyasaland postal service.<sup>30</sup> The early missionaries and traders were faced with a problem of communication and transport. As a result of late or no delivery of mails from Europe to Nyasaland which went through complicated processes, in different collecting points including the Portuguese territory of Quelimane, the Postmaster General opted to use a system that involved mail runners. The displays in the museum portray that the mail runners, from different communities in Nyasaland, took mail from the steamer ship to various locations on foot. The distances they walked were great. Even though the system was considered to be a good option, most of the mail runners faced many challenges including bad weather conditions, sicknesses along their long journey and they were occasionally attacked by wild animals.

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<sup>26</sup> The first Nyasaland post office was at Chiromo and it was built in 1891. Chiromo is a town in the southern region of Malawi, in Nsanje District (then known as Port Herald).

<sup>27</sup> The Tea Association of Malawi, *50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 1936-1986, Tea Vignettes*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> See Museums of Malawi, “Exhibition file” 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> Mtengatenga system was a system of carrying goods from one place to another. It involved carrying different goods by porters, carrying mails by mail runners and also carrying Europeans by *machila* (hammock) carriers.

With an aid of the depiction in a diorama of a barefooted mail runner in a dungaree-styled uniform, the museum shows that before their departure at their respective duty stations, the mail runners were given a lantern and a rifle to assist them in the night. Prior to this, the mail runners were only provided with spears and blankets. Victor Cox rebuked this system and advocated for a change in the tenga-tenga system. In addition, in an official exhibition document of Museums of Malawi he is described as lobbying for scientific expertise to help planters fight a disease that was hampering the coffee industry.<sup>31</sup>

Victor Cox died in Malawi. I could not establish the year and the cause of his death.

However, Theodore lived in the country up to 1927 then returned to England.<sup>32</sup> I estimated that Victor may have died in the 1920s and it could be deduced that Theodore left Malawi as a result of the death of his brother. Cornell Dudley who worked with the Museums of Malawi in the Natural history section as a research associate in Entomology and his wife Sandy Dudley wrote to me and narrated how they remembered the Coxes and the story that was told during the repatriation of the collections to Malawi. They said that the Coxes retired and Theodore moved back to England.<sup>33</sup>

### **Making of a body - Objects of curiosity from household to museum: 1894-1940**

During the 35 years of which the Coxes were in Malawi, they actively engaged in collecting artifacts. The first collections were made in 1894 soon after Theodore's arrival. Theodore may have had interest in the material culture of the community he lived amongst or he may have collected because of the common practice that was developing in colonies. As Chris Gosden and Chantal Knowles argue, "collecting cannot be understood as an isolated activity,

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<sup>31</sup> See Museums of Malawi, "Exhibition file" 7.

<sup>32</sup> See Museums of Malawi, "Exhibition file" 7.

<sup>33</sup> An email conversation with Cornell and Sandy Dudley on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March, 2015.

but one which was deeply embedded in the overall set of colonial relations pertaining at the time.”<sup>34</sup> Most European explorers’ accumulated different objects from the lands they visited particularly from colonised societies. They mostly collected objects out of a certain sense of curiosity. In the course of the nineteenth century, objects were acquired through plunder especially during military operations while others were acquired by way of confiscation by European missionaries with an intention of encouraging the spread of Christianity, even if this was at the cost of destructing indigenous communities.<sup>35</sup> Towards the end of the nineteenth century, many of these objects were placed in the new public national museums of Europe and the USA. Most of these artifacts portrayed colonial power over other cultures and a “representation of primitive people” as juxtaposed to the Western societies.<sup>36</sup>

As settlers, the Coxes collected Malawian made artifacts from different communities which could be classified as ethnographic objects. From the assortment in the collection ranging from ceremonial, domestic, fishing, warfare, hunting, many may have come from the area in which they lived which had diverse groupings of communities as a result of invasions, famine and employment seekers in the plantations.

In my discussion with the Dudleys, I was made to understand that the Coxes during the time of collecting told people that they were specifically interested in beautiful, handmade Malawian objects and that they would buy them. Consequently, people came from far and wide to meet up with the requests of the Coxes. I was told a story that the people, especially the majority of women who brought their objects were adults. According to the Dudleys, it was speculated [after the collection’s return to Malawi in 1989] that women sold assorted

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<sup>34</sup> Gosden and Knowles, *Collecting Colonialism*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Moira Simpson, “To have and to hold”, *Museums Journal* 97 (1997): 29.

<sup>36</sup> Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” in *Representing the Nation*, ed. David Boswell et al. (London: Routledge, 1999), 68.



objects decorated with beads to the Coxes.<sup>37</sup> They were well versed in intricate beading that they made beaded aprons, beaded belts, necklaces, bangles and waist beads that were usually worn by women and girls. This assertion that only women sold objects beautified with beads could be questionable because some of the ceremonial objects like beaded spears were owned by men. I tried to substantiate the assertion that women sold beaded items to the Coxes in the course of my research but I was unsuccessful due to lack of information with regard to how they actually acquired these objects. The Museums of Malawi catalogue shows that girls would wear the beaded belts upon reaching puberty. The skill in beading was passed on through apprenticeship from one generation to another.



**Figure 4:** Beaded necklaces, Cox collection. Photos: taken by a staff of Museums of Malawi in May 1989 after the objects' return to Malawi © Museums of Malawi.

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<sup>37</sup> Cornell and Sandy Dudley have been in Malawi since 1972.



**Figure 5:** Walking stick made of wood and beads\_1941.08.079, Cox collection, photo: taken by Comfort T. Mtotha at Museums of Malawi collection stores.

Apart from beadwork, the Coxes also collected shields (*chihlango*) made from animal hides. Shields which are common amongst the Ngoni, an area where the Coxes settled, are described in the museum catalogue as symbols of power or authority. At the same time, they are used during war and others are used to compliment dancing regalia. My understanding is that most of the shields that landed in their hands served these purposes. The Coxes also collected weapons such as locally produced spears and arrows. The spears were common in royal homes and they show prestige especially with their elaborate motifs. It should be noted that some of the spears the Coxes collected were used for hunting large animals. Other hunting tools include clubs and axes. These were assembled during their travels. According to Kumwenda, most community members sold these objects to European government officials, expatriates and missionaries.<sup>38</sup> He elaborates that these expatriate communities in Malawi owned private collections of ethnographic objects and they took advantage of lack of awareness of the local communities on the value of the objects which later found their way out of the country.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Kumwenda, "Illicit Traffic of Cultural Property in Malawi," 2.

<sup>39</sup> Kumwenda, "Illicit Traffic of Cultural Property in Malawi," 3.



**Figure 6:** Shield\_1941.08.086 (left), Spears\_1941.08.065, \_1941.08.068, \_1941.08.073 (right). Cox collection, photo: taken by Comfort T. Mtotha at Museums of Malawi collection stores.

Whips made from hides of a hippo form part of the Cox collection. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was common to see whips on plantations due to the brutal mechanisms that some plantation owners employed to control labour. Sometimes these whips were used on thieves.<sup>40</sup> It cannot be determined from the data I gathered whether it was part of the collected objects or if the Coxes owned the whips. But then again, part of the population in Thyolo was from the Yao “ethnic” community whose chiefs were deemed to have taken an active role in selling slaves in the Arab slave trade. The local Yao chiefs and the Swahili Arabs sold the slaves to the slave market in Zanzibar. One can also argue that these whips may have been purchased, collected or given as gifts by the Yao community surrounding the Coxes estates. Aside from linking whips to slavery, white cowrie shells,

<sup>40</sup> The catalogue of Museums of Malawi indicates that they were used to whip thieves and labourers in tobacco plantation.

smoking pipes, tobacco boxes are part of the objects the Coxes collected. They were introduced amongst other items such as ivory and cotton for legitimate trade. These items were used as currency in exchange of commodities.

Ceremonial and domestic objects make up a larger part of what the Coxes collected and that is now at the Museums of Malawi. It is not certain what proportion of what was collected is in the museum and what proportion might have been stored away for themselves. The domestic objects that they collected were usually made of wood and bamboo. These include bowls, baskets, spoons, stools and a mat. According to the museum catalogue, mat making in Malawi is done by men. This one in particular is larger than most of the mats made and it was designed for the purposes of sleeping on it. The catalogue indicates that the mat was made in the shores of Lake Malawi by women. It may therefore indicate that the Coxes actually went out to collect some objects as a result of their assembling preoccupations.

Most of the ceremonial objects in the Coxes possession on the other hand, denoted royalty, status and wealth. It is evident in the collection to see well-defined wooden headrests with geometrical patterns, embroidered fan, scepters decorated and bound with brass and copper. These items were not used by ordinary people during the early twentieth century. Some of the objects used for ceremonial payments and exchanges include beads and shells. The brothers also collected musical instruments including a drum from the lower Shire valley and *Zeze* made from gourds or calabashes, sticks and strings. Usually, *Zeze* is strummed during festivals and it is occasionally used for rituals. During one of their travels along Shire River, the Coxes stumbled upon a canoe paddle and a number of knives that were used by the fishermen. They collected these items from the Sena “ethnic” community.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Taken from the collections catalogue of Museums of Malawi.

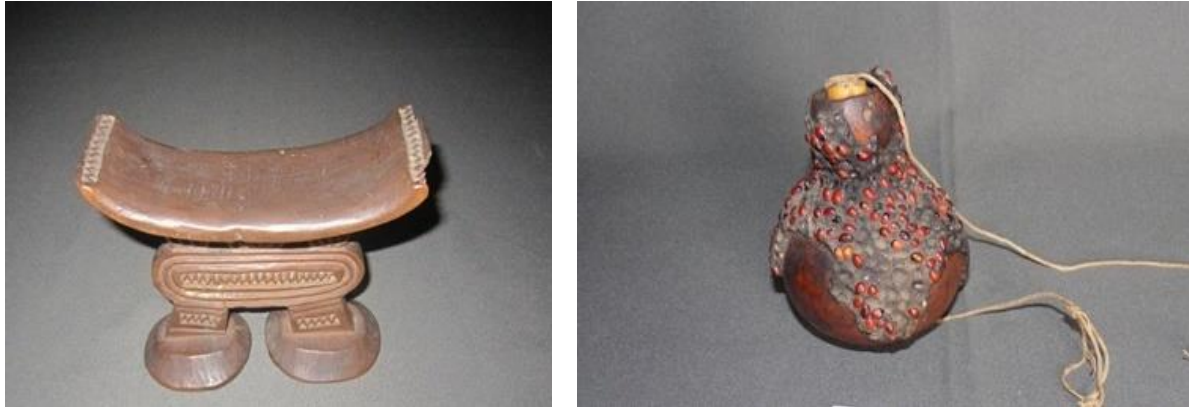


**Figure 7:** A drum made in the early nineteenth century\_1941.08.089 (left), shaman's power symbol made from grasses, beads and leather\_1941.08.002 (right). Cox collection, photo: taken by Comfort T. Mtotha at Museums of Malawi collection stores.

In 1894 as indicated in the catalogue, the Coxes collected a bark cloth. The cloth is made from the inner bark of a young tree usually baobab. In Malawi, as in many places in east and central Africa the bark is beaten off trees with wooden hammers and later the material produced is sewn into garments. During the same period, they managed to collect a bark cloth beater or wooden hammer. Decorative arts or objects on the other hand, were collected in different periods. According to the catalogue, the majority of these were carved human figures of various shapes and materials. I observed when I conducted my research that the Coxes ethnographic interest and curiosity started the time they arrived in the Protectorate. As understood from the catalogue, they showed a keen interest in traditional medicines made from herbs and minerals. The brothers collected horns and medicine gourds made from tar, wax, seeds, reed and thread.<sup>42</sup> Usually, such gourds were used for rituals. Bundles of herbs in powder form are stored carefully inside them. I could not establish the central motive of collecting such ritual objects of which I considered not to have any significant value to them

<sup>42</sup> Museum of Malawi catalogue, accessed on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January, 2016.

or in Europe where they came from. I noticed nonetheless, that each of the objects the Cox brothers collected was regarded as a “unique ethnographic piece.”



**Figure 8:** Wooden headrest\_1941.08.001 (left), Gourd or calabash\_1941.08.007 (right). Cox collection, photo: taken by Comfort T. Mtotha at Museums of Malawi collection stores.



**Figure 9:** Ceremonial object made of wood and fur used as a pointer to guide the way when walking in the forest\_1941.08.081. Cox collection, photo: taken by Comfort T. Mtotha at Museums of Malawi collection stores.

All through my research, I found (figure 9) to be an astonishing object. I made inquiries from the people belonging to the Chewa “ethnic” community following the museum collections’ database that indicates that it is used among them. Although I had initially associated it as a traditional object, I later learnt that it relates to missionaries. It is a wooden carving of an angel with a halo. As indicated in the caption, it is used as a guide. However, with its little information on the provenance, I wondered if the object was carved by the locals as a satirical object to the missionaries or if it was indeed used for religious purposes.

In all this, what is important to note is that the Coxes may not have collected mere souvenirs. It can be argued that they had identified the intrinsic value of the items they collected. As Prott claims “material taken in colonial days often was more culturally valuable than that being taken now.”<sup>43</sup>

### **A voyage to Europe and America**

According to an official document from the Whatcom Museum, Victor and Theodore Cox after collecting the “native artifacts for 35 years” sent the objects as gifts to their younger brother, Ernest H.E. Cox who at that time was living in the United Kingdom.<sup>44</sup> They actively sent these objects that date as far back as 1890s and as late as 1920s during their stay in the colony. They may have sent these objects on the steamers that transported their cash crop products to Europe. Or perhaps Victor and Theodore at a point returned home for holiday and took some of the objects along with them for Ernest. In 1918, Ernest moved from England to Bellingham. Bellingham is in Washington State in the USA where he took a job at the Water Department in Bellingham as the City Auditor.<sup>45</sup> His offices were in Bellingham’s Old City Hall, a building that was built in 1892 which later became the Bellingham Public Museum [now Whatcom Museum].<sup>46</sup> As he immigrated to his new home in the USA, he took the collection of the beautiful objects with him which his brothers had given him.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Lyndell V. Prott, “Saving the heritage: UNESCO’s action against illicit traffic in Africa,” in *Plundering: Africa’s Past*, eds Peter R Schmidt and Roderick J. McIntosh, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 31.

<sup>44</sup> Press release dated the 3<sup>rd</sup> of 1988 by the Whatcom Museum of History and Art. The subject was “The Cox Collection –Or How the Legacy of Malawi Found its Way to Bellingham.” (JOC).

<sup>45</sup> Retrieved from an official Letter from Malawi Embassy Washington DC from Ambassador Timon Mangwazu to the Secretary for External Affairs\_Malawi R. Nkomba, April 21, 1987. Reference: Malawi Arts and Crafts- formerly private property of Victor and Theo H. Cox (DBC).

<sup>46</sup> Whatcom Museum, “75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: 75 Years of Art, Nature, & History,” July 29, 2016. <http://whatcommuseum.org/about/75ann/>.

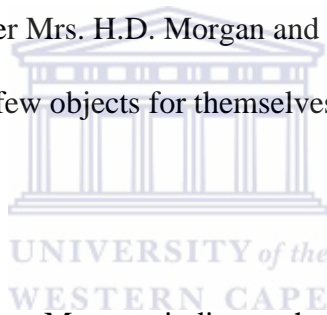
<sup>47</sup> An official letter from Malawi Embassy in Washington DC. It was addressed to the Secretary for External Affairs Malawi R. Nkomba from Ambassador T. Mangwazu on April 21, 1987 (DBC).

By bringing together these objects from England to America, I came to a realization that Ernest had created a body of these objects. The objects were no longer identified as individual items. Rather, there was a transition and they were now identified as a collection, as a whole. From that understanding, I became keen to know what he used to do with the collection. Does he place the collection on the table? Does he decorate his new office with it? Does he have a showroom in his house where he displays it and likens it to a museum? It is difficult to ascertain how the Cox house looked like. But one can imagine that he may have decorated his living room with the objects or he may have displayed them in the library or other rooms of his house in a meticulous manner. Nonetheless, the collection had personal significance, it had a family connection as it was collected by Victor and Theodore, then given to him as a gift and later it was in the custody of Mrs. H. Dan Morgan, his daughter. For this reason, Ernest might have embraced it, lived with it with an expectation that it would stay intact in their family house. Ernest might have shown his visitors what his brothers in Africa were doing and the collection became evidence of their travel. The collection might have also been a significant connection between himself and his brothers.

It should be noted that the processes of arranging the objects possibly started in Ernest's house. Considering the value this collection was to him, it may have been a reason of keeping it intact. I can imagine that his house became a space where the body of the collection was formed, established and put together. This assemblage of the objects might have been an indication that he started the process of giving the collection life. Moreover, for the objects to be in a good condition one can imagine that he guarded them and employed certain housekeeping techniques which made a considerable number of objects which are in Museums of Malawi today appear in good condition.



After safeguarding the collection for a long period in Bellingham, Ernest died in 1940 and it is not known how old he was. By the time of his death, Theodore was already in Europe. He was old and had left Malawi but he managed to come over to Washington to sort out his brother's affairs.<sup>48</sup> Ernest left the collection with his daughter Mrs. H. D. Morgan, the Executrix of the Cox estate. Together with her uncle Theodore, Mrs. H. D. Morgan in January 1941 decided to donate this collection of cultural items to the Whatcom Museum which was then referred to as the Bellingham Public Museum and later the Whatcom Museum of History and Art. She made a decision to meet the "Bellingham Museum Commission, directors of the fledging Bellingham Public Museum with a donation of ninety-one artifacts."<sup>49</sup> The museum was opened in 1941 and was "run by an all-volunteer Museum Society."<sup>50</sup> It is not known whether Mrs. H.D. Morgan and Theodore donated the entire collection or whether they kept a few objects for themselves as mementos to memorialise the two brothers, Victor and Ernest.



The official website of the Whatcom Museum indicates that when the museum was opened in 1941 as Bellingham Public Museum, it "had no collection yet, but artifacts, relics of pioneer life, and an ornithological collection from the Museum's first director, volunteer John M. Edson."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, it could be said that at the beginning of the museum's life, the Cox collection was already under the museum's custody and care but yet was not on display. They packed it carefully and stored it away as the museum's specialty was on Pacific Northwest region's art and cultural history which the Cox collection seemed unfit for display.

Nevertheless, the collection was accessioned, thus acquiring a unique number, a new identify

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<sup>48</sup> See Whatcom Museum of History and Art Press release of 3 June 1988.

<sup>49</sup> Press release of June 3, 1988.

<sup>50</sup> See Whatcom Museum, "75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" at <http://http://whatcommuseum.org/about/75ann/>.

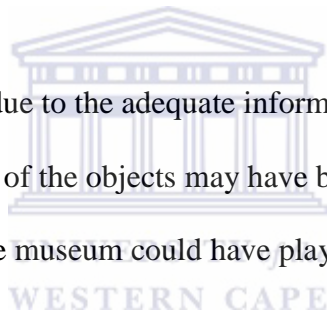
<sup>51</sup> See Whatcom Museum, "75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary" at <http://http://whatcommuseum.org/about/75ann/>.

and a new meaning. It entered a new phase where it was no longer in the private space of the Coxes home.

Undoubtedly, there were a lot of details left behind relating to the provenance of the objects when the Cox brothers collected them in the 1890s to early 1900s. I suppose there was no greater sense of probing to know the meaning and understand the objects during the time they were being collected. Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz argue that:

Museums are themselves complex organizations that attribute symbolism and meaning to things and use them in their own contexts, framing them to exhibit the meanings they select or attribute to them. In addition, objects may be given meanings in museums as they lie in a seemingly passive state in storage drawers.<sup>52</sup>

For the Cox collection however, due to the adequate information it lacked upon entering the Whatcom Museum, the meanings of the objects may have been lost, distorted or misrepresented. Consequently, the museum could have played a role in giving them a new meaning.



## **Conclusion**

This chapter began to look at the fragments of the life of the Cox brothers, Victor and Theodore in Malawi. I discussed the beginning of their assemblage preoccupations whilst on the plantations of Bandanga and Namitete in Thyolo District. With little information on the provenance of most of the objects in the collection, I reconstructed this story using photographs and the available limited literature. The main archive of the chapter however, was the collection itself which assisted to make linkages to both the social and political

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<sup>52</sup> Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz, "Collecting, Exhibiting, and Interpreting: Museums as Mediators and Midwives of Meaning," *Museum Anthropology*, 37, (2014), 58.

events that took place in the process of gathering these objects. I have discussed that the brothers may not have collected the items randomly as seen in the type of objects that were in their possession. While discussing that the objects made multiple journeys from Malawi to England and then to the United States of America at Ernest's, I indicated that the collection became significant to the Coxes and it was in essence a representation of a family connection. I highlighted that the collection's transitioned from being objects of wonder in the private home of the Coxes to museum objects where they attained a meaning.



## CHAPTER TWO

### COLLECTIONS, NEGOTIATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF REPATRIATION: FROM SOUVENIR TO ARTIFACT, 1941-1988

This chapter begins by examining the Cox collection's life after residing "in obscurity on the storage shelves of Whatcom Museum of History and Art in Bellingham."<sup>1</sup> It discusses significant moments in this life which include the processes of repatriation. The first part of the chapter gives a brief account and a backstory of the "rediscovery" of the objects through one of the key players who initiated the return of the Cox collection, Donal Allan Brody, the Honorary Consul General for Malawi in the State of Washington, in the United States of America. Brody was a Management Consultant from Westlake, Los Angeles who worked with the government of Malawi for many years. He first came to Malawi on a mission delegated by the U.S. government in 1967 and met the President Kamuzu Banda.<sup>2</sup> Noel Anthony writing in *Sarasota Journal* asserts that "President Banda was so taken up with him," he invited Brody to stay in Malawi and assist with the projects of putting the country's tourism on the map.<sup>3</sup> Anthony described Brody as "The Most Important American in all Malawi" who could live there under the president's endorsement until he could handover the task to a local.<sup>4</sup> Brody and I started communicating in April 2015 through long distance telephone conversations and emails as he narrated his story of the "rediscovery" of the Malawian artifacts with his wife Paula Brody. He acknowledged that this particular Malawi endeavour was his very favourite. He managed to gather materials for me including the

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from an exhibition banner from Whatcom Museum of History & Art. "The Forgotten Legacy of Malawi: African Artifacts from the Cox Collection- August 20 – November 13, 1988."

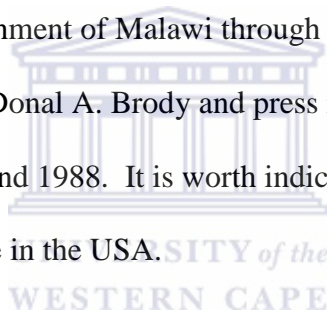
<sup>2</sup> Noel Anthony, "Malawi Paradise Shattered by President's Banning of Mini Skirts", *Sarasota Journal*, December 7, (1970): 6-12.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony, "Malawi Paradise Shattered by President's Banning of Mini Skirts," 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

formal correspondences between the government of Malawi and Whatcom Museum of History & Art.

From this background, the chapter examines what prompted Malawi's representatives in the USA to have an enthusiastic concern for the objects and their drive to plead for their return as a symbol of national pride. These objects were hailed as "national treasures of Malawi...believed to be the only collection in existence."<sup>5</sup> The chapter also looks into the contestations in the negotiation process of repatriation. During these negotiations, what the Whatcom Museum saw as a very small collection of souvenirs became objects of value.<sup>6</sup> My archive for this chapter is based heavily on interviews, correspondences between the Whatcom Museum and the government of Malawi through the former Ambassador in the USA, Timon S. Mangwazu and Donal A. Brody and press releases from the Whatcom Museum between the year 1987 and 1988. It is worth indicating that most of the proceedings that this chapter relates took place in the USA.



### **The unexpected visitor: a road trip to Bellingham**

In one of our telephone conversations Brody related to me that during the springtime of 1987, "through pure coincidence" a visitor came to his office in Alderwood Manor, Lynnwood, Washington State.<sup>7</sup> Brody does not remember who this visitor was, but based on an article by Ron Cowan that appeared in the *Statesman Journal*, the unidentified visitor is mentioned as an anthropology student who catalogued the [Cox] collection and reported its existence to a

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<sup>5</sup> Press Release of June 3, 1988, "The Cox Collection – Or How the Legacy of Malawi Found its way to Bellingham", by Whatcom Museum of History and Art. (JOC).

<sup>6</sup> Press release by the Whatcom Museum dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1988, Reference: "British Airways grants \$15 000 of in kind services toward Whatcom Museum repatriation project."

<sup>7</sup> Press Release of August 16, 1988, "Valuable artifacts from Africa to be exhibited before their historic return to native country of Malawi" by the Whatcom Museum of History and Art.

Malawian official.<sup>8</sup> With keen interest, the visitor took notice of the flag of Malawi which was neatly hanging on Brody's office wall. The flag impelled the visitor to ask Brody if he knew about the artifacts from Malawi that were being held in the stores of Whatcom Museum. He referred to them as Malawian artifacts but they were described to me by Brody as treasures that were from the period of British Central Africa (now Malawi).<sup>9</sup> This piece of information that he had gathered from the visitor about the objects led him to become very interested and eventually he attempted to trace them. He contacted the museum to establish and verify the existence of the objects and perhaps to see them. Brody spoke to the Curator of collections Mrs. Janis R. Olson who was cordial and substantiated the claim and agreed to show him the objects.

Brody explains that he made a decision to go with his wife Paula Brody to Bellingham which is about 70 miles from Lynnwood, Washington where they were based. Upon reaching Bellingham, they went directly to the museum to meet Olson, who told them that the objects have been in a building across the street for more than forty-five years. With deep concern for the objects, Brody explained that he had not noticed the brick-building which the curator alleged was holding the objects when he was heading to the museum until they walked out. He assumed the building was probably erected in the middle- to-late 1800s. It looked very fragile and old. Olson provided them with two chairs and told them that the collection was kept on the shelves. These shelves according to Brody's narration had plastic curtaining hanging from the front which she rolled up gently about 10 feet from where they were seated. He saw many artifacts but until Olson went to the shelf and took the objects down for him, he could not see them clearly. Brody said to me:

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<sup>8</sup> Ron Cowan, "Plundered art creates quandary: Local museums often have returned such pieces," *Statesman Journal*, (2006), accessed on 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2016 at <http://www.elginism.com/similar-cases/restitution-of-cultural-property-in-the-usa/20060815/509/>.

<sup>9</sup> Telephone conversation with Brody on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

I really could not believe what I was holding. I recognised the vast importance these artifacts were to Malawi far beyond British Central Africa, Nyasaland and then Malawi. Immediately I knew that they were national treasures. The artifacts ranged from ceremonial, domestic...from several ethnic communities like Ngoni/Zulu, Yao, Tonga. Some spears were so finely made that that they could only have been commensurate with a chief's position. One piece was a power symbol and would belong to a very, very significant chief.<sup>10</sup>

He narrated that they spent about an hour studying individual items and then went back to the main museum building where they were introduced to George E. Thomas, the director of the institution. Brody disclosed to Thomas and Olson over lunch before bidding farewell how extraordinary the objects were and their significance to Malawi:

Objects such as these are nonexistent in the country. Original artifacts have suffered the ravages of time. Any object made of wood won't last. The custody of these objects by the Coxes [the collectors] and the Whatcom Museum has served an extraordinary purpose in the history of the country. These objects are cultural roots of Malawi.<sup>11</sup>

But he says he tried not to give an impression that he had intentions of taking the objects from the museum or calling for their return to Malawi. Brody knew in a greater way from Olson's cooperation that they understood the significance of the collection. According to him, this rediscovery was seen as "an unbelievable intersection of people, places, time and the objects."<sup>12</sup> Brody stated that he was aware from the start that:

A lot of museums do not want to give up part of their collections. Museums never get rid of things...if they do get rid of things it means they are ostracised by other museums. These are objects that are claimed to belong to them. It is almost like it is on their balance sheet or at least that is how it looks like.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Telephone conversation with Brody on Monday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> See the Press Release of June 3, 1988, "The Cox Collection – Or How the Legacy of Malawi Found its way to Bellingham", by Whatcom Museum of History and Art. (JOC).

<sup>12</sup> See the Press Release of August 16, 1988, "Valuable artifacts from Africa to be exhibited before their historic return to native country of Malawi" by the Whatcom Museum of History and Art.

<sup>13</sup> Telephone conversation with Brody on Monday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

The idea of museums' tendency of holding on to objects is also expressed by David Wilson who justifies that a museum such as British Museum does not repatriate because when they get rid of material, "the institution often...regrets the decision. Our argument is not the childish idea expressed in the words, 'It's mine', rather it is the sense of curatorial responsibility, of holding material in trust for mankind throughout the foreseeable future."<sup>14</sup> It is probably a similar sentiment that Brody expected from the Whatcom Museum.

### **Preliminary stages of negotiation**

Upon their return to Lynnwood, Brody decided to call Timon S. Mangwazu, the former Malawi Ambassador in the USA and a representative of Malawi at the United Nations. He told him how essential it was for him to go to the State of Washington because they were "on the verge of something very significant to the country."<sup>15</sup> Mangwazu agreed to Brody's request despite the fact that he had a lot of commitments at a conference which was in session at the United Nations and that he had to travel across the USA from the East coast to the Pacific Northwest region.

Writing to the Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi, Mangwazu stated that he visited Bellingham on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April, 1987 with the Brodys and Mr. Satha, a consular official.<sup>16</sup> Olson met the group for the viewing of the objects after Mangwazu's arrival from Washington D.C. According to Brody, upon entering the collection stores, they allowed the curator to open and unpack the collection for the Malawian Ambassador to take a look at it himself. The collection was described by the museum as an "African Collection: Gift of the

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<sup>14</sup> David M. Wilson, *The British Museum: Purpose and Politics*, (London: British Museum Press, 1989), 116

<sup>15</sup> See telephone conversation with Brody on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> A formal letter from Ambassador Timon. Mangwazu to Mr. Nkomba, Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi, dated April 21, 1987. Reference: "Malawi Arts and Crafts- Formerly private property of Victor and Theo H. Cox- Now at the Museum of the city of Bellingham." (DBC).



Cox Brothers.”<sup>17</sup> When the Ambassador finally saw two or more objects that Olson brought down for him from the shelf “he was stunned, he was in a shock.”<sup>18</sup> Brody told me it was a very emotional moment for all of them, a teary-eyed moment of both joy and satisfaction. The Ambassador, with enthusiastic boldness described his experience of seeing the collection as “holding history in my hands.”<sup>19</sup> He acknowledged that he never thought he would ever see so many beautiful things made by Malawian artists in his life. He explained to the curator that these precious items had all died out in Malawi and he could only imagine that in the past, Malawians had crafted such wonderful things.<sup>20</sup>

Brody in one of our conversations said that he was exultant to realise that the Ambassador Mangwazu was satisfied and recognised the importance of what he had seen. Even though this was the case, Brody asserts that Mangwazu understood that he [Brody] did not want to raise any subject concerning the return of the objects at that moment realising that he was an American and “did not feel that it was appropriate.”<sup>21</sup> Mangwazu on the other hand, was in a good position to negotiate the return of the objects not only because of his position as an Ambassador but he was also Malawian. Mangwazu states in an official letter that it took them hours to finish viewing the arts and crafts which he noted were in excellent condition and constituted over one hundred pieces.<sup>22</sup>

After viewing the collection, the Ambassador, the Brodys and Mr. Satha had discussions first with the Curator, Janis Olson in her office. The Ambassador revealed again the interest and

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<sup>17</sup> Description of the collection retrieved from a letter dated April 21, 197 from Ambassador Timon Mangwazu to Mr. Nkomba, Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi. (DBC).

<sup>18</sup> See the telephone conversation with Brody on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> See the Press Release of August 16, 1988, “Valuable artifacts from Africa to be exhibited before their historic return to native country of Malawi” by the Whatcom Museum of History and Art.

<sup>20</sup> Retrieved from an email conversation with Cornell and Sandy Dudley who were present during the repatriation. Cornell once worked with the Museums of Malawi in the natural history section.

<sup>21</sup> See the telephone conversation with Brody on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> See the letter from Ambassador Timon Mangwazu to Mr. Nkomba, Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi (DBC).

value which he attached to the objects and “how it could please the Government of Malawi if the Board of Bellingham Museum were to give the pieces of arts and crafts to the Malawi nation.”<sup>23</sup> He asked Olson to pass the request to the Board of Directors of the Museum with an expectation that his demand may possibly lay a foundation for negotiations if found necessary.

Mangwazu writes in an official letter to the government of Malawi that by sheer good luck, he met the director of the Museum, George E. Thomas who was on leave at the time but regardless, he appeared at the Museum. The Ambassador and Brody told him of the deliberations that had taken place with Olson and emphasized the value of the objects.

Mangwazu expressed to Thomas and Olson that he would formalize a request for the objects upon his return to Washington D.C.<sup>24</sup> Following the brief discussion, Thomas guaranteed the Ambassador that he would present the issue to the Board of Directors upon the receipt of his letter. Mangwazu acknowledged that “understandably, both Mrs. Olson and Mr. Thomas could not commit their Board; but I had the impression that they were both willing to present the Malawi request to their Board sympathetically.”<sup>25</sup>

At that point, Olson stated that it would be appropriate if the Mayor of Bellingham, Tim Douglas, was drawn into the meetings. The Malawian representatives were not aware that the Mayor has a huge influence on the Museum as part of his other duties. But he (the Mayor) managed to meet them and discussed issues pertaining to the repatriation of the objects over lunch. Brody said it was a very open conversation and they told the Mayor how the collection was extremely important to the country and that Malawi had nothing like what they had seen

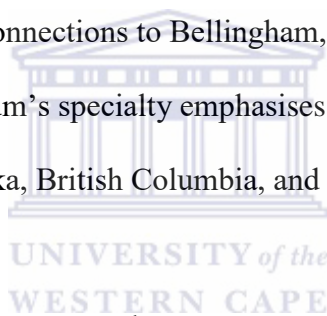
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<sup>23</sup> See the letter from Ambassador Timon Mangwazu to Mr. Nkomba, Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi (DBC).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., Letter to the Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Letter to the Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi.

at the national museum. He also disclosed to the Mayor that for more than forty years, the collection of Malawi arts and crafts has been stored carefully at least 500 feet away from the museum in the storeroom of an old building and had never been shown to the public. He was communicating implicitly that the collection appeared not to have been regarded as important and there had been no intention of exhibiting it. Its sole purpose of its existence in that museum was sitting on shelves and not being put to further use. During our telephone conversation, Brody described Mayor Douglas as a “terrific man” and highlighted that he was deeply touched with what he learnt from the Malawian representatives. The director of the Museum, Thomas, revealed that the collection was stored away because they did not have much interest or expertise in African collections. He mentioned that “even though the family that acquired the collection had connections to Bellingham, the collection itself doesn’t relate to our local history.”<sup>26</sup> The museum’s speciality emphasises on the Pacific Northwest region “from the coastal regions of Alaska, British Columbia, and Washington.”<sup>27</sup>



Mangwazu indicated in a letter he wrote to the government of Malawi that he had met other prominent figures of Washington State before this meeting with the Mayor. He pointed that the Brodys had introduced him at different functions, to the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor, Senators, the city council and some other officials. The Ambassador also mentioned that he was introduced to the Mayor of Langley, Dolores Cobb, with whom he had dinner with on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, 1987.<sup>28</sup>

The significance of our meeting with these notables lies in the fact that Dr. Brody fully briefed each one of them of the purpose of my visit and they showed sympathetic understanding of Malawi’s position over the arts and

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<sup>26</sup> See the Press Release of June 3, 1988, “The Cox Collection – Or How the Legacy of Malawi Found its way to Bellingham”, by Whatcom Museum of History and Art (JOC).

<sup>27</sup> Whatcom Museum, “Collections,” accessed on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 2016 at <http://whatcommuseum.org/collections/>.

<sup>28</sup> See the letter from Ambassador Timon Mangwazu to Mr. Nkomba, Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi (DBC).

crafts. Therefore, it could be rightly thought that each of these distinguished people will directly or indirectly exert influence on the Board of Directors of the Museum of Bellingham.<sup>29</sup>

Even though the Ambassador acknowledged Brody and his wife Paula for their effort, Brody revealed to me in our conversation that he does not want to take too much credit. He would rather highlight the role of Mangwazu who made it possible to start the fragile process of negotiations. He describes Mangwazu as competent, jovial, intelligent, and never a bureaucrat. These qualities played a huge part during these crucial initial stages. The Ambassador recommended that the government of Malawi continues to negotiate the return of the objects:

It should be noted that Europe and the United States of America are full of arts and crafts from Africa, Asia and other parts of the world which cannot be returned because of one reason or another in spite of the requests from the countries where the arts and crafts originated. If Malawi succeeds in having the arts and crafts returned, it shall be an important precedent and could be great news. It is for this reason that it would be important for someone from Bellingham Museum to formally present the arts and crafts [in Malawi at an appropriate ceremony], should we succeed in our negotiations with them.”<sup>30</sup>

Mangwazu was aware of the controversies existing in museums on the subject of repatriation. By contacting the Malawi government on the artistic and historical value the collection bore, he wanted to elevate the issue to be dealt with at a national level. But beyond that, his act could be seen as a political issue: an attempt of positioning Malawi politically. I kept wondering if the artistic value really counted or if it was actually a political manoeuvre of prominence. Nevertheless, by entering into mediation with the Whatcom Museum and later with the Washington State, there was a high possibility of willingness to liaise on the issue and reaching an understanding on the return of the objects due to the cooperation relations

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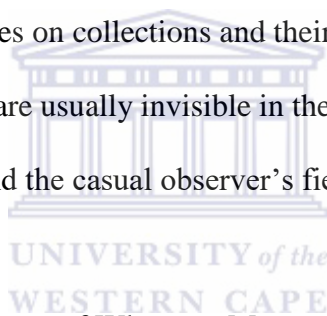
<sup>29</sup> See the letter from Ambassador Timon Mangwazu to Mr. Nkomba, Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi (DBC).

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., Letter to the Secretary for External Affairs in Malawi.

and virtuous image the State of Washington and the national state of Malawi would have wanted to portray.

### **Politics of negotiations - Whose collection is it anyway?**

Repatriation of objects pass through many processes which include decision making and negotiations in relation to the collection, legal issues, policies, logistics, the place where it will finally be placed and a timeframe. I took an approach to understand in details the back stage processes which include the politics behind the scenes and how events unfolded before the return of the objects. As Mary Bouquet says, “going behind the scenes of a public museum opens up new perspectives on collections and their life-support systems, as well as the staff who tend them and who are usually invisible in the front area of the institution, and communities who are often beyond the casual observer’s field of vision.”<sup>31</sup>



On the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, 1987, the director of Whatcom Museum Thomas met with the Museum Board to pass on the request made by the Ambassador of Malawi to consider the return of the Malawi artifacts. Writing to Ambassador Mangwazu in a letter dated the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 1987, Thomas indicated that the Board authorised the Museum to proceed with discussions leading to the collection’s return as a “gift” to Malawi. The Board stated that it “favors the gift and will give final approval when agreement is reached on the specific terms.”<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, I wondered as to what transpired during the Board’s meeting and why the Cox collection was referred to as a “gift” to Malawi. I am still not sure if the concept of a “gift” was used as an alibi for repatriation. Thomas said that the Museum was willing to start the deliberations if agreeable by the government of Malawi through their representative Brody particularly on the

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<sup>31</sup> Mary Bouquet, *Museums: A Visual Anthropology* (London: Berg 2012), 93-117.

<sup>32</sup> Letter to Ambassador Mangwazu from the Director of Whatcom Museum, George E. Thomas dated May 29, 1987 (DBC).

laid out terms and conditions. Mangwazu had delegated some tasks to Brody as his representative. Not only because he [Mangwazu] was a busy man working for both the Malawian Embassy and the United Nations but Brody, the Honorary Consul lived in the State of Washington making it easy to work with the staff at the Whatcom Museum during these preliminary stages of negotiations. The conditions Thomas laid down from the Board involved the timing and method of transfer of the collection and Whatcom Museum's desire "to have the objects on public display...for a short period before they leave for good."<sup>33</sup> Thomas pointed out that Whatcom Museum was excited and enthusiastic about the prospect of the objects returning home: "You have effectively conveyed their historic significance and the importance of them to your people. While we will miss them we are confident they serve a higher purpose in a museum in Malawi."<sup>34</sup> I understand from Thomas' statement that it was an expression of sadness with regard giving up these objects to another museum.

Mangwazu on June 10, 1987 expressed his gratitude to the Museum Board for deciding to take a first step towards the negotiations and their willingness to approve the transfer of "the gift" to the government of Malawi if other conditions were met. Following these letters were a series of meetings for over a year between Whatcom Museum and Brody. The director of the Museum, Thomas and the Malawi Ambassador Mangwazu also engaged in a dialogue and continued to communicate through letters and telephone conversations. Whatcom Museum as indicated by Thomas presented itself as serving both as a caretaker of the objects and as an agent for the local government. For that reason, there was a need "to satisfy the concerns of the Museum Board of Directors, who in turn were accountable to the Mayor and Bellingham City Government."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See letter from the Director George E. Thomas to Ambassador Mangwazu dated May 29, 1987 (DBC).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., letter from the Director George E. Thomas to Ambassador Mangwazu dated May 29, 1987.

<sup>35</sup> Retrieved from a letter dated March 10, 1988 from the Director of Whatcom Museum George Thomas to the Ambassador of Malawi in the USA, Timon Mangwazu (DBC).

The first condition that was brought forward by the Board was “Museum Inspection.”<sup>36</sup> The Board wanted a Whatcom Museum staff member to visit Museums of Malawi and meet with its curator to evaluate the space to make sure that the Cox collection was going to be treated properly:

Because the artifacts are owned by the people of Bellingham we must be able to assure them and their representatives that when transferred to Malawi, the artifacts will be properly housed and cared for...we will explore the possibility of determining the Malawi museum’s storage, records, security and other collections management systems...<sup>37</sup>

This scenario of assessing and inspecting museums before returning objects resonates to what happened in 2002 when museums and research institutions in Europe and America including the British Museum jointly signed a Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. The Declaration as discussed in the introduction of this thesis opposes the return of art works to the supposedly original owners.<sup>38</sup> According to Prott, the objects become part of the museums that have housed them over the years and subsequently they become part of the nation.<sup>39</sup> In short, these universal museums are custodians of the cultural heritage of the world and are encyclopaedic in nature. Some museums in the West have failed to repatriate objects to their counterparts taking into consideration conservation issues especially the fluctuations of temperature and others have considered storage conditions. Anne May Olli, the director of the Ridlo Duottar Museat in Norway stated that after offering to return half of the Sami people’s collections from Norsk Folkemuseum and Kulturhistorisk Museum, there were constraints to the project.<sup>40</sup> Aside from funding, Olli added that “the objects will be

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, letter dated March 10, 1988- from George Thomas to Ambassador Timon Mangwazu.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

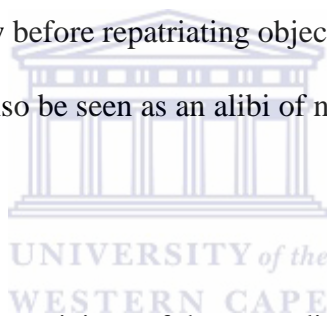
<sup>38</sup> Prott, *Witnesses to history*, 116.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>40</sup> Rosemary Neill, “Repatriation of indigenous artefacts a hot topic for museums” in *The Australian*. Accessed on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/repatriation-of-indigenous-artefacts-a-hot-topic-for-museums/news-story/>.

returned only if the Sami museums have appropriate storage facilities to house them.”<sup>41</sup>

These Sami people are sometimes referred to as the indigenous people of the North and are deemed to be found in Norway [which has the highest population], Sweden, Finland and Russia.<sup>42</sup> Wilson, a former director of British Museum argued that local conditions – “whether of security, atmospheric pollution, political instability or even past history” are not among the things the British Museum considers when they do not return objects to the country of origin.<sup>43</sup> This claim is debatable considering that there were allegations that the British Museum fails to repatriate the legendary Parthenon or Elgin Marbles to Greece among other reasons was the climatic condition particularly the prevailing smog. Given these conflicting statements of the required conditions from each case, it shows how museums vary in terms of the criteria they follow before repatriating objects. These conditions of conservation I speculated could also be seen as an alibi of not returning or could actually become one.



Ambassador Mangwazu was also suspicious of these conditions. In a letter dated March 23, 1988 he suggested that rather than using staff from the Whatcom Museum to travel all the way from the USA merely for the inspection of a museum collection store in Malawi, they could explore other avenues of using external personnel. He thought of the possibly of having a staff from the U.S. Consulate in Malawi to assess the conditions of the storage area. Mangwazu pointed out that the person could be requested by the Whatcom Museum to submit a report after the inspection indicating whether the artifacts would be well looked after

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, *The British Museum: Purpose and Politics*, 115.



and secure which was their main concern.<sup>44</sup> Mangwazu's response can be seen as double-edged since he does not necessarily accept the idea of inspection.

Secondly, the Board presented the need to mount an exhibition of the Cox collection at Whatcom Museum before its final crating and shipping to Malawi.<sup>45</sup> They asserted that "this provides for the acknowledgement of the gift here [Bellingham] and is the last opportunity the community will have to see the objects."<sup>46</sup> My understanding is that the issue of ownership was inevitable during these negotiations. Even though the museum seemingly became aware of the existence of the collection after forty-five years, the Board claimed that the community of Bellingham needed to bid farewell to the objects they once owned. That is quite a contradiction. The people did not even know that the collection was there until they were told by the museum. It is surprising that all over the sudden it was claimed as belonging to the "community" of Bellingham. It can also be speculated that such claims of ownership become an excuse of not repatriating. It became even more interesting that these objects which were seen as mere mementos belonging to neither art nor cultural [historic] objects came to be recognised as objects of rarity and importance. This idea that objects are prone to change their status is substantiated by Clifford in his model of the art-culture system.<sup>47</sup> He argues that "objects move into two directions along this path. Things of cultural or historical value may be promoted to the status of fine art."<sup>48</sup> So what was happening here was that objects evolved into artifacts and historic objects.

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<sup>44</sup> Ambassador Mangwazu writing to the Director of Whatcom Museum George Thomas on 23 March, 1988. (DBC).

<sup>45</sup> See letter dated March 10, 1988- from George Thomas to Ambassador Timon Mangwazu (DBC).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, March 10, 1988 letter from Thomas to Mangwazu.

<sup>47</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 224.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

These negotiation processes seemed to be based on amicable understanding, with no animosity but I could not stop wondering who really owned the collection based on the fact that it not only traveled between spaces but it also landed in several hands before it was finally in the custody of Whatcom Museum. It had really gone through multiple journeys from several communities in Malawi including Chewa, Mang'anja, Lomwe, Ngoni, Sena and Yao to the Coxes house. Then it was taken to England where it moved again to the Cox house in the Pacific Northwest region of America before it was donated to a museum.

Thomas indicated in a letter to Mangwazu that if all the conditions put across by the Board were met, Whatcom Museum was to mount the exhibition in summer 1988 or in 1989 during spring. However, Mangwazu was very ambitious and he wanted the handover ceremony of the objects scheduled for September or October 1988:

I wish to humbly suggest that instead of having another exhibit in 1989, in spring, you should only have one in summer and, thereafter, the artifacts be dispatched to Malawi- say in August, 1988. The Malawi Government would appreciate your positive decision on our request to have the artifacts leave Bellingham in August, this year.<sup>49</sup>

In a letter dated March 31, 1988 as a response to Mangwazu, Thomas indicated that the summer 1988 exhibition was scheduled to open on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August through November 13, 1988. He continued to explain further that, “after closing it, [exhibits] will be taken down and the artifacts crated. If there are no problems, the artifacts could be ready to ship within three weeks...you could expect to receive the artifacts by the end of 1988.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Letter dated March 10, 1988- from George Thomas to Ambassador Timon Mangwazu (DBC).

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Ambassador Mangwazu from George Thomas, Whatcom Museum dated March 31, 1988 (DBC).

The third requirement by the Board was on exhibition interpretation.<sup>51</sup> This requirement brought about a heated conversation, a number of contestations and misunderstandings.

Writing to Ambassador Mangwazu, Thomas put it that,

For our use here [Bellingham] during the exhibit, but more importantly for use by the Malawi museum, we will prepare interpretive materials including text panels, labels, photographs and a bilingual brochure. These are required components of any exhibit we do and will be transferred along with the artifacts in order to expedite their reinstallation in Malawi.<sup>52</sup>

Mangwazu in his response in a letter dated the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March, 1988 showed his appreciation upon understanding that the production of the brochure would be used for both viewers at the Malawi Museum and in the USA. He added that he was “happy to note that Dr. Donald Brody has promised to find funds for the production of the brochure.”<sup>53</sup> Thomas writing to Mangwazu on March 31, 1988 contested that, “It would be too strong a statement to suggest that he promised to find necessary funding. We will both try, and if successful, will prepare the brochure and interpretive materials to support the exhibit.”<sup>54</sup> He added that if their efforts were not successful, there would still be a very simple exhibit but Malawi would not receive the brochure, text panels and other interpretive materials to augment the artifacts use in the Malawi Museum.<sup>55</sup> In regard to what he deemed as possible misunderstandings in Mangwazu’s letter, Thomas cautioned that:

If we are to proceed in making the gift a reality, our agreements and understandings should be clearly stated as possible. In this way we can avoid taking action which might have to be redone at a later date.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Retrieved from a letter from the Director of Whatcom Museum to Ambassador Mangwazu of Malawi- March 10, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., March 10, 1988 letter from Thomas to Mangwazu.

<sup>53</sup> Retrieved from a letter dated 23 March, 1988 from Ambassador Mangwazu to the Director of Whatcom Museum, George Thomas (DBC).

<sup>54</sup> A reply from George Thomas, Director of Whatcom Museum to Ambassador Mangwazu dated March 31, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., March 31, 1988 letter from Thomas to Mangwazu.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., March 31, 1988 letter from Thomas to Mangwazu.

At the back of my mind, I kept thinking of what the Board of Directors and Thomas wanted as to the preparation of interpretive materials including texts. The Museum in Malawi was being side-lined in this matter. As a Museum, they also had curators who could have worked jointly with their counterparts on the preparation of texts, representation of ideas created around the narrative and interpretation of the objects since they were aware of their audience in Malawi. But the Whatcom Museum had the curatorial authority over the exhibition and controlled its knowledge production.

Following this requirement, the Board raised a fourth condition about the objects' formal transfer.<sup>57</sup> Thomas mentioned in a letter to Mangwazu that upon packaging the "gift" and transferring the artifacts to Malawi, a representative of their local government would visit Malawi immediately to formally complete the return of the objects.<sup>58</sup> Mangwazu in his response agreed to this and remarked that it would be "necessary to wait until the artifacts have been put in place in the Malawi National Museum before a formal presentation ceremony takes place, so that after the ceremony members of the public could view, for the first time, the artifacts."<sup>59</sup> Thomas on the other hand was of the view that the ceremony could be limited to "turning over of the Deed of Gift by our representative to yours and our receiving the formal acknowledgement of the acceptance of the gift."<sup>60</sup> Once again, the idea of the "gift" was reinforced. The concept of the return being a gift raises issues of the "giftness" of the process. It is quite a contradictory considering the ownership argument that I had raised earlier. During my research, I contemplated that the Whatcom Museum had also received the collection as a gift or a donation in 1941. Does that mean when they receive it as a gift they should give it back or turn it into a gift during the process of repatriation? I argue

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<sup>57</sup> See letter from Thomas to Mangwazu dated March 10, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>58</sup> See letter from Thomas to Mangwazu dated March 10, 1988.

<sup>59</sup> Letter from Ambassador Mngwazu to the Director of Whatcom Museum- March 23, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>60</sup> See the letter dated March 31, 1988 from Thomas to Mangwazu.(DBC)

that, by asserting ownership this was not merely a return to previous owners but a “gift” by the Whatcom Museum.

Thomas, with reference to the formal transfer, continued to explain that their requirement was to see the safe arrival of the objects in Malawi and to ensure all legal requirements were completed.<sup>61</sup> He then added that:

Since there is no way to determine at this time when the artifacts might actually be on public display we do not want to wait until that time. The installation might take months or years to complete and we do not expect or require you to promise a specific time for it to be finished...If when the artifacts are on exhibit, and a formal ceremony is desired to accompany the exhibit, we can arrange for a representative to be there.<sup>62</sup>

Lastly, the Board became blunt with their last condition concerning the responsibility for costs.<sup>63</sup> Thomas emphasised that this could be the area which could prohibit Whatcom Museum from giving “the gift” of the artifacts to Malawi. He claimed that it should be the recipient of the gift, the government of Malawi, who should be the logical bearer of these expenses.<sup>64</sup> Thomas stated that:

The making of this gift should not be a financial burden to the Museum. Expenses attributed to the above items cannot be provided by the Whatcom Museum...Considering the remarkable coincidence of the “discovery” of the collection in this unlikely location and a rather unique willingness on our part to give away a collection of a major cultural significance, it would be very unfortunate if a relatively small amount of money gets in the way of the transfer.<sup>65</sup>

It is ironic that after forty-five years, the Whatcom Museum acknowledges the cultural and historical significance of the objects and its meaning to Malawi. I speculate that, upon the

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<sup>61</sup> See the letter dated March 31, 1988 from Thomas to Mangwazu (DBC).

<sup>62</sup> See the letter from Thomas to Mangwazu dated March 10, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

rediscovery of these objects, the Whatcom Museum begin to perceive them as priceless. Indeed, as Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall argue, “Objects do not have to be physically modified to acquire new meaning,” rather, contexts create meaning.<sup>66</sup> Upon laying this condition, Thomas gave an estimated figure of \$31, 500 for all the costs including a small amount as a contingency in the event of an increase in shipping and air fare costs.<sup>67</sup> The estimated details were as follows:

<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>AMOUNT (\$)</b>
Exhibit installation costs	1 800
Exhibit Brochure	5 500
Crating	5 000
Air Freight	12 500
Air fare and expenses [2 visits to Malawi]	5 200
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>29 500</b>
Contingency	2 000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$31 500</b>

By this time, Mangwazu had only committed to cover \$17, 000 of the total cost, which he requested the government of Malawi to provide. The question was how to deal with the difference given the overall cost of \$31, 500. Mangwazu in a letter to Thomas indicated that the Malawi government could host the representatives accompanying the collection for the formal transfer so that a considerable amount of \$7, 825 was reduced from the overall cost.<sup>68</sup> Again, by considering outsourced personnel to determine the technical capabilities of the Malawi Museum without an actual site visit by the Whatcom Museum staff, \$2,325 was to be saved from the overall amount.<sup>69</sup> The new amount was \$21, 350 which was still \$4, 350 above Mangwazu’s initial request to the Malawi government.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Chris Gosden and Yvonne Marshall, “The Cultural Biography of Objects,” *World Archaeology*, 31 (1999): 174.

<sup>67</sup> See letter from Thomas to Mangwazu dated March 10, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, letter from Thomas to Mangwazu dated March 10, 1988.

<sup>69</sup> Breakdown of figures retrieved from a letter from Thomas to Mangwazu, March 10, 1988.

<sup>70</sup> See letter from Thomas to Mangwazu, March 10, 1988 (DBC).

My understanding is that Mangwazu did not want to give up on the objects. He assured the Board through Thomas that he would report to his government of the difference. Since he had initially acknowledged their significance to Malawi, it was going to be difficult for such a rare opportunity to slip through his fingers because of financial constraints. I also imagine that Mangwazu saw the bigger picture that many museums are not always willing to repatriate artifacts. They give many justificatory arguments and conditions during the negotiation processes including determining the security of objects. It should also be highlighted that, when other museums repatriate voluntarily, they are sometimes seen by their counterparts as though they have been forced to do so.

After the lengthy discussions of the terms and conditions, Thomas put emphasis that a final approval by the Museum Board was going to be given after all arrangements were made and assurances that all conditions had been met.<sup>71</sup> Mangwazu assured the Board diplomatically through Thomas that he had no doubts that the Malawi government would meet all its obligations to ensure that the artifacts were transferred without any difficulty.<sup>72</sup> He then thanked him and the Board of Directors for their kindness in offering the objects as a gift and their work in the preparation for the transfer of the artifacts:

I look forward to the day when these artifacts will be back home to their country of origin. Malawians will always cherish these valuable pieces of Arts and Crafts – works of their ancestors. Thanks also to those who made the “discovery” of this otherwise hidden collection- Don and Paula Brody.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, letter from Thomas to Mangwazu, March 10, 1988.

<sup>72</sup> Retrieved from a letter from Ambassador Mangwazu to the Director of Whatcom Museum - March 23, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>73</sup> See letter from Ambassador Mangwazu to the Director of Whatcom Museum Thomas - March 23, 1988 (DBC).

## Scouting for Funds

But the problem of funding the return still remained. Brody during our telephone conversation mentioned that the repatriation depended on raising funds. He acknowledged that he understood the reason the Whatcom Museum was not prepared to pay any money for shipping, “this was a gesture of moving objects across the world and the least the government of Malawi could do was to pay for all that.”<sup>74</sup> However, Thomas in a letter dated the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 1988 indicated that as a Museum, they were willing through Brody’s assistance to locate corporate funding and seek other assistance. He told Mangwazu that they would “both try to acquire the funds necessary for the exhibit installation and printed brochure.”<sup>75</sup>

Brody stated that the first companies they approached were the ones that sold, produced and, imported goods or did other business transactions in Malawi, for instance the cargo, tea and tobacco companies.<sup>76</sup> It is interesting to note that the same process which lead to the acquisition of the objects in the first place by the Coxes of exporting tea and coffee was being used to secure the return of the objects. After months of assiduous scouting for funds, the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1988 brought great relief to all involved in the process of repatriation. James Saunders, a sales manager for British Airways in Seattle informed the administrator at Whatcom Museum that their airlines had made a decision to donate almost \$15, 000 to the work towards repatriation.<sup>77</sup> Writing in a press release of the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1988, Whatcom Museum acknowledged the efforts and the generosity of the British Airways for lending a hand to assist in the return of what were only seen initially as worthless “souvenirs.” These

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<sup>74</sup> See the telephone conversation between Donal Brody and Comfort Mtotha on 8 August, 2016.

<sup>75</sup> See letter from the Director of Whatcom Museum Thomas to Ambassador Mangwazu - March 31, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>76</sup> See the telephone conversation between Donal Brody and Comfort Mtotha on 8 August, 2016.

<sup>77</sup> See press release by the Whatcom Museum dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1988, Reference: “British Airways grants \$15 000 of in kind services toward Whatcom Museum repatriation project.”



“souvenirs” had been miraculously metamorphosed into “the only surviving relics of the original cultural heritage of the small country” and a “rare collection.”<sup>78</sup>

During my conversation with Brody, he told me that after approaching British Airways to ask for assistance, they immediately understood what was going on. He said, “We were ready to settle for a huge discount. But then they shipped everything [artifacts] for nothing. It was really very incredible. British Airways were even willing to take us. They gave us tickets to fly to Malawi with the collection.”<sup>79</sup> British Airways provided four round-trip air tickets from Seattle to Malawi for the Mayor of Bellingham Tim Douglas, the Honorary Consul of the Republic of Malawi Donal Brody, the Whatcom Museum’s director George Thomas and the curator of collections, Janis Olson.<sup>80</sup>



It was disclosed at this moment in the Whatcom Museum press release that the collection was scheduled to return to Malawi at the beginning of 1989. It was also indicated that this collection would be an integral feature in the country’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence from the Great Britain.<sup>81</sup> While looking forward to its return, the Whatcom Museum was preparing to exhibit the objects for the first time for their audience in Bellingham. With a title “The Forgotten Legacy of Malawi: African Artifacts from the Cox Collection” was scheduled to open on the 20<sup>th</sup> of August 1988 through the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 1988.<sup>82</sup>

During the planning of the repatriation process, the U.S. Embassy in Lilongwe, Malawi and the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) came into play. All these stakeholders recognised that the project still lacked funds for the remaining expenses which included packing, insurance,

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<sup>78</sup> See press release by the Whatcom Museum dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1988.

<sup>79</sup> Telephone conversation with Brody on 8 August, 2016.

<sup>80</sup> Letter dated the 23rd of March, 1989 written by the American Ambassador, George Trail III (JOC).

<sup>81</sup> See press release by the Whatcom Museum dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1988.

<sup>82</sup> See press release by the Whatcom Museum dated the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1988.

display cases and a per diem for a U.S. expert to assist the Museums of Malawi in mounting “the priceless - in many cases one-of a-kind-collection of repatriated artifacts.”<sup>83</sup> It should be noted that, the USIA whose African area office became very interested in the project, suggested bringing this American museum specialist with expertise in mounting exhibits on board to assist the Museums of Malawi staff. On March 23, 1989, the U.S. Ambassador, George A. Trail III wrote a letter to John C. MacMillan the Manager of African Division Cargill in London [as an investor in Malawi] to participate in what he called a “unique and fascinating transaction” of the return of the “priceless Malawian artifacts.”<sup>84</sup>

As the American Ambassador to Malawi, I believe the successful realization of this project will greatly benefit the American image in Malawi I would hope that you would see it in Cargill’s interest to support this worthwhile project...It is my hope that a consortium of U.S. investors, British Airways and the U.S. government can bring the idea to fruition...Unfortunately we have all too little time to get the artifacts here, mounted and be ready for the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary festivities on July 6.<sup>85</sup>

Bringing together of the collection and the festivities was a deliberate move for the U.S. government, not only for boasting their image but also for being tolerant to the issues of repatriation. Apart from this letter to MacMillan, Ambassador Trail III sent more letters to seven American business firms requesting donations to cover the aforesaid remaining costs in transferring the objects.<sup>86</sup> They were also provided with slides with photographs of the artifacts to be used as a further “selling point.”<sup>87</sup> Writing to Olson on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, 1989, the director of United States Information Service (USIS) David L. Gray, said he was trying to keep everyone involved in the project on the information loop. He advised Olson to keep Gadi Mgonezulu, the Commissioner for Culture in Malawi abreast of all their moves, “I

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<sup>83</sup> See letter from the American Ambassador George A. Trail III to John C. MacMillan of Cargill dated the 23rd of March, 1989 (JOC).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

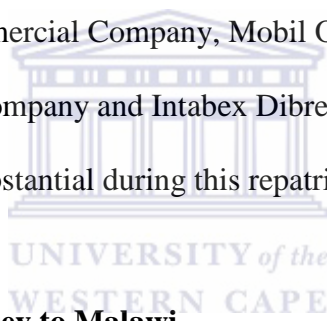
<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from the Director of United States Information Service (USIS) Malawi office, David L. Gray to Janis Olson curator for collections at Whatcom Museum- March 28, 1989 (JOC).

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, letter March 28, 1989 dated March 28, 1989 from Gray to Olson.

usually call him first with any of our initiatives and get his OK, just so he doesn't feel as if we are doing things of which he and his government may not approve.”<sup>88</sup> All the donations were wired straight to the Whatcom Museum who kept the objects.

While the representatives of the American government in Malawi were facilitating the return of the objects, Brody was occupied in negotiations with the Coca-Cola Company to participate in the project. Writing to Jim Clements on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, 1989 he stated that only a sum of \$7,000 was missing and assured him that his participation would be forever remembered by the people of Malawi.<sup>89</sup> The Coca-Cola Company indeed managed to lend a hand towards the project. Other companies that contributed generously for the objects to return include the Standard Commercial Company, Mobil Oil Company, the Limbe Leaf Tobacco Company, Caltex Oil Company and Intabex Dibrell.<sup>90</sup> The involvement of these major oil companies was very substantial during this repatriation.



### **Farewell Bellingham- An Odyssey to Malawi**

August 20 1988, was a momentous day in the history of Whatcom Museum when its doors were flung open for the public to see a collection from Africa that was hidden in the collection stores for forty-seven years. This was unusual and auspicious occasion considering that the museum showcases works and a history of the people in the Pacific Northwest region. Mike Kamwendo in his review of the repatriation events stated that Olson, the curator of the collection arranged the final exhibit of the collection to allow the local community to

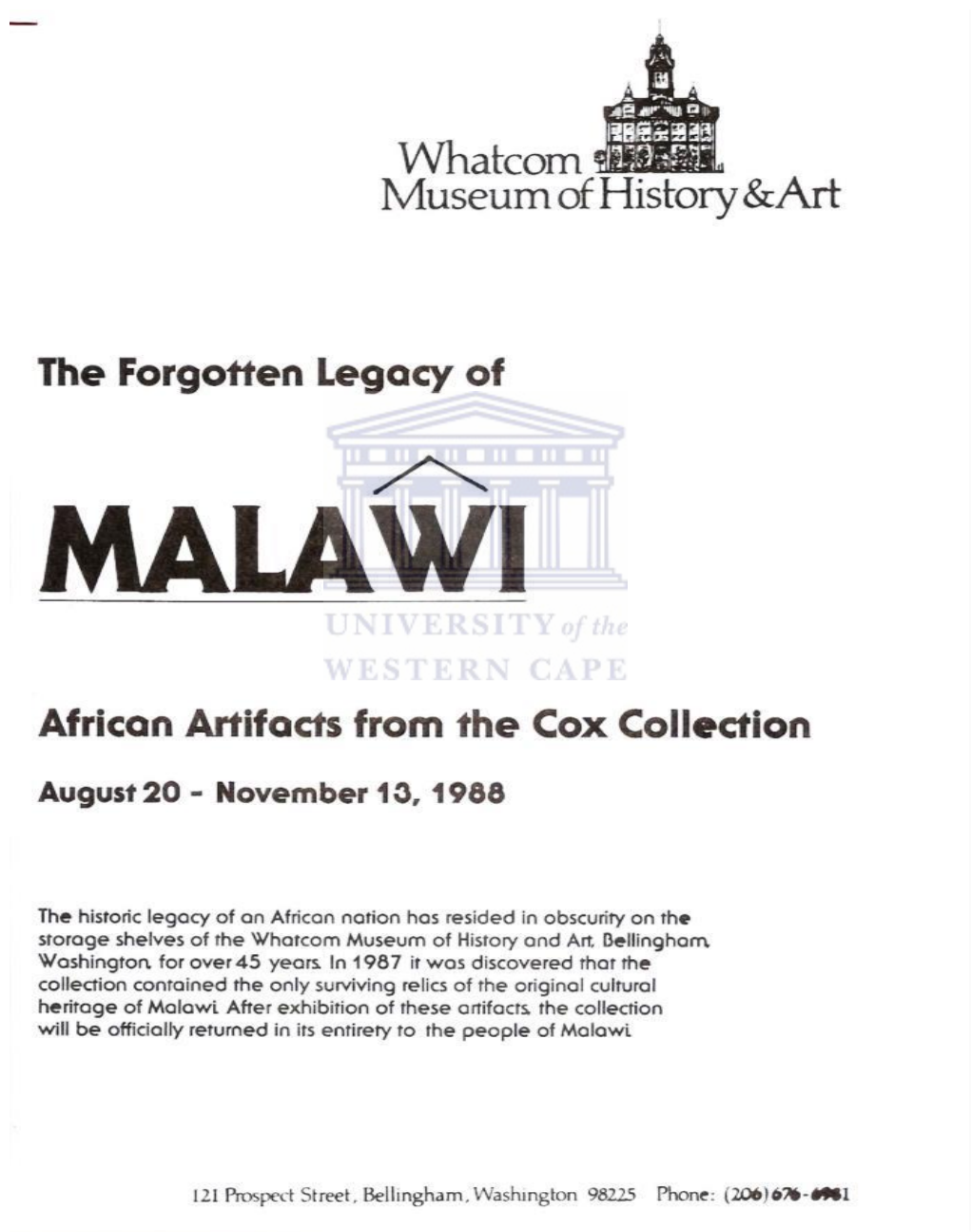
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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, letter March 28, 1989 dated March 28, 1989 from Gray to Olson.

<sup>89</sup> Letter from Dr. Donal Brody to Jim Clements on the 13<sup>th</sup> of April, 1989 (DBC).

<sup>90</sup> Michael G. Kumwenda, “Whatcom Museum donates MK30, 425.84 to Museums of Malawi,” *Ndiwula Annual Newsletter* 3 (1990): 26.

view the objects before their shipment to Malawi.<sup>91</sup> This exhibition was a memorable occasion. On one hand, it was of great significance as objects of Africa were viewed for the first time by the public at Whatcom Museum. On the other hand, the exhibition was a precursor to the parting of objects from supposedly permanent custodians or owners.



**Figure 10:** A poster for the Cox collection exhibition which was mounted at Whatcom Museum © Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>91</sup> Kamwendo, "Back Home To Africa," 56.



**Figure 11:** Display cases for the Cox collection exhibition, mounted at Whatcom Museum. Retrieved from an article by Mike Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa.” © Smithsonian Institution.

In the display cases of this exhibition (figure 11), it is evident to see groupings of objects according to type. For instance, there are spears, shields, beads, clubs/knobkerries, musical instruments and human figurines grouped together. Each item has a number attached to it and its description pasted carefully on the display case. The exhibition is displayed in a contemporary art setting which is usually characterised by its white walls. The colour selection in the exhibition is very astonishing given the vibrant colours of blue, red and a touch of black. This colour combination provided a sense of harmony with the objects making them look more appealing even though they are displayed according to category. As Corinne Kratz argues, “it is generally agreed that brighter and more saturated colours draw

more attention.”<sup>92</sup> At the same time, Kratz talks about lighting and how important it is to give meaning to an object. Even though it is difficult to read an exhibition using one photograph of it, it seems like the whole exhibition space is made vibrant with floodlighting. Kratz continues to argue that, “lighting is closely allied with space and colour in a synergetic architecture of display, defining paths and pacing, delineating spaces, directing attention, and evoking ambience and atmosphere.”<sup>93</sup>

After showcasing the objects for close to three months, the exhibition was taken down and deaccessioned in order for the objects to be packed up for a voyage to Africa where a supposedly greater meaning was going to be attached to them. In my conversation with Brody he said before shipping them, they made sure that special museum cases were made rather than dumping these magnificent objects into a crate.<sup>94</sup>

Every object was measured, photographed and was placed in foam rubber, cut out to its shape. And the people who build such cases for the museums made two or three huge cases shaped to fit the objects into the airplane cargo. Every object was put into the space for it and could not move at all. And opposite it there was another piece of foam that covered it so that it should not bounce.<sup>95</sup>

On the return of the objects, the director of the Whatcom Museum, Thomas commented that these artifacts were a permanent gift from his institution to the government of Malawi to be shared by its people.<sup>96</sup>

It is an unusual thing to give up part of the permanent collection. It's not what museums normally do. However, it is going to the Museum of Malawi. We feel good about the gift. In the end, we feel we are very much doing something of value. We feel very positive about the decision. The

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<sup>92</sup> Corinne A. Kratz, “Rhetorics of Value: Constituting Worth and Meaning through Cultural Display,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 27, (2011), 32.

<sup>93</sup> Kratz, “Rhetorics of Value,” 30.

<sup>94</sup> See telephone conversation between Donal Brody and Comfort T. Mtotha on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016

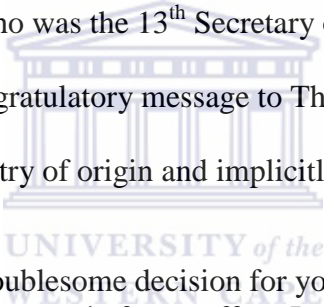
<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> See press release dated June 8, 1988.

cooperation and assistance we have received from Dr. Brody and Ambassador Mangwazu has really helped to make this all work.<sup>97</sup>

Thomas' deputy Olbrantz supported this decision of returning the objects. He stated: "It made a lot of sense, and it seemed like the right thing to do...It's an issue that a lot of museums, particularly museums with an extensive collection, are grappling with."<sup>98</sup> On the other hand, Brody found this repatriation unbelievable and too good to be true. He said: "It is a landmark situation; it is the only incident I have ever heard of in which an institution has willingly returned artifacts to their country of origin."<sup>99</sup>

The return of these objects also attracted a number of high profile people and politicians. On August 19, 1988, Ralph Munro who was the 13<sup>th</sup> Secretary of State of Washington and a Republican politician wrote a congratulatory message to Thomas for his decision to return the valuable artifacts back to the country of origin and implicitly tried to politicise the occasion:



This must have been a troublesome decision for you, but I know that in the long haul you will be very proud of your effort. I would be happy to participate in any way that you deem appropriate. Perhaps this should be called a Centennial Gift on the State's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday back to a country that is struggling to recapture its heritage. That's just my idea-maybe it's appropriate, maybe it's not...I am proud to be associated with people like you.<sup>100</sup>

From the statement made by the Secretary of the State, it seems to me that certainly, these objects were held in high regard and many notables wanted to participate in this event. In a letter dated the 6<sup>th</sup> of August 1988, Brody expressed gratitude to Thomas, the Whatcom Museum and the people of Bellingham for choosing to repatriate the collection of objects.

Brody conveyed his appreciation to Thomas and stated that:

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<sup>97</sup> See press release dated June 8, 1988.

<sup>98</sup> Olbrantz made the comment in Statesman Journal of Monday, August 14, 2006, article by Ron Cowan.

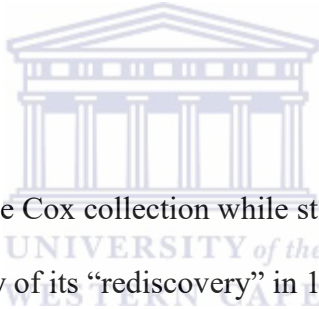
<sup>99</sup> See press release dated June 8, 1988.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from the Secretary of State, Ralph Munro to George Thomas, Director of the Whatcom Museum, dated August 19, 1988 (JOC).

While the objects leave your custody, protection and stewardship, a new legacy of friendship and gratitude take their place. A bridge of brotherhood now exists between your wonderful city and beautiful Malawi, the warm heart of Africa. For this we thank you... On behalf of the people of Malawi, I have the honour of accepting this gift, a very special 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Independence gift, and assuring you of its lasting place of honour in its new home at the Museum of Malawi.<sup>101</sup>

This was a letter of showing appreciation to the commitment and the tireless work they all put in during the negotiations towards the return of the objects. Although there were a lot of politics in the course of these negotiations, the spirit of harmony was shown. After two and a half years of negotiations, the Cox collection finally left USA from Seattle–Tacoma International Airport to Malawi.

## Conclusion



This chapter gave a narrative of the Cox collection while still “hidden” in the Whatcom Museum. It started off with a story of its “rediscovery” in 1987 by a Malawian representative in the United States of America. I discussed the cultural and historical values of the collection of which the government of Malawi had attributed and reasserted meaning to it upon its rediscovery. The objects in this collection were hailed as national treasures and a symbol of national pride. With an enthusiastic concern on the objects which were in “obscurity” for over forty-five years by the time of their rediscovery, the government of Malawi started negotiating for their return with the Whatcom Museum and later with the U.S. government. I have argued in the chapter, how politics came into play during the negotiation process of repatriation including issues of ownership, finances, logistics, conservation and the timeframe of return. What is striking to know is that the Board of Directors at the Whatcom Museum agreed to enter into negotiations with the government of Malawi, and to return the collection

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<sup>101</sup> See letter from Donal Brody to George Thomas dated August 6, 1988 (DBC).



as “gifts” from the people of Bellingham. I argued however, that the notion of “gift” may have been an alibi for repatriation as the objects were claimed to belong to the community of Bellingham. The chapter also looked at the collection’s moments of significance particularly when it was showcased for the first and last time at Whatcom Museum before being repatriated to Malawi. What happens in the chapter is that the objects which were once seen as mere “souvenirs” and a small collection of African objects by the Whatcom Museum transitioned to become objects of unique value. They became “artifacts.” This argument of the objects metamorphosis from mere mementos belonging to neither art nor cultural [historic] objects to objects of rarity becomes central to the chapter and this change in meaning connects to the next chapter.



## CHAPTER THREE

### NATIONALISM, FESTIVAL AND THE QUESTION OF RETURN, 1989-2016

This chapter gives an account of the collection's return to Malawi. The objects in this collection had metamorphosized into artifacts of value and rarity before leaving the United States of America. By the time the collection came back to Malawi, it became nationalised. It seemingly turned into a national collection, "an everlasting part of the eternal history of a proud and sovereign nation, the Republic of Malawi."<sup>1</sup> The chapter attempts to describe the handover ceremony and an exhibition which was mounted at Chichiri Museum to recognise and celebrate the collection's return after a century of absence. This handover ceremony and the welcoming of the collection was a small occasion but yet it was a deliberate attempt to coincide it with the bigger event of the country's silver jubilee independence. This chapter will also give an account of this festival as an attempt to bridge the question of return and the issue of nationalism. The description of these events relies on photographs, newspaper articles, official government reports and the exhibition itself as the main archive.

#### **The return of the collection and the spirit of Independence**

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 1989 Malawi celebrated twenty-five years of independence. The government termed the festival as "25 years of calm and order in which the country and the people...made strides on the path towards progress and democracy."<sup>2</sup> Upon Malawi's attainment of independence from the British in 1964, Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh had urged for peace in the new born nation which he said was to be achieved through tenacity

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Donal Brody to George Thomas dated August 6, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>2</sup> B.F. Kandoole and K.M. Phiri, *Twenty Five Years of Independence in Malawi 1964-1989: Silver Jubilee Commemorative book*, (Blantyre: Dzuka Publishing Company Limited 1989), 9.

and perseverance.<sup>3</sup> The *Daily Times* newspaper of Malawi presented this festivity of independence as being of great significance to Malawians marking the pride of what they had achieved, not only peace as anticipated by the colonial administration but also progress and prosperity.<sup>4</sup> In another report, Dyson Mzumara stated that the last governor of Nyasaland, Sir Glyn Jones noted that these accomplishments of Malawi under the rule of President Kamuzu Banda had been tremendous, exceeding what he had hoped for in 1964 when the country attained its independence.<sup>5</sup> These reports seem rather exaggerated as they present the history of Malawi as unblemished. From 1964, Banda was acclaimed and proclaimed by Malawians as the founding father of the Malawi nation. In view of that, he played a role in the framing and production of the country's history and culture.<sup>6</sup>

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, 1989 a collection of artifacts arrived in Malawi at Chileka International Airport in Blantyre. This collection was presented as a gift for the silver jubilee independence from the Whatcom Museum in the United States of America to Museums of Malawi.<sup>7</sup> It was one of the numerous preceding activities that culminated in the main festival event which took place at Kamuzu Stadium. While the Museums of Malawi was in the process of getting things together to showcase the collection for the first time to the people of Malawi, other events were running concurrently before the Independence Day celebrations. In a special edition of the Silver Jubilee events which appeared in the *Daily Times* newspaper, Ken Lipenga shows that the festivities began with three receptions hosted by President Kamuzu Banda "to honour the country's veteran politicians and retired civil servants."<sup>8</sup> Lipenga

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<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from the "Independence Anniversary Supplement" in the *Daily Times Newspaper* of Thursday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Dyson Mzumara, "Celebrations-Bonn Style," *Malawi News*, July 8-14, 1989, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Lipenga, "Silver Jubilee Souvenir," *Daily Times*, July 1989, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Kalinga, "The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s," 542.

<sup>7</sup> Michael G. Kumwenda, "Repatriation of the Cox Collection- A Unique Gift to the Museums of Malawi," *Ndiwula Annual Newsletter* 2 (1989): 16.

<sup>8</sup> Lipenga, "Silver Jubilee Souvenir," 3.

giving a detailed report of the festivities stated that these occasions gave the President an opportunity “to show his appreciation to and thank the valiant men and women who gave him such crucial support during his fight for the country’s independence.”<sup>9</sup> After hosting these retired government officials, Banda on June 27, 1989 invited citizens from the rural communities to dine with him at Sanjika Palace in Blantyre. Lipenga depicts Banda as the man of the people who revealed to them that they were invited because his government had not forgotten their good works.<sup>10</sup> Lipenga uses words from a guest in trying to show this as a remarkable occasion, “this was unheard of in the colonial days.”<sup>11</sup> Lipenga substantiated this expression when he said, “he [Banda] once again did something which is rare in other parts of the world: a leader entertaining folks from village in a very banquet hall where he entertains important leaders from around the world.”<sup>12</sup> Although this was an unusual expression, I understand it as a political move of showing goodwill and making all people from all walks of life feel appreciated. It could have also been a way of aligning these good works to the silver jubilee independence theme of “Peace, Progress and Prosperity.”<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, by inviting people from diverse background, it verifies the claim Karp makes that festivals assert claims to inclusivity because they are meant to be popular, celebratory, generative yet they are as exclusive as museums.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from these banquet receptions, there was an interdenominational National service of worship on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1989 and it was held at Kwacha International Conference Centre in Blantyre. These prayers with a theme, “The Nation’s Thanksgiving to God with Renewed Commitment for the Future” were graced by a populace from different denominations and

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<sup>9</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

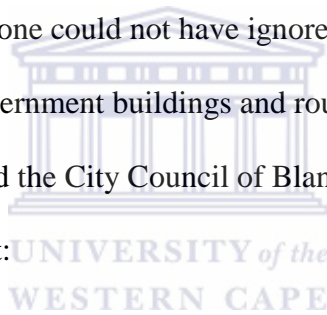
<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Mzumara, “Celebrations-Bonn Style,” 1.

<sup>14</sup> Karp, “Festivals,” 284.

regions.<sup>15</sup> The government carried these prayers for people to reflect on “the religious and racial harmony Malawi enjoy[ed] under Kamuzu’s leadership.”<sup>16</sup> This gesture of having all denominations under one roof to pray for Malawi was inevitable during this festival. Festivals generally claim that everyone is one despite coming from different communities and different religious backgrounds. Indeed, religion here was used for the political claim of unity to depict that Malawians are one and they all support Banda. As Karp puts it, the “festivals are generally held to be special events in which everyday cares and social differences are put aside and people interact as part of a larger community.”<sup>17</sup> This is another way festivals appear to operate. And it is around the creation of appearances.

Walking in the town of Blantyre, one could not have ignored the vibe of the independence commemoration events. Both government buildings and roundabouts were decorated by the National Celebrations Council and the City Council of Blantyre to mark the silver jubilee celebration. Lipenga narrates that:



Gracing the roundabouts at the Clock Tower and at Chichiri were huge wooden red, black, green [colours of the Malawian flag] petals that seemed to grow naturally out of the ground. The words Silver Jubilee were prominently marked on the top fronts of these giant petals. By night, countless electric stars could be seen seemingly chasing one another around the roundabout island and the words “Silver Jubilee” flashed on and off endlessly- “Long Live Kamuzu” in glittering lights that showed the flag. It was a time of celebration, a time of pride.<sup>18</sup>

During this independence celebration, President Banda became a focal point of these festivals. The appraisal attributed to him as a leader through such decorations shows that the festival might have been linked to sustaining and supporting the president’s leadership. As

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<sup>15</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>17</sup> Ivan Karp, “On Civil Society and Social Identity,” in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp et al. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 28.

<sup>18</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 11.

mentioned earlier in the introduction of this thesis, Karp posits an assertion that, “the very essence of the festival...[the] celebratory nature of the event, makes it an attractive forum for the exhibition of other agendas.”<sup>19</sup> The inscription, “Long Live Kamuzu,” associated with kings in ancient times, who were supposed to reign until their death, seemingly looks like an attempt to pass a message that Kamuzu was not set to give up power anytime soon as exemplified in him being declared Malawi’s Life President beginning from 1970.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it was apparent that he was here for the long haul: to govern Malawi forever and ever even though he was in his late eighties or early nineties at the time of the commemoration.<sup>21</sup> The inscription therefore implicitly represents an attempt to elongate Kamuzu’s reign.



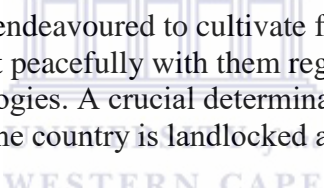
**Figure 12:** Youths’ display depicting Banda’s face with an inscription of “Long Live Kamuzu” during Malawi’s Silver Jubilee Independence Day © BNL Times Archives, Malawi.

<sup>19</sup> Karp, “Festivals”, 284.

<sup>20</sup> Museums of Malawi has a chair in its collection stores which was used to carry Banda after he was unanimously made Life President at the annual convention of the Malawi Congress Party at Marymount Secondary School in Mzuzu, Malawi. Banda was carried shoulder-high.

<sup>21</sup> Banda’s birth year remains unclear as he is presented to have been born in either 1898 or 1906.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1989 it was reported by Lipenga in the *Daily Times* newspaper that thousands of people flocked to Chileka International Airport in Blantyre to join the Malawian leader, Kamuzu Banda in welcoming his guest of honour for the independence celebrations, President of Tanzania, Ndugu Ali Hassan Mwinyi.<sup>22</sup> During this state visit, Lipenga writes that the two leaders discussed in depth on their “friendship and the oneness of the people of Malawi and Tanzania and the artificial nature of the boundaries separating them.”<sup>23</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> July 1989, with the same mood of strengthening their friendship, the Malawian president hosted a state banquet at Sanjika Palace and his guests were entertained by performances including traditional dances.<sup>24</sup> Laying emphasis on the cooperation with other countries during these festivities, was a political gesture. In a *Silver Jubilee commemorative book*, Kandoole and Phiri have argued that:



Malawi has consistently endeavoured to cultivate friendly relations with her neighbours and to coexist peacefully with them regardless of their internal policies or political ideologies. A crucial determinant of this policy of “good neighbourliness” is that the country is landlocked and has depended on its neighbours.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, during Banda’s reign, Malawi attempted to remain in harmony with the neighbouring countries. However, this statement made by Kandoole and Phiri can be seen as an attempt to justify Banda’s relations, for example with apartheid, South Africa. When most African countries were not in support of it:

Malawi and South Africa formalised diplomatic relations in 1967...South Africa gave financial assistance to Malawi in the form of ‘soft loans’ for the construction of the new Malawian capital, Lilongwe, and the Nacala railway through northern Mozambique...South Africa had thus developed

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<sup>22</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 6.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kandoole and Phiri, *Twenty Five Years of Independence in Malawi 1964-1989*, 35.

significant influence with president Banda through this economic assistance...<sup>26</sup>

The atmosphere of the celebrations continued with side events on the eve of independence, 5<sup>th</sup> July, 1989. Lipenga narrates that hundreds of people had gathered at Chichiri Park, opposite Kamuzu Stadium, the main venue for the Independence celebrations. In this group of people were prominent individuals including cabinet ministers and members of the Central Executive Committee of the Party who had assembled to watch the spectacular and magical colours of fireworks as they counted down the hours to the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations of Malawi.<sup>27</sup> Writing poetically, Lipenga acknowledged that, “even the skies told the story [of a nation proud of its achievements], of Malawi’s joy with Kamuzu who...brought unprecedented peace, progress and prosperity in only 25 years of self-rule.”<sup>28</sup> I speculate that, as the fireworks lit up the night sky, there were supposed to bring light to the past, and continue the same past into the future. Banda, the designated father of the Malawi nation was once again praised for his supposedly good leadership. Lipenga’s statement connotes a nationalistic expression in celebrating the country’s attainment of political freedom. This relates to David Procter’s argument on how festival celebrations are metaphoric and extend meaning “relating one form of comprehension to another.”<sup>29</sup> The idea of festivals is supposedly about independence, festivity, progress yet in effect, they are about bolstering an individual. In this Malawi context, it can be claimed that Banda comes to stand for Malawi. Comprehension here is not all about twenty-five years of independence but the comprehension is actually about Malawi being Banda and Banda being Malawi. The festival seemingly extended to claim that Malawi cannot do without Banda.

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<sup>26</sup> David Robinson, “Renamo, Malawi and the struggle to succeed Banda: Assessing theories of Malawian intervention in the Mozambican Civil War,” *Eras* Edition 11, November 2009, accessed at <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/publications/eras>.

<sup>27</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>29</sup> David E. Procter, *Civic Communion: The Rhetoric of Community Building*, (Maryland: New York, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 60.



## Long-awaited Silver Jubilee Independence

The celebrations of the silver jubilee independence were held at a national level on the 6<sup>th</sup> July 1989 at Kamuzu Stadium. Thousands of Malawians from all walks of life were reported to have come to Blantyre from all corners of the nation leaving their daily duties “to join their Ngwazi and express their joy and pride that 25 years had passed since the country attained Independence.”<sup>30</sup> Though this is an overstatement report portraying as if every citizen of the Malawi nation gathered at the stadium, their assemblage can still be seen as a nationalist gesture. On the other hand, it should be mentioned that it was almost obligatory to attend national festival events in Malawi during Banda’s reign as people could not go on with their daily activities (shops, markets in the neighbourhoods were closed) and Young Pioneers patrolled the streets to seek out those who challenged this directive through brutal mechanisms. In essence, these party gurus took unwritten laws in their own hands. Chirambo states that the Malawi Young Pioneer was a paramilitary wing of Banda’s party, MCP that “bore arms, conducted espionage and intelligence operations, besides being the most trusted bodyguards around Banda.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 3.

<sup>31</sup> Reuben Chirambo, “Operation Bwezani”: The Army, Political Change, and Dr. Banda’s Hegemony in Malawi,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 13 (2004), 147.



**Figure 13:** Triumphant entry of the Malawi leader, Banda into the stadium on the Silver Jubilee Independence Day. © BNL Times Archives, Malawi.

Several activities were lined up to grace the people in the jammed stadium. It was reported in the *Daily Times* newspaper that the most memorable displays were the colourful floats that paraded “depicting 25 years of progress in all sectors of Malawi’s economy.”<sup>32</sup> The Malawi Defence Force, Police and the Malawi Young Pioneer made an entrance into the stadium and astonished the masses with their demonstrations of the work they do in their barracks. Lipenga attempting to give a real sense of the events, reports that “there were simply no words to describe them.”<sup>33</sup> These presentations of the military, I speculate were meant to show awe, discipline and national pride. They were also meant to generate fear and perhaps to intimidate and stop the opposition. Chirambo argues that:

The Army was very much under Banda’s hegemonic influence. They saw Banda not just as Commander-in-Chief with a detached professionalism. He was for them as for everyone in Malawi God-given Messiah, Father and Founder of the nation, Ngwazi, and Life President. One of their parade

<sup>32</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 11.

<sup>33</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 11.

songs during Kamuzu Day (Banda's official birthday) said that Banda was the greatest gift God gave Malawi.<sup>34</sup>

Aside from the military procession, Malawians showcased a diversity of their traditional dances. The dancers were dressed in wonderfully made regalia “representing the rich cultural tapestry that is in Malawi.”<sup>35</sup> Kamuzu Stadium is said to have “turned into a living metaphor of African rhythm...Malawi the ‘Warm Heart of Africa’ [was] at its most alive, at its most colourful.”<sup>36</sup> There was ululating, throbbing of drums and harmonious singing which spiced up this day. The understanding of celebrating these traditions was that they were “shunned by the colonialists but...regained respect...[and] acquired special nourishment under Kamuzu.”<sup>37</sup> I understand that Banda may have used these traditions implicitly as a political manoeuvre. Kalinga argues along the same direction when he mentions that amongst the Ngoni men, the dancers dressed “in traditional outfit, singing and chanting war songs praising him, the conqueror of colonialism.”<sup>38</sup> He continues to argue that:

At major national events such as the Independence Day celebrations, party officials would ensure that Ngoni men and women featured on the programme of entertainers as he [Banda] would always join them in their war dances...leader of the Ngoni group...[would] march in a majestic fashion to the podium where Banda would be seated and in ciNgoni (a version of Zulu) invite him to join ‘his warriors’. He would then have two dances with them before being escorted back to his seat.<sup>39</sup>

I deduce that Banda found it very essential to be associated with these Ngoni warriors. Not only because of the songs of praise that spoke more of his reign and projected an idea of his greatness but it is also clear to see that it was an attempt of portraying an image that he could accommodate and associate freely with people from diverse backgrounds.

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<sup>34</sup> Chirambo, “Operation Bwezani,” 160.

<sup>35</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 11.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kalinga, “The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s,” 543.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 543.



**Figure 14:** President Banda coming from the podium with a Ngoni chief/“warrior” as Banda’s *mbumba* (women) look on. © BNL Times Archives, Malawi.



**Figure 15:** President Mwinyi of Tanzania, President Banda and distinguished guests including Joshua Nkomo, Zimbabwe’s former Minister in the President’s Office walking back to their seats escorted by a Ngoni chief/“warrior.” © BNL Times Archives, Malawi.

The occasion gained momentum and the whole stadium became full of life when the Presidents Kamuzu Banda and Mwinyi, followed by other notables joined the *Ingoma*

dancers in the arena.<sup>40</sup> In all this, it is interesting to mention that the idea of tradition has always given a sense of time. Banda depicts himself as though he has not just reigned for twenty-five years, but has been there since time immemorial. This is to say, tradition is a time of no time. Although tradition began long time ago, Banda is depicted to have always been part of it and he surrounded himself with it despite the fact that most times he would portray his pro-colonial imagery. This was seen for example in his modern form of English dressing when participating in traditional dances.

In his independence speech, Banda highlighted how he rose into power and how he challenged the colonial authority by making his demand explicitly known to them. Paul Chiudza Banda and Gift Wasambo Kayira argue that, it was easy for Banda to challenge the colonial authority because “he was conversant with British colonial politics and processes (having lived, studied and worked in the West)...He was also able to energise the local masses easily, which fell in love with his oratory.”<sup>41</sup> When he came from overseas, Banda claimed that he had come back home to do two things, to break the stupid federation and to give the people of Malawi their own government.<sup>42</sup> Banda mentioned that he cautioned his fellow Malawians in the early 1960s that if the dream of breaking the federation was to come into fruition, then unity and hard work will be the key factor.<sup>43</sup> What is important here is that he creates an anti-colonial history with himself as the pivotal figure. He laid emphasis that he was accused by the white people in Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland that by demanding the dissolution of federation, he was sacrificing the political, social and economic interests of the people of

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<sup>40</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 11.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Chiudza Banda and Gift Wasambo Kayira, “The 1959 State of Emergency in Nyasaland: Process and Political Implications,” *The Society of Malawi Journal* 65, (2012), 2.

<sup>42</sup> A speech by President Banda- “Ngwazi Broadcasts to the nation,” retrieved from the “Independence Anniversary Supplement” in the *Daily Times Newspaper* of Thursday, the 6<sup>th</sup> of July, 1989, 2.

<sup>43</sup> See President Banda’s 1989 Independence speech, - “Ngwazi Broadcasts to the nation,” 2.

Nyasaland for his political gains which were likely to result in starvation and old tribal wars would follow.<sup>44</sup>

When I broke their stupid federation...Africans are in control. There is no starvation here any longer...Tribal wars have not come back...The country is united, truly united. As I have said before, here tribalism is the thing of the past. Therefore, the whites...who said that if I succeed in breaking the federation, and getting rid of the colonial rule the people would be going about naked, and that the old tribal wars would come back, were wrong, very wrong...Ladies and gentlemen, I wish all of you happy Silver Jubilee Independence.<sup>45</sup>

It can be deduced from Banda's oratorical speech that he was implicitly pleading for unity as he laid emphasis on his good works, sacrifice, courage and his impact of making the people come together when he was campaigning for the dissolution of federation. He tried to highlight that the people of Malawi had one common enemy, the colonial authority who created divisions. Accordingly, Banda urged his people that they ought to be united within themselves. It appears like a speech of success, reconciliation and a request for harmony for the love of the country. Kalinga making reference to Frantz Fanon's argument, asserts that "when faced with political and socio-economic crises, many post-colonial leaders would attempt to create or restore some legitimacy by resorting to factors which colonialism had by its nature lacked - history and its role in national unity."<sup>46</sup> Kalinga continues to argue that this idea of national unity intensified with certain predicaments that emerged during the earlier years of Banda's regime including imprisonment without trial and the infringement of human rights which instilled "fear and uncertainty in the minds of many people."<sup>47</sup> On this day of celebrations, a nationalist message was indirectly being communicated by Banda to eradicate any forms of tribalism and regionalism for the sake of the country's development and stability. Kalinga posits that "while always reminding his audience of his Chewa ethnicity,

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<sup>44</sup> See President Banda's 1989 Independence speech, - "Ngwazi Broadcasts to the nation," 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Kalinga, "The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s," 544.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 544.

Banda also began to talk almost incessantly of the supremacy of national unity over ethnic affinities.”<sup>48</sup> The occasion ended with a friendly football match between Malawi and Gabon which Malawi won with two goals to zero.

### **The Cox Collection Exhibited**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Museums of Malawi received a collection of artifacts during Malawi’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations. This collection was referred to as a “permanent gift” of the Silver Jubilee Independence from the Whatcom Museum.<sup>49</sup> Sandra Msadala reported that the gift was a “relic boost towards its [Museums of Malawi] collection of artefacts.”<sup>50</sup> These artifacts which were collected by the Cox brothers left Malawi in the 1890s and early 1900s. Mike Kamwendo, a publisher of *Quest Magazine* in Malawi argued that “if they [artifacts] could speak, they would tell the most interesting story of crisscrossing the Atlantic Ocean onto foreign soils where they eventually came to rest for half a century in a small museum in the northwest corner of the United States.”<sup>51</sup> Upon their return to Malawi, the artifacts were seen as “once-hidden treasure” representing “the most significant collection of historic Malawian culture known to exist in the world.”<sup>52</sup> It is indeed interesting to see that much attention was given to them consequent to their homecoming and they became positioned as national treasures.

Like many other institutions in the country, Museums of Malawi organised a side event as part of the national independence celebratory events. As a custodian of Malawi’s cultural

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<sup>48</sup> Kalinga, “The Production of History in Malawi in the 1960s,” 545.

<sup>49</sup> See Press Release of June 3, 1988, “The Cox Collection – Or How the Legacy of Malawi Found its way to Bellingham,” by Whatcom Museum of History and Art (JOC).

<sup>50</sup> Sandra Msadala, “Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,” *Daily Times*, July 10, 1989, 13.

<sup>51</sup> An article by Mike Kamwendo. “Back Home to Africa, 1989, 56-57. Retrieved from Smithsonian Libraries African Art Index Project DSI, under the topic “Art, Malawi—Repatriation - Cultural property—Repatriation.”

<sup>52</sup> Mike Kamwendo. “Back Home to Africa, 1989, 56.

heritage, Museums of Malawi committed itself to a curatorial project to showcase these artifacts to the Malawi nation. The institution wanted the public to see these objects of value which had originated from Malawi. The United States Information Service (USIS) during the negotiation process of repatriation, appointed Carol Thompson to assist the staff at Museums of Malawi in the mounting of this exhibition.<sup>53</sup> Thompson was a specialist in African artifacts and an assistant curator of New York City's Center for African Art.<sup>54</sup>

For the exhibition to grow into fruition, it had to pass through many processes of decision making and negotiations in relation to space, design and the selection of objects. It also involved conceptualising the target audience for the exhibition and deciding on the theme and the timeframe of the project.



With a title, “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Malawi: Repatriation of the Cox Collection,” the exhibition opened on the 3rd of July, 1989 at Chichiri Museum in Blantyre, Malawi.<sup>55</sup> Chichiri Museum is situated very close to Kamuzu Stadium where the silver jubilee independence national celebrations took place. This exhibition space formed a crucial aspect of the project. According to Raymond Montpetit, one of the first conditions to be considered for an exhibition to be organised is the issue of space both internally and externally. He argues that, an exhibition is a “spatial phenomenon,” “a place where people go to follow a circuit.”<sup>56</sup> Montpetit asserts that an exhibition “spatializes meaning for the visitor, by means of the material objects brought together and displayed.”<sup>57</sup> By drawing from this quotation, the space at Chichiri Museum was carefully selected because it was both

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<sup>53</sup> Kamwendo. “Back Home to Africa,” 58.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>55</sup> Msadala, “Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,” 13.

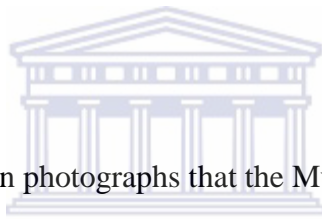
<sup>56</sup> Raymond Montpetit, “Making sense of space,” *UNESCO, Museum International*, 47, 1 (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 41.

<sup>57</sup> Montpetit, “Making sense of space,” 41.



convenient and accessible to people who might have wanted to see the artifacts as they made way to the stadium. Again, even though Museums of Malawi consists of other four museum facilities, the selection of Chichiri Museum was a deliberate move to supplement the story of the objects' return with the idea of nationalism which was the main concern of the silver jubilee independence celebrations. Indeed, the exhibition became part of the festival.

The initial target audience of this exhibition as observed during my analysis of the exhibition photographs was not limited to students both in primary and tertiary education, faith communities, academics, government officials, politicians and other elites in society. Rather, it was meant to enlighten and boost awareness of the collection to a wider, more general audience.



I observed from the Cox exhibition photographs that the Museums of Malawi settled for red and ivory colours for the exhibition. These colours were painted inside the display cases. Some cases on the other hand, had a little touch of red fabric placed in their interiors. Quoting Francis Reid, Kratz indicates that “colour is a powerful tool, particularly when deployed to assist in exerting a subconscious influence on the audience.”<sup>58</sup> The idea of using red gives me an understanding that they were trying to highlight the rather “dull” colours of some of the objects. As earlier argued in Chapter 2, “brighter and more saturated colours draw more attention” to the objects in an exhibition space.<sup>59</sup>

As regards the display cases, Museums of Malawi exhibition team outsourced experts to construct them. The team of experts came from Soche Technical College in Blantyre,

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<sup>58</sup> Kratz, “Rhetorics of Value,” 31.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 32.

Malawi.<sup>60</sup> The display cases were specifically designed for the groupings of objects. This exhibition was displayed according to the type of objects, use and theme. For that reason, the cases varied both in shape and design. These showcases were made of wood and glass. Some were freestanding whilst others were look-down or table cases. This exhibition consisted of ten display cases, each with groups of objects namely: beads, shields, musical instruments, axes, clubs and spears for warfare, hunting and ceremonial. There were other items assembled together to depict prestige and domestic or daily life. One display case was a recreation of the Coxes house. It represented selected items which the Coxes might have used in their house including hand fan, headrest and tobacco boxes.



**Figure 16:** A visitor appreciating the exhibition at Chichiri Museum. Retrieved from an article by Mike Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa.” © Smithsonian Institution.

As noticed from the exhibition photos, even though natural light was seen to be evenly distributed in the exhibition room, florescent bulbs were attached outside the glass of some of the display cases creating a cosy and appealing ambience. I could not establish the meaning

<sup>60</sup> Retrieved from a letter dated the 11th of July, 1989 from the Principal Curator of Museums of Malawi, Michael Kumwenda to the Principal of Soche Technical College. Reference: “Special Exhibition of artifacts from Whatcom Museum in U.S.A. (MMC).”

and the reason some of the showcases including the ones with warfare objects were selected to have the fluorescent light. As Kratz argues, “lighting’s specific effects, however, are rather elusive and ineffable, difficult to articulate and interpret separately because it works in close conjunction and interaction with colour, space, and other aspects of exhibition design.”<sup>61</sup>

In order to reach out to a wide audience of the Malawi community, the exhibition text was bilingual in Chichewa and English. As Kratz argues, exhibition texts are very important and they convey mood, “referential content, present and explain concepts, categories, themes, and other information that define an interpretive framework.”<sup>62</sup> It should be noted that the exhibition had a symmetrical layout and the visitor flow was undirected. But even though the exhibition was undirected, it had a clear point of entry and a clear beginning.

The exhibition “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Malawi: Repatriation of the Cox Collection,” started with an interaction with the collection. Visitors were welcomed with a multi-coloured large woven grass mat which the Cox brothers had collected along the shores of Lake Malawi.<sup>63</sup> The mat was spread carefully and pinned to a large upright wooden board making it centred. Right at the middle of the mat, a form board placard was hanging with thin chains containing the title of the exhibition accompanied by text to provide the audience with a summary of what to expect in the exhibition. The placard also had a list of companies that made both the repatriation and the exhibition possible. The introductory paragraph of the placard which was written in large red words read:

The objects in this exhibition document a very eventful period in the history of Malawi. They were created during the years when this region, then known as Nyasaland was undergoing numerous social, economic and political changes. These changes had their roots in the immediate past. Ethnic group migrations, suppression of the slave trade, introduction of

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<sup>61</sup> Kratz, “Rhetorics of Value,” 30.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>63</sup> See Museums of Malawi Collection Catalogue.

Christianity, “legitimate trade”, and British colonial rule all left a mark on the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century Malawi...The Cox collection is now being presented as a gift to the people of Malawi on celebrations of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the country’s independence as a contribution towards the efforts to preserve and present its cultural heritage.<sup>64</sup>



**Figure 17:** Visitors view the Cox collection for the first time during the handover ceremony on 3rd July, 1989. The photo was taken from the Museums of Malawi Photo Archives.

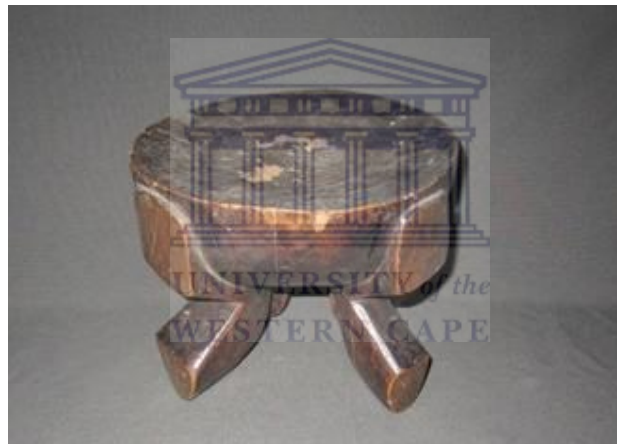
Behind this introductory panel was a freestanding case which contained objects grouped as “prestige.” From the Museums of Malawi catalogue description however, some of these objects are categorised as charm and fetish objects used by traditional healers. I wonder if the meanings of the objects changed or if a curatorial decision was made to redefine their meaning. As Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz argue, “museums are engines that make their own narratives, based in part on how they define their disciplines, goals, and relationships to

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<sup>64</sup> Retrieved from the Introductory text of the “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Malawi: Repatriation of the Cox Collection,” exhibition mounted at Chichiri Museum in 1989.

communities, as well as a variety of other things.”<sup>65</sup> In essence, a work of the curator is not purely about making meaning to an object but more importantly, entails a display of cultural production.

In front of this showcase were two look-down display cases which contained different kinds of colourful beads ranging from aprons, bangles, bracelets, belts and necklaces. To the left of these showcases was a display consisting of objects used in everyday life. These domestic items included woven basket made of bamboo and wood, scoop spoons, wooden bowls, book rest, bark cloth, canoe paddle and a round stool.



**Figure 18:** A round stool collected by the Cox brothers. The photo was taken from the Museums of Malawi collection stores in 2012. © Museums of Malawi.

To the right of the beads showcases was a freestanding display case holding items which were supposedly in the Coxes house. The display case also had an image of the Coxes house at Bandanga farm in Thyolo District. Next to this display case was a pedestal showcase with musical instruments including a drum and a *zeze*. To the immediate front of the musical instruments showcase was a display case of axes. These axes were made from different materials and were shaped differently depending on their use. Adjacent to this case were

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<sup>65</sup> Ivan Karp and Corinne A. Kratz, “Collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting: Museums as Mediators and Midwives of Meaning,” in *Museum Anthropology* 37 (2014): 60.

freestanding display cases of ceremonial and hunting objects. The majority of the items in these two showcases were spears made of wood and iron. Sandwiched between the showcases was the largest display case in this exhibition with dazzling red interiors. It implicitly created a barrier between the temporary exhibits and the permanent displays. The showcase contained three large shields made of animal skins, wood and a touch of hides, cloth and a vegetable fibre material.<sup>66</sup> In the Museums of Malawi catalogue, these shields are said to have been used in traditional dances and warfare.<sup>67</sup>

### **Exhibition Designs**

From the beginning of my research, I became desperate to communicate with the people who were directly involved in mounting the exhibition at Chichiri Museum. Unfortunately, a lot of the people I contacted could remember faintly on the technicalities of the exhibition and aging and time were said to be the contributing factors. The most important thing I wanted was a concept design for the exhibition which I realised would complement the story of the Cox collection after it was returned to Malawi which I intended to tell. As I showed my supervisor, Leslie Witz some of the photographs that I had acquired from Museums of Malawi and others from Brody, he recognised a face of his colleague. He identified her as Carol Thompson, a Fred and Rita Richman Curator of African Art at High Museum of Art in USA. As earlier mentioned, she was a curator who was outsourced by the U.S. embassy to assist the Museums of Malawi team to mount the exhibition of the Cox collection in 1989.

Witz managed to communicate with Thompson and told her of my project. She was willing to help but unfortunately, she had forgotten many details with regard the exhibition particularly

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<sup>66</sup> See Museums of Malawi Collections Catalogue.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

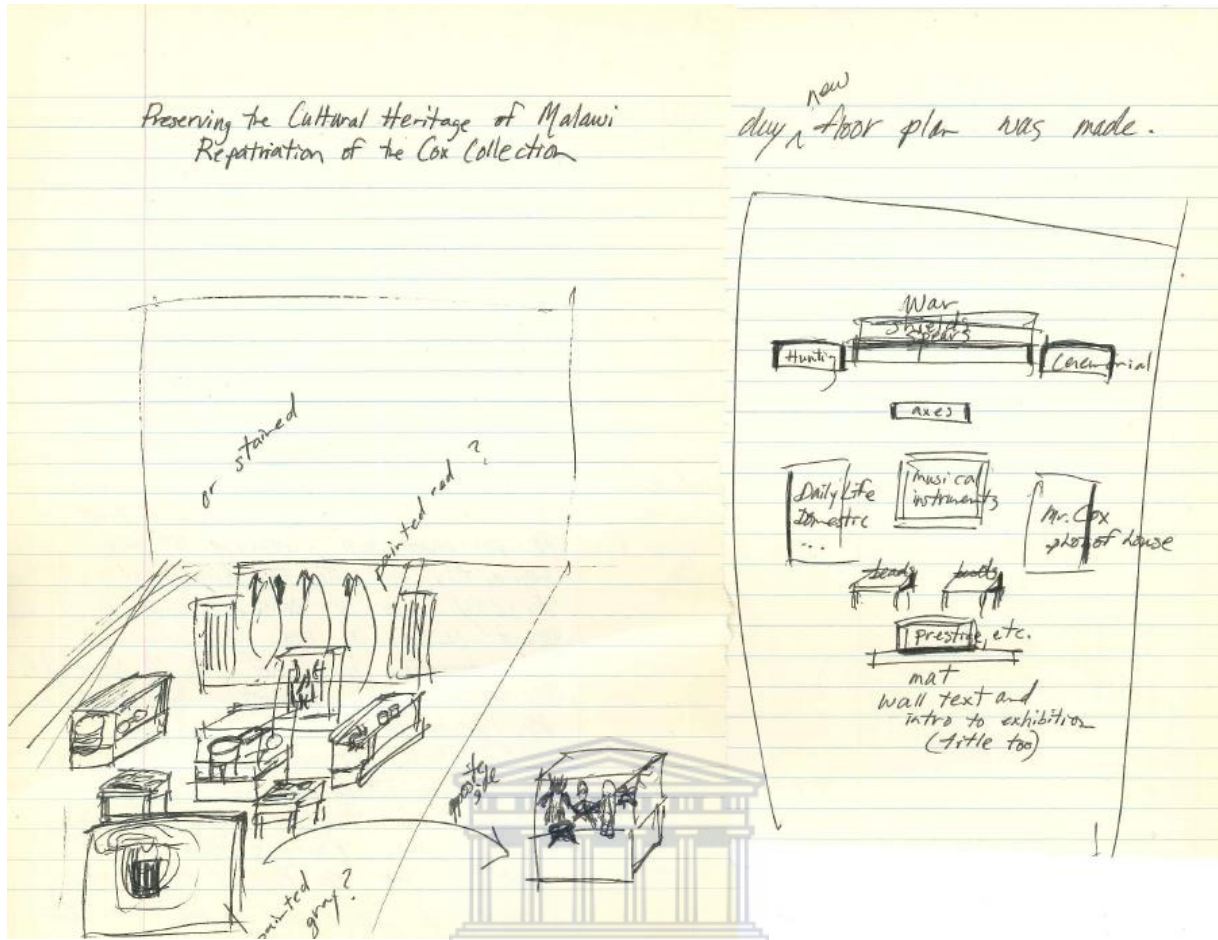
because it had taken twenty-seven years since the project was realised. I contacted her several times via email to provide me with a sketch for the exhibition. She could see my desperation. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, 2016, she assured me that she would try to see if she could find her old files related to the project. With great excitement, Thompson contacted me on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, 2016, after three weeks of digging into her archives. She found a journal from the time that she visited Malawi in May, June, and July of 1989. She scanned and attached her very rough sketch of the exhibition plan. She then provided me with information on all the people she worked hand in hand with for the project in Malawi to be materialised. Apart from the Museums of Malawi staff, she worked with Mr. Sunduza from Soche Technical College on the showcases and John Msosa at Graphic Lintas on the production of wall texts and brochures.<sup>68</sup>



Immediately when I received Thompson's sketches, I contacted a colleague and a friend of mine, an architect McDonald Lupenga to almost recreate the exhibition. He used the drawings by Thompson and I provided him with photographs to assist him with the 3-D architectural designs. It should be mentioned that the photos for the exhibition showed parts of the showcases and not the whole exhibition since the photographer's main concern was to capture the exhibition viewers. The architectural designs have been recreated for the purposes of this thesis.

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<sup>68</sup> Email conversation between Carol Thompson and Comfort Mtotha dated the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June, 2016.

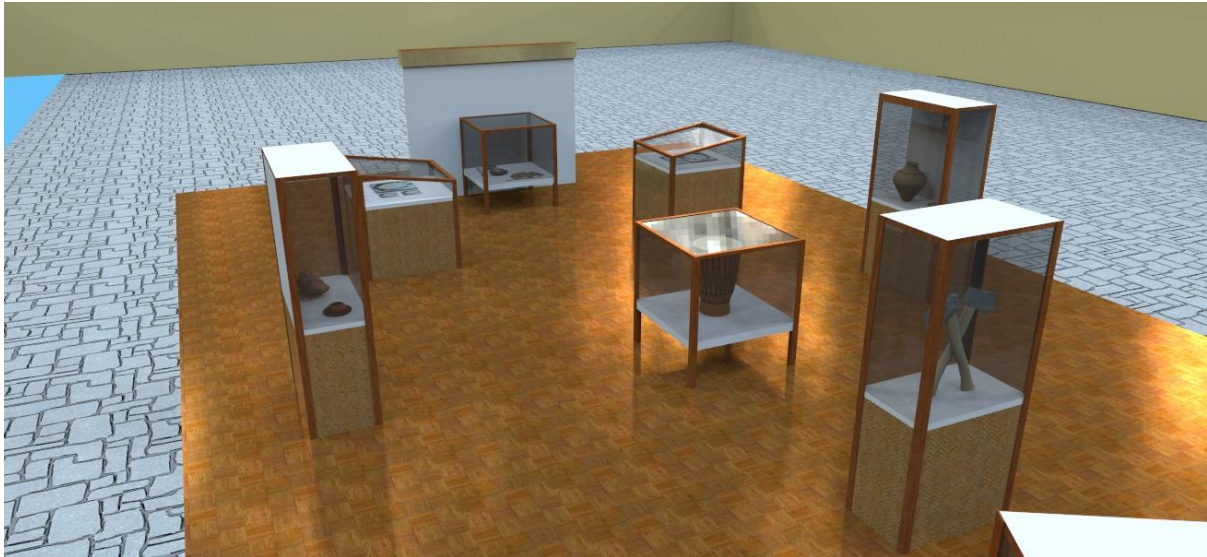


**Figure 19:** Concept design of the “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Malawi: Repatriation of the Cox Collection,” exhibition. This sketch was designed by Carol Thompson in 1989. © Carol Thompson.



**Figure 20:** An architectural design (bird’s-eye view) of the “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Malawi: Repatriation of the Cox Collection,” exhibition at Chichiri Museum. Designed and recreated by McDonald Lupenga from the drawings provided by Carol Thompson for the purposes of this thesis. © McDonald Lupenga 2016.





**Figure 21:** A bird's-eye view architectural design of the exhibition installed at Chichiri Museum in 1989. Sketches provided by McDonald Lupenga. © McDonald Lupenga 2016.



**Figure 22:** Front elevation of the Cox collection exhibition mounted at Chichiri Museum (left) and a photo of the Cox collection exhibition at the Whatcom Museum in 1988 (right).

As noted in (figure 22) above, the exhibition mounted at Chichiri Museum and the one mounted at the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham were different in both design and layout. As evident from Lupenga's sketches, the exhibition at Chichiri Museum is an example of a standard ethnographic exhibition. It is displayed through the mechanisms of ethnographic display cases especially those with no backing board. Objects in this exhibition are alienated

from the visitor with boards and glass creating a sense of “strangeness, otherness, separateness” to the viewers.<sup>69</sup> I speculate this barrier was created for conservation purposes. In terms of lighting, the Chichiri Museum exhibition used natural light with a touch of fluorescent bulbs attached to the showcases. For that reason, it was slightly dark in the exhibition space as juxtaposed to the Whatcom Museum exhibition which was evenly distributed with floodlighting. Again, the Whatcom Museum exhibition was characterised by bright colours making the objects to appear appealing as individual art pieces. Chichiri Museum on the other hand had red and ivory colours in the showcases which were rather dull on some of the ceremonial objects in the collection. Lastly, it should be mentioned that the Whatcom Museum exhibition was situated in a sort of contemporary art exhibition environment as evident with the white walls in the space. In all this, I speculate that the type of museum the Cox collection rested in, defined how it was finally displayed. For instance, Chichiri Museum is basically an ethnographic museum which explains the reason the collection was displayed in an ethnographic standard after its repatriation in 1989. In the same way, the Whatcom Museum depicts the art and the history of the people in the Pacific Northwest region. It falls under a museum of art and history. Thus, I construe it similarly explains the modern art exhibition setting when it displayed the Cox collection.

### **The Handover ceremony: Lost But Found**

It was an occasion like no other. Artists, politicians, chiefs, diplomats, church ministers, businessmen, academics, members of the media, government officials in various ministries and other prominent individuals in society came together at Mount Soche Hotel to witness the handover ceremony of the Cox collection. Before this gathering, a small event was held at

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<sup>69</sup> Diagne, *African art as Philosophy*, 48.

Chichiri Museum (see figure 23) where school children, artists, diplomats, representatives from the Whatcom Museum, the Mayor of Washington State in the United States of America and the people living close to Chichiri Museum saw the unveiling of the Cox collection exhibition.<sup>70</sup> The viewing of the objects in the afternoon of 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1989 at Chichiri Museum was virtually open to the public. Kamwendo expressed that the atmosphere at Chichiri Museum was one of excitement because of the acquisition of the “newly repatriated Malawian artifacts from the United States.”<sup>71</sup>



**Figure 23:** Opening of the “Preserving the Cultural Heritage of Malawi: Repatriation of the Cox Collection,” exhibition at Chichiri Museum. A photo taken in July, 1989 by staff member at Museums of Malawi. © Museums of Malawi.

During the handover ceremony at Mount Soche Hotel later on that evening, Kamwendo reported that two hundred guests were present to symbolically witness the transfer of the artifacts from the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham to Malawi.<sup>72</sup> It was such a grand reception characterised by numerous speeches and performances. Speaking at the ceremony

<sup>70</sup> Retrieved from a programme jotted by the Museums of Malawi for the American delegation led by the Mayor of the City of Bellingham, Tim Douglas, from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> of July, 1989.

<sup>71</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa,” 56.

<sup>72</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa,” 58.

on behalf of the Minister responsible for Education and Culture was Isaac Lamba. He was the Principal Secretary of Education and Culture at the time of the artifacts' return.<sup>73</sup> Writing in the *Daily Times* newspaper, Msadala reports that he “thanked the United States of America for holding in high esteem the friendship with the government and the people of Malawi.”<sup>74</sup> Here, the idea of strengthening friendship and cooperation with other countries was highlighted drawing links to the silver jubilee independence theme of “Peace, Progress and Prosperity.”<sup>75</sup> This is an early evidence of the USA using the cultural diplomacy.

Lamba claimed that the uniqueness of these artifacts would greatly enrich the existing museum collections.<sup>76</sup> He equated the occasion of the return of the artifacts to the biblical story of the “return of the prodigal son” and added that the artifacts were a source of pride and happiness.<sup>77</sup> Lamba applauded the “goodwill” of all the stakeholders involved during the return of the collection. He commended the government and the people of the United States of America particularly the Mayor and the people of the City of Bellingham for giving the artifacts at will to Malawi as a gift.<sup>78</sup> He added:

I am aware that Museums all over the world are reluctant to show the kind of goodwill the Whatcom Museum has shown to Malawi. The argument normally used by Museums (in the so-called developed world) is that the collections in their museums... are “ambassadors” of those third world countries. And yet more often than not, such collections are perpetually in the back stores of such museums. How does one expect an ambassador to discharge his duties properly if he is perpetually kept under lock and key?<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa,” 58.

<sup>74</sup> Msadala, “Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,” 13.

<sup>75</sup> Mzumara, “Celebrations-Bonn Style,” 1.

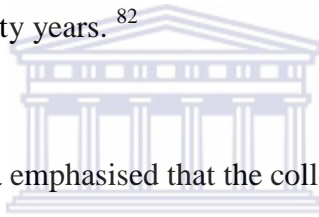
<sup>76</sup> Retrieved the speech made by the Principle Secretary of Education and Culture, Isaac Lamba from Museums of Malawi Official Documents on the Handover Ceremony of the Cox Collection on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1989. (MMC).

<sup>77</sup> Msadala, “Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,” 13.

<sup>78</sup> See the speech made by the Principal Secretary of Education and Culture, Isaac Lamba on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1989. (MMC).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

It is indeed ironic that the Principal Secretary of Education and Culture made such a statement despite the fact that before the repatriation, Whatcom Museum was also caught up in the same web of shelving the Malawi artifacts in its collection stores for almost half of a century. Lamba continued to commend that Whatcom Museum is a leading star and has “resisted the temptation of clinging to the Malawi artifacts in the name of ambassadors.”<sup>80</sup> On that note, he made an appeal that museums of the world should follow the “unprecedented example of the Whatcom Museum.”<sup>81</sup> It could be claimed that the Whatcom Museum itself learnt from this repatriation as it has returned some items of cultural significance over the years. A good example was in February 2016, when the Museum returned a Tlingit Chilkat blanket to the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA) after being in their custody for forty years.<sup>82</sup>



In his concluding remarks, Lamba emphasised that the collection had been put back in its “proper context” the moment it became displayed at the Museums of Malawi with the existing exhibition.<sup>83</sup> He subtly highlighted that it is in Malawi where it is better valued and its existence becomes more meaningful.<sup>84</sup> Lamba then tried to politicise his speech to fit in with the context of twenty-five years of Malawi’s anniversary celebrations and the question of nationalism when he paid tribute to President Banda for “creating and restoring an atmosphere that enables Malawi to make friends with the world.”<sup>85</sup> He then presented a token of gratitude to the Mayor of the City of Bellingham Tim Douglas, the U.S. Ambassador to Malawi George Arthur Trail III, the Brodys, Thompson and the American delegation which

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<sup>80</sup> See the speech made by the Principal Secretary of Education and Culture, Isaac Lamba on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1989,5 (MMC).

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Whatcom Museum, “Press Releases” , accessed on 12 October, 2016 at <http://whatcommuseum.org/press-release/whatcom-museum-repatriates-chilkat-blanket-to-tingit-and-haida-tribes-of-alaska/>.

<sup>83</sup> See the speech made by the Principal Secretary of Education and Culture, Isaac Lamba on 3<sup>rd</sup> July, 1989 (MMC).

<sup>84</sup> Msadala, “Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,”13.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

included the staff at the Whatcom Museum, Olson and Thomas.<sup>86</sup> The visitors were given gifts which included wooden carvings of facial masks, lamp stands, tea boxes, pieces of Malawi made cloth and macadamia nuts.<sup>87</sup>

After Lamba's speech, the U.S. Ambassador to Malawi, Trail III stood at the podium and described the day of the return of these artifacts as a memorable one considering that it coincided with the Republic day. He thanked the efforts that were put into the repatriation.<sup>88</sup> Trail III admitted the predicament in scouting for funds prior to the return of the artifacts to Malawi. He mentioned however, that this task was "easily alleviated with the help of business cooperation's in the USA, the United Kingdom and Malawi."<sup>89</sup> In his concluding remarks, Trail III linked the return of the objects to fit into the concept of the festivities. The ambassador "likened the going to the USA and later coming back of the artifacts to the Ngwazi [Banda], who...left and later returned following a series of events that called for his rightful attention back home."<sup>90</sup> He bluntly gave an idea that after the artifacts' multiple journeys, it had finally come back to be with the people of Malawi who understood its significance. The collection in essence is deemed to have come back for a nationalist cause just like Banda so it boosts Banda's centrality and power.

The Mayor of Bellingham speaking after Trail III stated that, "the value attributed to the artifacts by both Malawians and Americans was well demonstrated by the return of the Cox Collection in teamwork."<sup>91</sup> According to Douglas, this teamwork is an indication that "the world is becoming extremely small with people becoming so interdependent as their interests

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<sup>86</sup> Kamwendo, "Back Home to Africa," 58.

<sup>87</sup> Retrieved from Museums of Malawi archives, "Cox Collection Handover Ceremony file," accessed on the June 30, 2015 at Top Mandala Museum.

<sup>88</sup> See Msadala, "Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,"13.

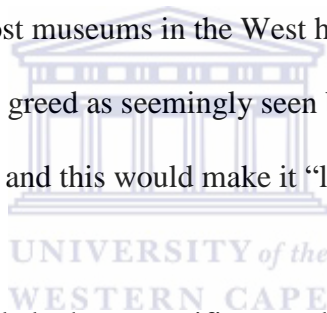
<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Msadala, "Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,"13.

become more and more similar.”<sup>92</sup> His statement was in line with Ambassador Trail III who articulated earlier that “the effort to return this collection is a model of fruitful cooperation among nations, private enterprise and the public sector.”<sup>93</sup>

The director of the Whatcom Museum, Thomas was the last speaker on this eventful night and he started off by addressing the question of restitution of collections.<sup>94</sup> In his speech, he disclosed his “desire to see an internationally negotiated policy in this area and [he emphasised] that collecting rare objects for the purposes of research, study, and public viewing is a legitimate mission of museums in all parts of the Western world.”<sup>95</sup> I could not establish what Thomas was indirectly articulating in his statement. However, I argue that he was still justifying the reasons most museums in the West hold on to rare objects. He might have been expressing that it is not greed as seemingly seen but in essence, they become objects of study in their museums and this would make it “legitimate” to own them.



The handover ceremony event ended when a certificate and a wooden glass plated plaque were presented to the Principal Secretary of Education and Culture on behalf of Museums of Malawi.<sup>96</sup> These items were presented to seal the return of the artifacts. Mangwazu, the former Ambassador of Malawi in the USA during the time of the artifacts’ return expressed that “there is need to be a prerequisite guarantee for the artifacts’ safekeeping when they are returned to their countries of origin because a museum piece still remains of national and international significance.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Msadala, “Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,” 13.

<sup>93</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa,” 58.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Msadala, “Museum Receives a Collection of Malawian Artifacts,” 13.

<sup>97</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa,” 58.



**Figure 24:** The Handover ceremony event of the Cox collection. Retrieved the photo from Kamwendo’s article, “Back Home to Malawi.” Photo description: “Bellingham Mayor Tim Douglas presents Dr. Isaac Lamba with a plaque listing the supporters of the repatriation effort.”

The exhibition at Chichiri Museum was reported by the Museums of Malawi officials to have attracted multitudes of people after its opening.<sup>98</sup> Kamwendo writes that people expressed different opinions upon seeing the artifacts. Artists who viewed the artifacts “expressed their amazement at the ornamental details, the likes of which they had never before seen.”<sup>99</sup> He added that other artists observed that they could be identified as “modern commercial curios pale in comparison.”<sup>100</sup> I cannot ascertain if the artists or the author made such an overstated statement as part publicity. Kamwendo expressed that a Ngoni Chief from Ntcheu, Inkosi Gomani who patronised the exhibition observed “the freshness of the beadwork, as if untouched by time.”<sup>101</sup> It was reported by Kamwendo that the Chief “immediately identified himself with the artifacts and planned to duplicate some of the designs of the beadwork for

<sup>98</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa,” 58.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



him and his people.”<sup>102</sup> At the same time, other people from all walks of life merely came to appreciate the collection that was hailed as “the single example in the world of an expatriation of a complete set of artifacts to their country of origin.”<sup>103</sup> During a conversation with Michael Kumwenda, a former Principal Curator of Museums of Malawi, he narrated that people appreciated the exhibition and it was more patronised by school groups. He continued to say, the artifacts made them proud of the Malawian culture.<sup>104</sup> After the collection had marked four years on display at Chichiri Museum, Banda wrote a letter to the Mayor of Bellingham dated the 5<sup>th</sup> of June, 1993 asserting the value of the artifacts to Malawi. It read:

Dear Mayor Douglas,

It has been four years since your visit to Malawi to return the magnificent and important collection of artifacts to this country. I felt it appropriate to write to reiterate my thanks to you, the Whatcom Museum and the people of Bellingham for this very generous gift.

In the ensuing four years since its installation in our National Museum, the Cox collection has been visited and greatly appreciated by thousands of school children of all ages, Chiefs from all areas of Malawi and innumerable citizens. It has contributed in a very significant way to increasing the knowledge of our rich past.

I have asked my Consul, Dr. Donald Brody to personally deliver this letter of appreciation to you along with my sincere thank you for this unprecedented gift.

**H. KAMUZU BANDA**<sup>105</sup>

I deduce from Banda’s letter that he tried to show that the return of the collection served a greater purpose to the people of Malawi. By extending appreciation to the Mayor and the people of Bellingham, he might have been aware of the tendencies and the unwillingness to

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<sup>102</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home to Africa,” 58.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> A conversation between Michael Kumwenda and Comfort Mtotha on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, 2016 at Chichiri Museum in Blantyre, Malawi.

<sup>105</sup> A letter from President Ngwazi Hastings Kamuzu Banda to the Mayor of Bellingham, Tim Douglas (DBC).

repatriate objects by several museums in the West. Most of all, it is inevitable to see possible tensions arising during the process of return. For this repatriation, there was little or no such kind of uncertainties. The Whatcom Museum and the people of Bellingham eventually saw a need to return the artifacts to Malawi and referred to it as “model repatriation project.”<sup>106</sup>

Thomas writing to Brody asserted that, “since it has worked out so well it clearly demonstrates the potential for other private and public repatriation efforts...I have seen just how valuable this kind of project can be to the United States’ reputation.”<sup>107</sup> Indeed, Thomas’ enthusiastic statement shows that he was pleased with the project and the efforts rendered by both the Malawi and the United States governments. His concern was to maintain and foster the diplomatic relations that seemed to have been strengthened during the repatriation.

## Conclusion



This chapter attempted to bridge the concept of repatriation and the issues of nationalism and festivals. I discussed how the idea of returning a collection of artifacts was infused into the twenty-fifth anniversary of Malawi’s independence. In a broader way, the celebration was politicised and served a purpose of glorifying the leadership of an aging President Kamuzu Banda. At the time of the celebrations, Banda's grasp on power was beginning to loosen and therefore, the festival was an attempt to reassert it through displays of diplomacy, military, and tradition. All these were coming together under the individual's biography which was asserted in an anti-colonial framework. During the handover ceremony of these artifacts, Banda remained a focal point. His multiple journeys to the United States and the United Kingdom were likened to the way the collection went overseas. Similar to Banda, it returned to serve the interests of Malawians, a nationalist cause. In a greater way, it can be argued that

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<sup>106</sup> Letter from George Thomas to Donal Brody dated 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1989 (DBC).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

the life of the artifacts and the life of Banda became intertwined. Thus, the biography of the artifacts became the biography of Banda. In order to show these objects of rarity and value to Malawians, an exhibition was mounted at Chichiri Museum attracting a lot of people from a diverse background which showed its inclusive nature. These artifacts were on display for eight years: from 1989 to 1997. All in all, the chapter showed how repatriation helps to promote international relations and how other countries like the United States have used it to boast their own image.



## CONCLUSION

This study has given a biography of the Cox collection that is on displays and in the collection stores of Museums of Malawi. The account of this collection started with the assemblage of the items by the Cox brothers in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century in Malawi. I attempted to make links to the shifts in the social and political issues that emerged during the time the objects were being gathered in the Coxes house at Bandanga plantation in Thyolo District. The collection as discussed in the thesis, travelled between spaces from Malawi (then called Nyasaland) to the United Kingdom, then to the United States of America before it finally returned to Malawi almost eighty years later. In the discussion of this travel, I mentioned briefly how the objects became a collection and the changes in its meaning. The time the collection was in the UK and in the USA, it moved from the private home of the Coxes to the Whatcom Museum in Bellingham, Washington State. The donors gave these objects to the museum for safekeeping and perhaps they must have thought they would someday be displayed.

This collection of objects which was seemingly seen as mere souvenirs' at the Whatcom Museum was in essence hidden from the public for more than forty-five years. It was rediscovered in 1987 by Donal Brody, the Honorary Consul for Malawi in the state of Washington, through a pure coincidence. After this rediscovery, the Malawi government entered into negotiations with the Whatcom Museum and later with the U.S. government to return the objects. As discussed in the thesis, the issues of ownership and the politics of return are intertwined. During the negotiations, the objects were said to be returned as "gifts" from the Whatcom Museum to Museums of Malawi. I have argued in this regard that the term "gift" might have functioned as an alibi for repatriation owing to the viewpoint that many

museums have failed to return objects in their collections from places designated as “origin” because of claims to conservation issues and prioritising environmental conditions. During these negotiations, the objects were displayed for the first and last time to the people of Bellingham who were deemed to be the owners of the collection. The Board of Directors at Whatcom Museum made it clear that “the artifacts are owned by the people of Bellingham.”<sup>1</sup> I discussed that, during these negotiations of repatriation, the collection that was seen by Whatcom Museum as “souvenirs” were transformed into “artifacts of value.”

The time the artifacts left the Whatcom Museum to Malawi, they entered into a new phase in meaning in a new place. The return of these objects to Malawi coincided with Malawi’s twenty-fifth independence festival. The collection became part of what became labelled as the “eternal history of a proud and sovereign nation.”<sup>2</sup> These artifacts of rarity became nationalised. It is striking to note that the return of these artifacts was then tied to bolstering the leadership of the country. Banda, the President of Malawi became a focal point of the silver jubilee independence celebrations as he was hailed as strengthening friendships with other countries, for peace and developing the country under self-rule.<sup>3</sup> I have argued that making Banda a focal point of the celebrations and other associated events, including the handover ceremony of the Cox collection was a political manoeuvre of affirming and sustaining his political power when it was beginning to wane. Indeed, the spirit of enhancing international relations became apparent during the handover ceremony of the Cox collection. The U.S. delegation expressed their appreciation for the assiduous efforts of Malawi representatives both in the USA and in Malawi. They saw an element of teamwork and a strong sense of brotherhood during the negotiation process, the repatriation and the mounting

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<sup>1</sup> See a letter dated March 10, 1988 from the Director of Whatcom Museum George Thomas to the Ambassador of Malawi in the USA, Timon Mangwazu. (DBC).

<sup>2</sup> Letter from Donal Brody to George Thomas dated August 6, 1988 (DBC).

<sup>3</sup> Lipenga, “Silver Jubilee Souvenir,” 11.

of an exhibition at Chichiri Museum for the public to see the artifacts. I argued that the U.S. emphasis on fostering diplomatic relations cannot be entirely separated from promoting their own reputations, and was a form of “cultural diplomacy.”<sup>4</sup>

One important aspect of the exhibition of the Cox collection in Malawi was that it attracted different audiences from diverse backgrounds. Kumwenda, a former Principle Curator at Museums of Malawi narrated to me during a conversation that “people loved it, they identified themselves with it and they were excited and proud of their culture.”<sup>5</sup> This claim was substantiated by Banda, the Malawi leader in a letter he wrote to the Mayor of Bellingham on the collections’ significance to Malawians. In essence, he tried to give a sense of the collections’ moments of recognition, celebration and the dignity it received upon its return to Malawi. Brody visiting Chichiri Museum from the USA a year after the installation of the exhibition said he was amazed to see a curator at the Museum teaching forty students about the objects. He narrated to me during a telephone conversation that the majority of the students were between the ages of six and twelve.<sup>6</sup> What fascinated Brody was that some of the objects were used interactively which helped the students learn more of the content.

Brody commented on what he had seen and said:

You never touch things at the museum. But the curator made them touch the objects particularly the spears. He could toss them and let the children touch them. He believed that to get emotional experience, it was to hold something that probably a child’s great grandmother held. The whole spirit of the effectiveness on the children was amazing. The little children were taught something of their ancestors. The curator wanted those children to be proud of their heritage: to see things, to touch things and to understand things.<sup>7</sup>

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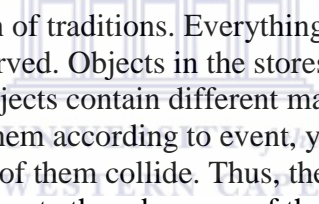
<sup>4</sup> See Christina Luke’s term “cultural diplomacy”, as quoted by Noëleen Murray and Leslie Witz in *Hostels homes museums*, 31.

<sup>5</sup> See conversation with Kumwenda and Mtotha on the 14<sup>th</sup> of January, 2016 at Chichiri Museum, Blantyre.

<sup>6</sup> See telephone conversation between Brody and Mtotha on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> See telephone conversation between Brody and Mtotha on the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, 2016.

Indeed, the Museums of Malawi played a role in turning the collection into heritage. However, according to Kumwenda, financial constraints limited the impact as the collection was unable to travel further. This collection as earlier mentioned, was on display for eight years: from 1989 to 1997. Kumwenda claims it stayed long on display at Chichiri Museum by public demand, although such a claim may be debatable as it may have just been lethargy by the museum. Today, a selected number of these artifacts have moved back to a temporary exhibition which was installed in 2013 while a majority are hidden in the collection store. These artifacts resting on the shelves are not assigned to a particular location in the store but rather, they are integrated in its classificatory nature, petrified according to type and the cultural context. Lovemore Mazibuko, the acting director of Museums of Malawi justified this categorization as he claimed it is for conservation purposes:



Our culture is a collection of traditions. Everything falling under this domain needs to be preserved. Objects in the stores are classified according to material and usage. Objects contain different material, for instance skin and metal. If you group them according to event, you endanger the composite objects. Some of them collide. Thus, they need different treatment. We tend to separate them because of the materials of which they are made of.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, it clearly shows that conservation has become an alibi for the categorization of artifacts into type in the collection store at Museums of Malawi. But when artefacts are placed in the stores in this form of classification they lose their history, in this case as the Cox collection. What is more even striking is that the selected items that “travelled” back to the displays at Chichiri Museum in the 2013 installation are not precisely labelled as artifacts in the Cox collection.

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<sup>8</sup> Conversation between Lovemore Mazibuko and Comfort Mtotha on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January, 2016 at Top Mandala Museum in Blantyre, Malawi.

The time I first entered into the museum collection stores, I was not aware of the Cox collection, which in the 1980s had been claimed as a “hidden gem” of Malawi.<sup>9</sup> Although the conservator gave me a thorough orientation of all the objects housed at Top Mandala Museum stores, he could not give me an account of the Cox collection or at least give me a short brief about the proceedings of its return. When I started my research out of curiosity on the earliest collection appearing in the museum database as 1941, I realized that the conservator was also not aware of the comprehensive story of this Cox collection. Part of the reason is that, there is little information at the Museums of Malawi on the collectors, the collections and the repatriation event. If not for this research and if I did not work for the Museums of Malawi, I would not have been able to know and understand the life and the historic significance of these artifacts.



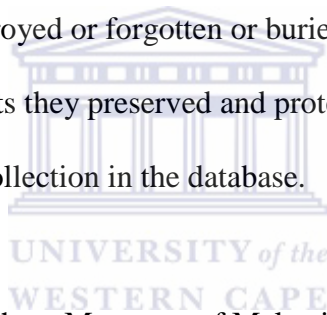
In the course of my research, I encountered limitations which made it problematic to enhance my work further in portraying this provocative biographical narrative of the Cox collection. I have spent months going through the internet, looking for various combinations in trying to find the collectors of the objects, the Cox brothers. I have read documents, did interviews and later went to the tea plantations in Malawi where I thought I could trace them or find their biographical information. I became desperate and frustrated in putting these many gaps together. Of course, in thinking about these Coxes and their collection I asked myself “Who really are the Coxes?” I found parts of Victor Cox’s fragments of his life at the National Archives in Malawi. He was referred to as a high jumper and someone who was deemed to love people but what else? It is as though the two brothers never really lived in Malawi. Indeed, it can be asserted that the Coxes only came into being when the objects they collected were returned to Malawi. It could also be debated that that their lives began when these

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<sup>9</sup> Kamwendo, “Back Home To Africa,” 56.



objects were rediscovered by Brody. In my conversation with Yohane Nyirenda, the Chief Curator of Museums of Malawi, he narrated that the majority of Malawians are not aware of the Cox collection because the Museum does not narrate the story about these objects unless it is to researchers who have interest in repatriation.<sup>10</sup> It is inevitable to see that the knowledge and the identity of the Coxes and their collection are in essence on the verge of being lost. How ironic it is for an institution whose goal is to interpret such historic artifacts to the people of Malawi and the world at large for the purposes of study, education and enjoyment.<sup>11</sup> Although it is undeniable that the Cox brothers did not collect the objects with an intention of preserving Malawi's cultural heritage but rather it seems for aesthetic and personal reasons, they contributed unwittingly to bolstering a sense of Malawian nationalism. The objects could have been destroyed or forgotten or buried during their journeys to Europe and America. But whatever objects they preserved and protected is what the Museums of Malawi considers as its earliest collection in the database.



In all this, the research is probing how Museums of Malawi could reinvigorate the recognition of the Cox collection to Malawians in a way that its significance might not be made to languish and to erode. Meanwhile, a large number of these artifacts are lying quietly and petrified in the darkness of the museum stores' shelves almost without a history and set inside a classificatory system of Malawi and its traditions. There is such a history about these artifacts: how they were ordinary household objects, how they were collected by owners of tea plantations, how they travelled to Europe and the USA, how they became souvenirs, then artefacts, "a national cultural treasure" and then returned to the modernity of Malawi and its evocation of tradition. This is the story I have attempted to tell.

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<sup>10</sup> Conversation between Yohane Nyirenda and Comfort Mtotha on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January, 2016 at Chichiri Museum in Blantyre, Malawi.

<sup>11</sup> Retrieved the Museums of Malawi goals and objectives in the MoM file, "Background Information on Museums of Malawi," accessed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January, 2016 at Top Mandala Museum in Blantyre, Malawi.

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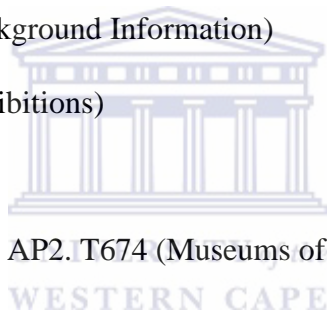
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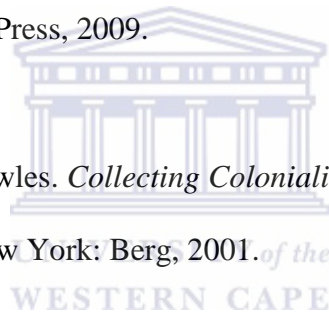
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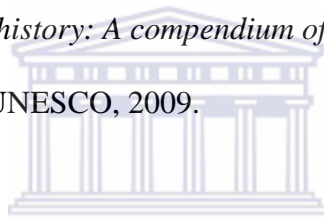
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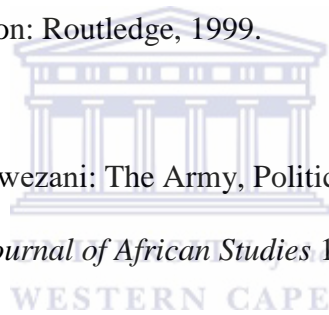
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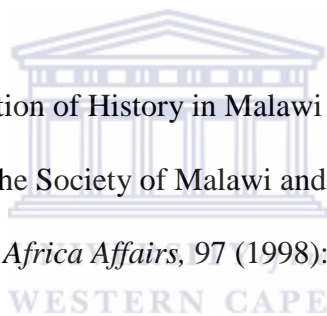
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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix 1: Map of Malawi



Map highlighting Blantyre City where the Cox collection is housed at Chichiri Museum and Top Mandala Museum collection storage. Source:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=map+of+malawi+districts>.

**Appendix 2: Letter from President Hastings Kamuzu Banda of Malawi to the Mayor of Bellingham, Washington State, US, Tim Douglas.**



STATE HOUSE  
ZOMBA  
MALAWI

5th June, 1993

His Worship, Mayor Tim Douglas,  
Bellingham, Washington,  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Dear Mayor Douglas,

It has been four years since your visit to Malawi to return the magnificent and important collection of artifacts to this country. I felt it appropriate to write to reiterate my thanks to you, the Whatcom Museum and the people of Bellingham for this very generous gift.

In the ensuing four years since its installation in our National Museum, the Cox Collection has been visited and greatly appreciated by thousands of school children of all ages, Chiefs from all areas of Malawi and innumerable citizens. It has contributed in a very significant way to increasing the knowledge of our rich past.

I have asked my Consul, Dr. Donald Brody to personally deliver this letter of appreciation to you along with my sincere thank you for this unprecedented gift.

H. KAMUZU BANDA

Source: Donal Brody, Honorary Consul for Malawi in the US © Donal Brody, 2015.