

# **One Zambia One Nation**

## **A Case of the Ethnographic Approach of a Multi-ethnic Nation of Zambia at Livingstone Museum**

By

Victoria Phiri

Keeper of Ethnography and Art,

Livingstone Museum,

Zambia

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### **Introduction**

Zambia is located in the southern part of Africa. A former British colony, it has a population of about 10 million people comprising of 73 ethnic groups. The Livingstone Museum is the largest national museum in the country. Established during the British colonial period, the background of this museum has been a strong ethnographic collection collected under the colonial influence of labeling the “other”. As such it holds the largest ethnographic collection from all parts of the country forming a representation of almost all the 73 ethnic groups that make up what is called Zambia today. The ethnography representation of the Zambian culture and its people has been based on this linguistic presentation since its inception. This approach has had its own merits and demerits; however, the question to the ethnography section of the Livingstone museum and indeed from our local visitors has been that “is this the way we see our selves, portrayed in categories that the linguistic map presents?”

Such questions have raised concern on how we view ourselves and later exhibit ourselves. Presentation on ethnicity grounds alone seemed to be too narrow and limited to reflect the dynamism of the people and their cultures. This approach seems to highlight more of the differences than the rich connections that the people share,

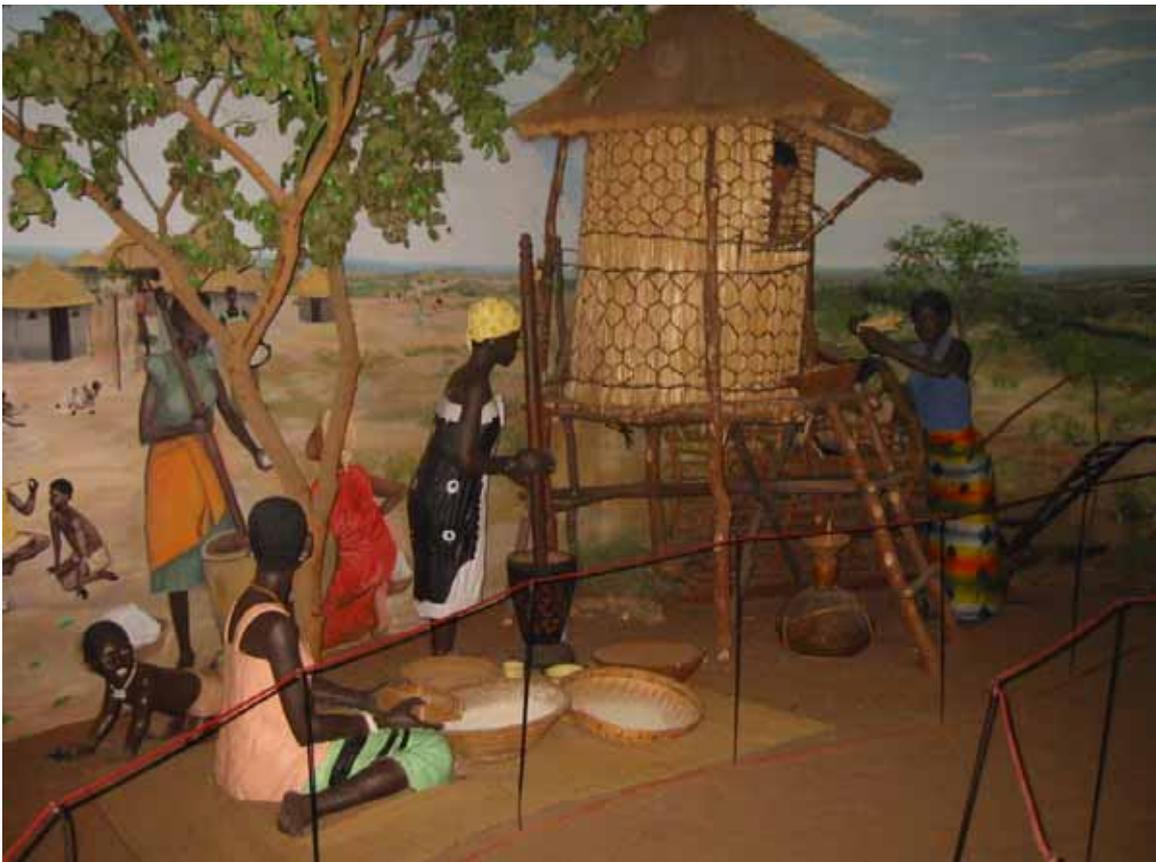
presenting a dissected society with defined lines keeping them apart. Thus, the ethnography section has long since been looking for an approach that would be inclusive enough to reflect the various characteristics of the people and the cultures. As such a holistic approach to the exhibition of the nation was adopted. Holism in this case meant common attributes, connections, interrelatedness, overlapping and non-boundaries that exist in a nation that is one and yet has different ethnic groups. The approach has been to highlight the fluidity and porous nature that characterizes the different ethnic groups unlike the emphasis of drawing boundaries and segmentation that characterized the ethnographic approach of the colonial time. Therefore, the new ethnography permanent exhibition that opened to the public in 2006 takes on this approach. This paper explores the approaches of this new exhibition that draws on a theme showing a fragmented nation of 73 ethnic groups, yet interconnected in ways that are so deep it is difficult to paint a true picture of one without the other. The paper looks at the challenges, achievements and the questions that the Zambian political slogan “One Zambia, One Nation”, brings out. Indeed can a multi ethnic nation like Zambia be one nation in an “ethnography gallery”?

### **The Exhibition**

This new exhibition is based on a theme of deep interconnection of a people caught up in similar histories and cultural development. In the villages where most people originate and where ethnicity is thought to be well defined, ethnic boundaries between neighbors can be porous leading to a fair amount of exchanges and borrowing of traditions and cultures. In the towns such as Livingstone where the Livingstone museum is based, different ethnic groups from all corners of the country meet and mix. Towns become boiling pots of cultures and traditions where people identify with one another on many other grounds other than just ethnicity. The main basis of this connection is drawn from experience and histories.

Throughout the country most people share similar histories and experiences ranging from a common origin, to the Bantu migration, settlement, kingdom formation, colonialism, alienation to their home lands (called villages), internal migration from the villages to the towns, a “temporal” settlement in the towns with a connection to the villages (in most cases with a hope to return there after earning some amount of money

in the towns). Re-settled in the towns, the people share common problems such as traditional and cultural breakdown, weak extended family bonds, crime, street kids (children who live on the street) and of late street adults, unemployment, shanty compounds, diseases such as cholera, dysentery, malnutrition and of late T.B and HIV/AIDS. At the same time they also share so called “good” things of the town such as tarred roads, piped water, electricity, modern schools, hospitals, television cheap but “in fashion”, second hand clothing from Europe, and new foods like sugar, tea, cooking oil, fast foods etc. These common histories and experiences have seen different ethnic groups share and exchange behaviors, languages and traditions and cultures.



Food processing in a “village”

The exhibition thus, depicts these experiences in dioramas and models. A village model using common features of a village in all Zambian ethnic groups has been depicted

showing life in the village with life size models of people engaged in activities that are recognized as village activities in the Zambian context. Another section of the gallery that is linked to the village by a road depicts a town. All the way down the road are features that are associated with the creation and mushrooming of the towns in Zambia such as a missionary station, the school, the grocer's shop, industrial activities, a polluted river, and the beginning of a tarred road. On the road are people moving from the village to the town while at the end of road are those contemplating to return to the village. The town depicts common features associated with towns of Zambia such as business buildings, motor vehicles, policemen, shops, public phones, electricity lines, government offices, street vendors, the shanty compounds, refuse dumping sites, condoms on sale etc.



“On the Road” People migrated from “our” Villages to “Their” towns

On the far end of the exhibition is a secluded room that is marked “the Museum”. This section houses the old display of the ethnography gallery in which the people of Zambia are displayed according to ethnicity based on their customs and beliefs using artifacts. “Museum” in Zambian traditional terms is very personal and special. Each household in one way or another is a museum in many aspects in that this is where memory, objects

of importance and the question of who they are, are at display. Thus the “Museum” part of this exhibition recreates such a space where people can have a personal dialogue about themselves and about others.



The “Museum” where people can go see their “culture”

This exhibition raises a lot of interest in that even though “the village”, the “town” and the “people” are not identified as one particular village or town or people in Zambia, so far most Zambian visitors from all sections of life and from different ethnic groups have identified and accepted them as the village they know, the town they know and the people they know. This is so despite the fact that none of the people or the cultures in the first part of the exhibition has been labeled as to belong to any ethnic groupings. Meanwhile the museum part of the exhibition has offered a space of self-awareness in the midst of others.

## **Challenges**

The challenges of this exhibition has been to avoid to over emphasize one over the other i.e. histories and ethnicity. The aim of this exhibition was not to show the importance of one from the other but to be more inclusive in the presentation of a people that cannot be described solely on a narrow perception in order to reflect a true picture of the situation on the ground.

## **Achievements**

One of the achievements of this exhibition is its inclusive approach in that it does not limit itself only to ethnicity as was the case in the recent past as adopted from colonial times. It looks at the Zambian people on much broader terms, combining ethnicity with shared histories and experiences to show how the peoples of Zambia view themselves.

## **Conclusion:**

A holistic approach gives a better interpretation and presentation of a situation because it is inclusive and broader. Zambia has for most part of its post colonial period struggled with the political slogan of “ One Zambia One nation” as a check against its fragile national unity in a background of defined ethnic boundaries highlighted as much in words as on paper during the colonial period. Not that in pre-colonial times there were no ethnic boundaries but that when this is the only way people are presented and described, it becomes difficult to see the connections and appreciate the exchanges that the differences can consume. Thus, ethnicity has been one source of differences among the peoples of Zambia even today. The slogan was/ has been questioned as to how could different peoples become one nation? However, a broader other than a narrow approach in the presentation of the people in this exhibition has proved that that indeed we are one people. Perhaps **not** on political persuasions but on experience, histories and cultural appreciation, which has brought about the interconnections, the sharing, borrowing inclusion and exclusion of what is accepted as our cultural heritage. This exhibition could not have come at a better time when most of wars in Africa are justified by the narrow view of what constitutes the peoples of Africa. The post-colonial

era in Africa calls for self examination and a chance for self representation – in this case a holistic approach gives a better solution to this problem in Africa in general and in Zambia in particular. Thus holism has given a chance for Zambia to stand as one nation on the grounds of the interconnections and relations that these various peoples have with each other, that has created a dialogue among the different cultures and traditions that come with ethnicity.