

## THE HOUSE WITH THE WEIRD ANIMAL: A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF KARONGA AND OTHER MUSEUMS IN MALAWI

YUSUF M. JUWAYEYI\*

Department of Social Sciences, Long Island University, Brooklyn, New York, USA, Yusuf.juwayeyi@liu.edu

**ABSTRACT** “Will you put them on display?” A Malawian journalist asked Professor Louis Jacobs upon seeing the dinosaur bones for the first time. It struck him that the bones were like nothing he had ever seen before, not even like bones of the *Nswala*, (giraffe) nor the *Mphoyo*, (Wildebeest), two other large animals known to be extinct in Malawi. They belonged to an animal that must have looked weird, and no matter how well he had described the bones in the newspaper, he could not quite capture their essence. The better approach was for Malawians to see the bones for themselves — perhaps in a museum. And therein lay the problem: Malawi had no suitable museums. Today, these bones are exhibited in the Karonga museum, constructed using funds and labor mobilized from both private and public sources. This paper discusses the establishment of the Karonga and other museums in Malawi and the research in Karonga district that resulted in the excavation of the Museum’s most prominent fossil — the dinosaur *Malawisaurus dixeyi*. The museum also houses the hominids *Homo rudolfensis* and *Paranthropus boisei*. But the future of museums in Malawi is bleak, as the preservation of the country’s cultural and natural heritage does not appear to be a priority for government authorities. Thus, in a broader sense, this paper is an attempt to show how far Malawi has come in the preservation and exhibition of its artifacts, and an argument for why it must continue along the path it has taken.

**KEYWORDS** Karonga, Museum, Dinosaurs, *Malawisaurus*, Hominids

### INTRODUCTION

Museums are a repository of a nation’s cultural and natural heritage. There are two things about museums in Malawi that I must mention at the outset. Firstly, there is no vernacular word for museum. This is because a building of any size, irrespective of its use, is called *nyumba*, in the vernacular Chichewa. If it is not a residential building, additional words are added to specify its use, as in *nyumba ya*, house for.... Thus, a museum is *nyumba ya* followed by whatever the local community thinks is easily identifiable with the *nyumba*. Secondly, Malawians had no museum tradition. Museums were not a big part of most Malawians lived experience, which made it difficult for them to even conceptualize what a museum might look like or how it may function. So, for instance, the people of Karonga thought that a museum meant mosque. When they became aware of plans to build one in their area, many of them believed that “the mission of the whole project [was]to Islamise the people” (Gondwe, 2001: 6).

Unlike in neighboring Zimbabwe and Zambia where museums were established early in the colonial period, museums were introduced in Malawi by British settlers very late in the country’s colonial period. Malawi, unlike Zimbabwe and Zambia, lacked important discoveries to warrant a museum. Zimbabwe had the famous Great Zimbabwe ruins, which sparked archaeological research as early as the 1890s (Bent, 1892; Randal-MacIver, 1971; Caton-Thompson, 1931). At Kabwe in Zambia, the discovery in 1921 of a hominid, *Homo sapiens rhodesiensis* (Clark, 1970), now referred to as *Homo heidelbergensis* (Klein, 1999), helped intensify research in that country. Not surprisingly, by 1922, Zimbabwe had built its fourth museum (<https://naturalhistorymuseumzimbabwe.com/history-of-the-museum/>), and Zambia had its first museum opened in 1934 (Mufuzi, 2011).

Awareness of the archaeological finds in Zimbabwe and Zambia encouraged the settlers in Malawi to emphasize archaeology in addition to ethnographic collections. Previously, the settlers had channeled their efforts to collecting from the local people objects of material culture, including current

\*Corresponding author

utility materials. With no qualified archaeologists among them, however, they turned to some of those who had worked in Zimbabwe and Zambia. Thus, at various times between 1950 and the 1970s, J. Desmond Clark and R.R. Inskip, both of whom worked at the Rhodes-Livingstone Museum in Zambia, and Keith R. Robinson of the National Monuments Commission in Zimbabwe did archaeological research in Malawi. While Inskip (1965) excavated only one Late Iron Age site, Clark and Robinson continued to work in Malawi until the 1970s (Clark, 1956; 1973; Clark et al., 1967; Robinson, 1966, 1970, 1973; Robinson & Sandelowsky, 1968). Their research yielded results that clearly indicated that humans had lived in Malawi continuously at least since the Middle Stone Age. These results delighted the settler community in Malawi, whose plans to establish a museum in Blantyre, Malawi's largest city at the time, were realized in 1957 (Clark, 1968). It was the seventh decade since Malawi became a colony and only seven years before the country gained its independence. As an elementary school pupil living in Blantyre in the early 1960s, I visited the museum repeatedly along with my equally curious friends. My interest was not in the objects of material culture; I saw plenty of those in my village. My interest was in the mounted stuffed wild animals.

## THE POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

When Malawi gained independence in 1964, three things happened that are relevant to this discussion: first, the Malawi government passed a law in 1965 called the *Monuments Act*. Second, realizing that the new nation lacked expertise in managing cultural and natural heritage, the government sought the advice of UNESCO on how to proceed. UNESCO responded by sending a consultant, J. Desmond Clark, who by then was professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley, USA. Third, the government established the University of Malawi. This was critically important for a country that at the time of independence had only a handful of degree-level college educated individuals. It was clear to both the British and Malawi governments that there would be an attrition of European expatriates within a decade of gaining independence, and their positions would have to be filled by college-educated Malawians.

Among other things, the provisions in the *Monuments Act*

were enacted to protect objects of archaeological and historical value, and places of natural beauty. Some of these objects and places would be declared national monuments. To achieve this, the law provided for the establishment of a Monuments Advisory Council to advise the government minister responsible for monuments on matters related to the declaration of various objects as national monuments (Laws of Malawi, Act no. 44, 1965).

Clark's UNESCO consultancy was important in that he was more aware than anybody else at the time of the poor state of cultural and natural heritage management in Malawi. His recommendations included revision of the just passed *Monuments Act*. He quickly noticed that the Malawi Department of Antiquities, which was created by the government in 1967, had been established independent of this law. In other words, the department had no legal basis, yet it was mandated to be responsible for national monuments. Revision was necessary to make the department legal. He also recommended that the exhibition and storage areas of the Museum of Malawi be expanded (Clark, 1968). On its establishment in 1957, the museum was on temporary premises. Unlike the Department of Antiquities, the museum was not a government department but a private entity, run by a board of trustees appointed from among the European settlers themselves. By 1960, the board, with the support of the Beit Trust had raised enough money to have a museum building erected (Clark, 1968). Its exhibition area, however, was only 565 square meters. Clearly, this was an insufficient size in view of the collections expected from both the Department of Antiquities, the museum itself, and the settler community.

Clark also recommended the training of Malawians in cultural heritage activities. This call was timely, considering that it came about a year before the graduation of the University of Malawi's first graduates in 1969. The first two directors of the Department of Antiquities were expatriates, and both were historians. With the assistance of professors at the University of Malawi, the directors identified local talent and prepared them for training abroad. Not surprisingly, and thanks to Clark himself, the first three students were enrolled at the University of California, Berkeley. Between 1973 and 1999, five Malawians obtained doctorate degrees. Three earned the degrees in African Archaeology at Berkeley--Gadi Mgonezulu, 1978; Yusuf Juwayeyi, 1981; and Zefe Kaufulu, 1983. The other two, Obyrne Chipeta earned his in history in 1986 from Dalhousie University in Canada, and Elizabeth

Gomani earned hers in Paleontology in 1999 at Southern Methodist University, in Dallas, Texas. One other individual obtained a master's degree at the University of Chicago; and another, a bachelor's degree at the University of London. Further, the Department of Antiquities sent three technicians to the National Museums of Kenya to train in various aspects of preparing archaeological materials. Two others were sent respectively to Southern Methodist University, and to Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, Germany, to train in preparing paleontological materials. One technician went to Italy for training in preserving prehistoric rock art.

Being a private entity, the Museum had a very slow start to the training of museum curators. Training professionals abroad was so expensive that the board of trustees probably did not consider it a priority. It was not until 1981, when the Malawi Government decided to take over the operations of the museums, that its graduate staff were sent to train at universities abroad. During the next several years, four individuals obtained graduate degrees at universities in Australia, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. Two individuals earned doctorate degrees, one in ornithology, and the other in zoology. The rest earned master's degrees, one in museum management and the other in zoology (Juwayeyi, 2011).

## EXPANSION OF MUSEUMS IN MALAWI

Despite Clark's recommendations, the exhibition space in the museum in Blantyre was never expanded. Instead, the government embarked on establishing more small museums, two in southern Malawi, and one in northern Malawi. These were followed by a fourth museum established in Karonga, following the initiative of private individuals with the support of the Department of Antiquities.

In 1971, a building in the lakeshore town of Mangochi was acquired by the Society of Malawi, formerly called the Nyasaland Society. Its membership was drawn almost exclusively from the European settler community, and its goal was to promote interest in literary, historical, and scientific matters, especially as they pertained to Malawi. The building was converted into a museum — the Lake Malawi Museum — and it exhibits “cultural material related to life on Lake Malawi and its shore areas” (Juwayeyi, 2011: 791). Just as it did with the museum in Blantyre, the government eventually took over the operations of the Lake Malawi Museum. It has an

exhibition space of only 386 square meters. Eight percent of this space is taken up by one exhibit — the hull of the *Guendolen*, a British gunboat that disabled the *Herman Von Wissmann*, a German gunboat, on Lake Malawi in what was “the first British-German maritime engagement of the first world war” (Juwayeyi, 2011: 791). The rest of the space is taken up by archaeological material excavated by various archaeologists in the southern Lake Malawi area.

In 1985, the Malawi government approved a plan to establish a museum in Mzuzu, the largest city in northern Malawi. It acquired rented space in a building with an exhibition area of 160 square meters. This museum opened to the public in 1990 and it exhibits the material culture of the people of northern Malawi. In the same year, the Mtengatenga Postal Hut Museum opened at Namaka, along the Blantyre-Zomba Road in Chiradzulu district. It exhibits postage stamps and material related to the history of postal services in the country. Mtengatenga means porter/carrier. In this case, it means postal mail carrier. The story goes that during the early colonial period, mail was carried by porters. The distance between Blantyre and Zomba, the then capital town, was forty-two miles. Namaka postal hut was located at the twenty-one-mile point, and this is where the Zomba and Blantyre-based porters turned back after exchanging mail bags. With only 16.5 square meters of exhibition space, the Mtengatenga Postal Hut Museum is the smallest of the public museums in Malawi.

I should also point out that there are some privately owned museums in Malawi. All but one of these are operated by Christian churches. Chamare Museum at Mua in Dedza district is owned by the Catholic Church. The Stone House Museum at Khondowe in Rumphi, is owned by the Livingstonia Synod of the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP). And William Murray Museum at Nkhoma in Lilongwe is owned by Nkhoma Synod, also of the CCAP (Lusaka, 2023a). In Limbe, there is the Transport Museum owned by the Society of Malawi. While The Stone House and William Murray Museums are about the history of those respective synods, Chamare Museum has gone beyond church history to depict various aspects of Malawi culture. The transport museum on the other hand has photographic exhibits covering the period from 1867 to 1996 showing the various means of transportation that were used in Malawi during this period. (<https://www.malawitourism.com/experiences/culture/museums-historical-sites/the-society-of-malawi/>).



FIGURE 1. Karonga Museum.

## THE CULTURAL AND MUSEUM CENTER KARONGA (CMCK)

The CMCK or simply the Karonga Museum (Fig. 1), is the home of the “weird animal,” the dinosaur, *Malawisaurus dixeyi*. The background to its establishment is interesting. Karonga district, unlike any other rift valley area in Malawi, is so rich in fossils (Jacobs, 1993) that the town authorities have branded it the “fossil district of Malawi” (Lusaka, 2023b: 3). The formation of the rift valley began about 8 million years ago. Subsequent tectonic activities led to subsidence that resulted in the creation of a river system and a rift lake (Schrenk et al., 1993). The exposed geological features were first surveyed and described by the then director of the Malawi Department of Geological Survey, Frank Dixey (1927). The area was also mapped using air photographs by E.A. Stephens of the British Overseas Geological Survey in the early 1960s (Clark, et al. 1967). Dixey recognized the Plio-Pleistocene Chiwondo beds, which

overlie the dinosaur beds, and the younger Chitimwe beds. Eventually, soil erosion exposed fossils in the older beds (Sandrock, et al. 2007) and archaeological material in the Chitimwe beds (Clark, et al. 1967; Wright, et al. 2014).

The first discovery of fossils in Karonga district was made by Henry Drummond, a Scottish theologian and scientist in 1883 (Jacobs, 1993). Between this date and the late 1920s, more fossils were found by a planter named Holt, who reported their existence to Dixey. In 1930, Dixey along with F.W.H. Migeod of the British Museum of Natural History, who at the time was leading dinosaur excavations at Tendaguru in Tanzania, made a brief side trip to Malawi, and discovered more fossils, some of which were of dinosaurs (Jacobs 1993). They were taken to the British Museum in London where for a long time no serious researcher examined them. In other words, the fossils were simply forgotten. Meanwhile in Malawi no researcher was interested in the dinosaur beds again until 1984 when Professor Louis Jacobs of Southern Methodist University arrived in Karonga.

Before his arrival, four research projects targeting the younger Chiwondo beds had been undertaken. The first project was led by J. Desmond Clark in 1965/66. His research team included a geologist, a paleontologist, two archaeologists, and five graduate students from the University of California, Berkeley (Clark et al., 1967). The goal was to investigate Pleistocene deposits in Karonga with the expectation of finding both hominids and Early Stone Age artefacts. While no artefacts were found in the Chiwondo beds, some were found in the Chitimwe beds. Clark and his team proceeded to excavate Middle Stone Age sites and others including the well-known elephant Butchery site at Mwanganda's village (Clark & Haynes, 1970; Wright, et al., 2014). About fifteen years later Zefe Kaufulu and T.D. White reinvestigated the Chiwondo beds, the results of which suggested potential for paleontological research (Kaufulu, et. al., 1981). A few years later, Juwayeyi excavated Mwimbi-2 site; results indicated that research must continue to locate artefacts in the Chiwondo beds (Juwayeyi & Betzler, 1995).

The last project is the Hominid Corridor Research Project (HCRP), and it is an ongoing long-term study dating back to 1983. It was initiated by Professors Friedemann Schrenk then of the Hessisches Landesmuseum and Timothy Bromage, then of Hunter College, City University of New York (CUNY). The project focused on understanding “the role of southeastern Africa in the origin and dispersion of Plio-Pleistocene fauna, including early hominids” (Schrenk, et al., 1993: 833). Besides finding a considerable amount of fauna, the project also found an early hominid mandible, *Homo rudolfensis* (UR 501) in Unit 3A within the Chiwondo Beds at Uraha and *Paranthropus boisei* (RC 911) at Malema dated to between 2.5 and 2.3 million years. (Schrenk et.al. 1993; Bromage et.al. 1995; Kullmer et al., 1999).

## MALAWISAURUS DIXEYI

When Jacobs first arrived in Malawi in 1984 to look for dinosaur fossils, it was a century after Drummond made the first ever discovery of fossils in the country. On Jacob's third trip to Malawi in 1989, he camped at Ngara, where Migeod had landed over 90 years before. Finally, here was an expert fully dedicated to finding and studying the dinosaurs of Malawi. The dinosaur digs, however, were at the village of Mwakasyunguti (also spelt Mwakashunguti), eleven miles away from camp.

Jacobs organized several field seasons, and the Mwakasyunguti site did not disappoint. It yielded dinosaur bones belonging to five different species including those of *Malawisaurus dixeyi*, three different kinds of crocodiles and even frogs, all dating to at least 100 million years ago. The site had and still has bones in abundance waiting for future Malawian scientists to follow in Jacobs' steps. The most common fossils recovered at the site are those of sauropod dinosaurs of the group called brontosaurus, familiar to many people in western countries. Some of them were the largest animals ever to have lived on land and all were herbivorous (Jacobs, 1993). Some bones were recovered singly while others were articulated, indicating good preservation.

## THE HOUSE WITH THE WEIRD ANIMAL

One day in early August 1990, I brought a group of journalists to Mwakasyunguti to see the excavations for themselves. I was then the head of the Department of Antiquities. This department, now redesignated the Department of Museums and Monuments, is the first stop for all visiting researchers of paleontology, archaeology, history, and other aspects of Malawi's cultural heritage. Besides being a member of Jacobs' team, I was also the official government contact point for researchers in these fields. I invited the journalists because both Jacobs and I felt that Malawians needed to know what the project was all about. The journalists were fascinated as many people are when they see an excavation for the first time. They asked familiar questions: How did the bones get here? How did we know the exact spot to dig? Finally, and importantly for this discussion: will we put the bones on display?

It was not possible to answer the last question with clarity in 1990. If the dinosaur and other bones were to be put on display, where would we do that? I have demonstrated above that the exhibition areas of Malawi's museums are very small. Perhaps, the Museum in Blantyre could mount *Malawisaurus* in the middle of its single exhibition room. As head of Antiquities, I had on several occasions attempted to show the Malawi Government that Lilongwe is incomplete as the capital city of the country without a national museum. As recently as 2022, when my wife and I went to present my book to President Dr. Lazarus Chakwera at Sanjika Palace, I recalled during our conversation the encouraging comments he had made about museums on his recent visit to Scotland.

I reminded him that we have no museum in Lilongwe. Sadly, it seems the idea of a museum, even if it is for the capital city, is not a priority for the government.

Prof. Schrenk (of HCRP) and I talked a great deal about building a museum in which *Malawisaurus* would be the prominent exhibit. We agreed to raise funds, but first we needed to agree where to build it because donors would want this information before agreeing to provide funds. Schrenk wanted it built in Karonga because that is where all the fossils had been found. I wanted it in either Lilongwe or Blantyre, the two largest cities in Malawi to ensure that the exhibit would be visited by many people (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7cDh-x1HqQ>). But the requirement by donors of community participation in granting funds meant that Karonga rather than Lilongwe or Blantyre would be the place for the Museum. Lusaka (2023b) reports that Karonga already has a well-known community-based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called Karonga Development Trust (KADET). It was formed in 1994 by retired elites who had worked in Malawi or abroad and were resident in Karonga town. KADET's goal was to address social and economic issues by improving agricultural productivity and fishing. It had nothing to do with museums. But a chance meeting between Schrenk and the committee of KADET at a lodge in Karonga where the Committee was discussing the possibility of opening a vocational training school (Lusaka, 2023b), changed everything. Members of KADET were informed of the CMCK project and the importance of community participation to receive funding for it. Before long, a meeting involving members of KADET, Schrenk himself, and the country representative of the European Commission took place in Lilongwe; and subsequently, the European Commission agreed to fund the project in the amount of 30 million Malawi Kwacha — US\$276,000 (Müller, 2001; <https://momaa.org/directory/cultural-museum-centre-karonga/>). As community contribution, KADET provided 1.5 hectares of land in mid-town on which to build the museum (Müller, 2005). This is how the “house with the weird animal” came to be in Karonga. *Malawisaurus* and the hominids came home.

Karonga museum consists of the main exhibition area, an administration block, and a laboratory. Later, an amphitheater was added for live presentation of traditional dances and other performing arts. However, since one of the goals of museums is to disseminate knowledge as widely as can be

done, I maintain that a disservice was done to Malawians at large and, if they could express themselves, to *Malawisaurus* and the hominids as well by building the museum in Karonga instead of Lilongwe or Blantyre.

## FROM DINOSAURS TO DEMOCRACY

Construction of the museum was finalized in April 2004, and on 10<sup>th</sup> November of the same year, the then president of Malawi, Dr. Bingu wa Mutharika presided over the opening ceremony. The theme of the exhibits is “From Dinosaurs to Democracy” (Müller, 2005: 1). Between 1964, when Malawi became independent, and 1994, when a democratically elected government came to power, the country was run by a single party dictatorship with the man at the top, Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, styling himself president for life. Had democratization delayed by three years, he would have been; but he died in 1997. Besides *Malawisaurus* and other fossils, the exhibits in the museum include Stone Age and Iron Age objects and cultural materials related to the slave trade, missionaries, colonialism, dictatorship, and democracy and multiparty politics (Müller, 2005). When one enters the museum, one immediately feels the dominance of *Malawisaurus*. It is Malawi's most prominently displayed scientific object. In general, the exhibits show profound creativity on the part of the museum staff. A good exhibition job was done here.

What remains to be sorted out at Karonga museum, however, is the issue of its ownership and management. In the year 2000, another community-based foundation, the Uraha Foundation Malawi (UFM) was registered as an NGO. Its goal was “to facilitate the implementation of the Cultural and Museum Centre, Karonga” (Müller, 2005: 5). According to Lusaka (2023b), the composition of the board members of UFM and KADET is such that the two organizations are essentially one. Since the European Commission gave the money to KADET, it turns out that KADET/UFM feel that they own the museum and should therefore manage and benefit from it. Meanwhile, the Malawi Department of Museums and Monuments believes that it owns the museum. After all, it was responsible for approving the projects that recovered the fossils, and some of its staff participated in the research. According to H. Simfukwe, a former chief historian at the museum, the department also pays the salaries of most of the staff (pers. communication, August 31, 2023). Thus, the issue of ownership has yet to be satisfactorily resolved.

However, as far as researchers are concerned, what matters most is that there is a museum in the fossil rich district and that they can still go about finding fossils. As for the public, well, *Malawisaurus* still reigns supreme at the Karonga museum.

## CONCLUSION

The Karonga Museum, like the museum in Blantyre, is small by any standard. Malawi's establishment of museums started very late in the colonial period. Now that Malawi has dinosaurs, hominids and other materials, the Malawi Government should see the wisdom to prioritize construction of a new national museum in Lilongwe, for example. A large museum in a large city is warranted as it would benefit more Malawians than the Karonga site.

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