

**Visualising M'bona Religious Beliefs and Practices:
A Visual Cultural Artistic Co-production
with the Custodians of Khulubvi and Associated Rain
Shrines in Nsanje, Malawi**

by

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DECLARATION

I, Eva Chikabadwa, student number 021774872, hereby declare that this thesis, *Visualising M'bona Religious Beliefs and Practices: A Visual Cultural Artistic Co - production with the Custodians of Khulubvi and Associated Rain Shrines in Nsanje, Malawi* is original and has not previously been submitted to any other institution of higher learning. Where ideas are sourced from others, efforts have been made to reference within the text and in the reference section. Where pictures are used, consent was obtained from the owners to use them in this thesis.



DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the Man'ganja people of Khulubvi and the associated sacred shrines.

ACCREDITATIONS



Eva Chikabadwa is a Lecturer in Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices at the Malawi University of Science and Technology. She teaches Ceramics, Drawing, Painting and Art Design. From 2011 to 2019 she worked as a lecturer in Fine Arts at the University of Malawi. She is a practising artist in Sculpture, Ceramics and Painting with a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Cape Town. She obtained her Bachelor of Social Sciences degree in 2003 and a Bachelor of Arts in Humanities degree in 2009 from the University of Malawi.

In 2003 she emerged as the best female artist in Malawi under the African Art Gallery Awards. Eva has exhibited more than thirty times locally and internationally in countries like Austria, South Africa, Nigeria, United States, Germany, Egypt and China. She is an advocate of Visual Literacy; her art is a vessel of social, cultural and political stories of her country. Material, colour, symbols, exaggerations, imaginations, facial and body expressions are some of the things she utilizes to achieve her intentions.



Lize Kriel studied History and Cultural History at the University of Pretoria and taught in these subjects from 1998. In 2006 she became a fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Since 2012 has been teaching in the Visual Studies Programme in the School of the Arts, where she currently chairs the Visual Arts Programmes. Her research has mainly been in missionary archives, with a focus on knowledge production, transculturation and cultures of inscription.



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His other research interests include studies on secularisation, inter-religious dialogue, theology of religions and religious studies, focusing on religion and art. He has published articles on a variety of topics in peer reviewed journals and attended several international conferences. He contributed chapters to several books.

SUPPORTING ARTISTS



Noel Phiri is an artist from the Khulubvi – Chiphwembwe section. The GVH Chiphwembwe group, a wing of the Khulubvi shrine, selected him. He was trained in painting by Eva Chikabadwa during this study. He has excellent drawing skills, but said he had never painted before. He did some of the paintings in the study. He is currently working as a sign post painter in Nsanje. His dream is to become a soldier.



Emmanuel Chavi is an artist from Khulubvi. The Khulubvi elders group proudly entrusted him with the noble job of transforming their visions into pictures. Emmanuel was born and raised at Group Village Headman Mbangu, which encompasses the Khulubvi shrine. His late father was an advocate of the M'bona spiritual culture. He was born in the royal clan of GVH Mbangu. He has amazing drawing skills, but he never knew how to paint. Emmanuel is an advocate of the M'bona spiritual culture, which made it easy for him to understand most concepts proposed to him to paint. He was trained in painting by Eva Chikabadwa during this research. Emmanuel is a brilliant and fast learner who has put in a great deal of work in this study. Emmanuel wishes to establish himself as a freelance artist in Blantyre City. He is currently in Blantyre practising his profession.

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Eva Chikabadwa
Blantyre, TA Kapeni
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ACRONYMS

GVH - Group Village Headman

KCHT - Khulubvi Cultural Heritage Trust

MPDCT - Meta Picture Data Collection Technique

MUST -Malawi University of Science and Technology

SC - Senior Chief

TA - Traditional Authority

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNIMA - University of Malawi

VH - Village headman

ABSTRACT

The study examines the role of the visual in research and documentation by analysing the power relations between the visual, oral, and written forms in the context of heritage preservation, drawing on theories of visual culture. The project aimed to visualise the M’bona beliefs and practices for the adornment of a future museum in a manner that strikes a balance among the three (visual, oral, and written) for heritage sustainability. The vision aligns with the concept of ‘decolonizing heritage for development,’¹ where development encompasses improvements in both material and non-material aspects, the ability to help others, and a change in individual and collective circumstances. Heritage, on the other hand, comprises skills, knowledge, and practices. In short, heritage development is a consequence of heritage and heritage making.

The study organized the data using Ninian Smart’s seven dimensions of religion. It employed Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, Talal Asad’s critique, the African Traditional Religions framework, and participants’ views to examine the M’bona culture as a religion. The Manganja M’bona advocates asserted that they do not consider the term ‘religion’ applicable in their culture.

An experimental research approach, the ‘Meta Picture Data Collection Technique,’ which strikes a balance between textual, oral, and visual elements of heritage while prioritizing community involvement, was developed and used in the study. The technique aims to balance practice and theory in visual culture by emphasizing artmaking as a holistic approach, much like reading and writing texts for deeper studies.

¹ The concept of decolonizing heritage is varied in perspective. Deconstructing colonial heritage institutions, abandoning terms such as precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial for the classification of heritage history, and retrieving stolen African heritage valuables are just some (J. D. Giblin, A. Sinamai, S. Chirikure, et al. 2024).

LAYOUT OF CHAPTERS

Chapter 1 introduces the study, its background, the M’bona Man’ganja Culture, the scope of the study, the problem statements, research questions, and objectives. The chapter then presents an argument for why visuals are important and why visual literacy must be a two-way process, similar to reading and writing, to be effective in research. The argument also gives suggestions on how this can be achieved effectively and with ease.

Chapter 2 explores visual studies in social research to examine how far they emphasize creating visuals, heritage studies, and the use of visuals in Africa and beyond. It also considers approaches in religious studies to determine if visuals are appropriate, and reviews past studies of the M’bona Man’ganja culture to appreciate previous researchers’ use of visuals.

Chapter 3 presents the data collection process using an experimental methodology (Meta Picture Data Collection Technique) and provides details about the participants.

Chapter 4 frames the M’bona Culture according to Ninian Smart’s seven-dimensional framework to improve user-friendliness.

Chapter 5 reflects on other aspects of the M’bona Culture by examining Clifford Geertz’s holistic approach to cultural studies and Talal Asad’s critique of this approach.

Chapter 6 examines the differences between current oral narrations and past documented ones, reflecting on the strengths and weaknesses of oral and written preservation methodologies in cultural heritage systems.

Chapter 7 discusses the reasons for the differences and concludes the thesis by reflecting on the power relations inherent in the visual, written, and oral approaches to heritage conservation. A summary of the thesis is provided, along with an overview of the study’s contributions and recommendations.

