

Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art, Mua Mission

Later this year, on 2nd November, [Kungoni Centre of Culture and Art](#) will celebrate its fortieth anniversary. Mua Mission (between Salima and Balaka / Mangochi, just off the Lakeshore road), where Kungoni Centre is situated, dates further back, to 1902: its church, mission house, schools (including a deaf school) and hospital are significant institutions in their own right. However, it is Claude Boucher, now in his seventy-sixth year, and originally from Canada, who has made Mua distinctive among other religious missions in Malawi, and a necessary part of the itinerary of any visitor to Malawi with cultural and artistic interest.

[Claude Boucher](#) (himself an artist) attracted to Mua a number of artists (mostly carvers, but also painters and potters) to form what is now Kungoni Centre. The quality and invention of their work have won just renown, not only throughout Malawi but also across Africa and the world. It is in many styles: Christian and traditional (Chewa, Ngoni and Yao), offering not least a cheerful and satirical, sometime insightful, commentary on life in rural Malawi; but it is perhaps most stimulating to observe the attempt to translate ideas learned from missionaries into local idiom. Christ of the Kungoni Centre is definitely an African! The artists' work is available for sale either at Kungoni Centre's art gallery and showroom or at Lakeshore lodges and outlets in Blantyre and Lilongwe. Commissions are also accepted.

Kungoni Centre is famous also for the [Chamare Museum](#), which must count among the most insightful ethnographic museums in southern Africa, and for its cultural troupe, which performs traditional dance not only for visitors to Kungoni Centre but as far afield as the Nc'wala Ceremony in Zambia. Last August Kungoni Centre came to national attention when, as part of its annual Open Day, it staged a play, incorporating Gule Wamkulu, which related the environmental devastation that is being worked in Malawi to the Chewa myth of creation. If you have not made the journey to Kungoni Centre, come to see what it has to offer; and be sure to spend a night at Namalikhate lodge, where the chalets are themselves works of art!

As Kungoni Centre began to reflect on forty years of achievement, it seemed right for a small body of friends to attempt the record of what will otherwise be lost together with its oral memory: we call this work the [Kungoni Art Project](#). We have (thus far) collected the biographies of over 220 artists who have lived and worked at Kungoni Centre (incorporating often several generations of the same family); and have recorded some 3500 examples of their work throughout Malawi and in over twenty other countries. The variety of subject and approach is extraordinary, but time is running out! On the night of 15th November 2015 the church at Nyungwe (between Blantyre and Zomba) burned down: it was a fine example of Kungoni work dating back to the 1980's; and it contained paintings by Claude Boucher and his (now deceased) collaborator P. Tambala Mponyani. It is fortunate that we had already recorded Nyungwe, but there is other work that is known only from old photographs or can be reconstructed only from Claude Boucher's written notes and memory; and time, neglect and theft have all too often exacted their toll on what remains.

Our purpose is to create an archive of material, which will extend from Claude Boucher's earliest artwork in his native Canada in the 1950's, through his arrival in Malawi in 1967 and his encounter with the men who would become Kungoni Centre's first artists, to the four decades of activity, each with their own emphases, that succeeded the establishment of Kungoni Centre in 1976.

There are remarkable stories to tell. For example: Leonard Chikasasa made his living as a carver of mortars for the practical function of pounding maize (and was known as Akamitondo, Mr. Little Mortars) before he was encouraged by Claude Boucher to attempt the human form, and he has some claim to be the first Malawian artist to do so: his Woman at Prayer dates to the early 1970's and is now in Lilongwe. He passed away in 1981, but two sons and a grandson have become carvers; and each has his own style. Or again: Jibu Sani, a Muslim, learned the art of carving in the Makonde tradition from his grandfather, who had travelled to Dar-es-Salaam to study. In 1977 he travelled from his native Zomba to the newly founded Kungoni Centre, where

he remains active, together with some ten members of his extended family: one of his sons Friday Jibu has recently made his career as a carver in Cape Town. Another carver James Chimkondenji, whose (deceased) brother also carved, has looked north instead, and now works between Malawi and Norway. It is an important aspect of the Kungoni Art Project to attempt the story of Kungoni Centre from the manifold perspective of the artists themselves.

The geographical reach and influence of Kungoni Centre are alike extraordinary. We have ventured along treacherous dirt roads to discover remote outstations with simple depictions of Gospel scenes (the oldest dates to 1969); but there are much grander commissions, not only in Malawi, but abroad, where the chapels of the Gaba Pastoral Institute (Eldoret, Kenya) and MISSIO (Munich, Germany) are especially fine. When John-Paul II visited Malawi in 1989, he received gifts of Kungoni carvings, which are now lodged in the Vatican Museums. Our record of secular work extends from photographs of pieces on a range of Malawian themes that were commissioned on behalf of Kamuzu Banda for his State Visit to the UK in 1985 to a growing catalogue of work in private collections: the collectors' lives are themselves a fascinating contribution to Malawian social history.

The intellectual interest of the Kungoni Art Project lies not least in the fact that Kungoni carvers have attempted to give visual expression to what has never received such reflection before. What does an ancestral spirit look like? or Mwali, the rain priestess of the Chewa? How would a witch appear, if revealed as (s)he really is? In countries with a longer continuous tradition of the visual arts, we take for granted an iconography that may have amassed over centuries (Christ has a beard; angels have wings; saints have haloes, and to each saint his symbol), but in the case of Kungoni Centre, it is possible to observe the evolution of such exercises in the depiction of the unseen world from first conception to establishment as part of a common visual language over a space of mere decades.

However, many of the carvers of Kungoni Centre apply themselves just as happily to the everyday world around them: to women about their village tasks, to the sing'anga (African doctor) and the effect of the HIV / AIDS pandemic, to the agricultural round of planting and harvesting, to the communion and release that are afforded by traditional ceremony and dance, to animals and plants. This work derives from close observation of village life, which yields art of grace and beauty, grim commentary or social satire, just as the artist is moved by his chosen theme. Very few of the artists and their fellow villagers have progressed sufficiently far in school so as to allow reflection on the world in which they live with any confidence according to the written word: accordingly, visual expression allows both lasting record and, through discussion and exploration, appreciation and understanding of the reality of their common experience.

Work at Kungoni Centre is ongoing: the most recent addition to the archive (2015) is the striking image of Ngaliba, the Great Circumcisor of the Yao, that stands at Sun'n'Sand Holiday Resort, Mangochi: it is by Thomas Mpira, the greatest of the current generation of carvers, and attempts to develop a theme that is relatively new to Kungoni Centre.

The archive is being compiled as a searchable database, which will allow consultation by artist, date and place, as one would expect, but also by theme and type of timber. (Indeed: a comprehensive study of the trees and flowers of the Mua area has emerged from the Kungoni Art Project.) As such it will become an important resource for those interested in Malawian art history and, more generally, in Malawi's wealth of cultural knowledge and rich visual expression. In due course, it is hoped further that the archive will provide the basis for a new art history of Kungoni Centre.

The [Kungoni Art Project](#) would be interested to hear from readers of [The Eye](#) who hold Kungoni work in their private collections: photographs and accompanying description would be most welcome; and would help to complete the archive.

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