

By Gospel Mwalwanda

**T**O the untrained eye, the small objects the men would now and again spot and pick from the wet ground as they moved forward in formation made no sense.

But to the eagle-eyed team from Department of Museums and Monuments, the objects they were looking for would provide vital information about the area and people who once inhabited it.

Pieces from broken earthenware and other tools people who lived in the area used would be collected and later taken to the laboratory for analysis.

And somewhat bizarrely, the research the four professionals were conducting concerned what is one of Malawi's biggest development projects—Shire Valley Transformation Project (SVTP).

"We have lost many cultural heritage sites in Malawi because of development projects," team leader Oris Malijani told reporters in Chikwawa, justifying the work his department was doing for SVTP.

Malijani said: "What this [irrigation] project has done is what all developers ought to do."

Many people are familiar with Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), a process that is done before a development project is implemented but seldom does one hear of cultural heritage impact assessment.

Although not many people are aware of it, cultural heritage impact assessment is as important as EIA when implementing a development project.

"Whenever there is a development project, especially big projects, according to the Monuments Relics Act, there is always a need to conduct a cultural heritage impact assessment," Malijani said.

The Monuments Relics Act Malawi requires that all development initiatives must ensure that from planning stages to implementation, all monuments and relics are protected.

And in compliance with the Act, SVTP engaged Department of Museums and Monuments who have been conducting a cultural heritage impact assessment since 2016.

The three-phased, 14-year SVTP is the biggest irrigation project not only in Malawi but the whole sub-Saharan Africa.

It was launched in March 2020.

Phase one is currently underway and will cost \$223 million.

The World Bank, African Development Bank, Malawi Government and Global Environment Facility are the funders.

The multibillion-kwacha scheme targets smallholder farmers in Chikwawa and Nsanje.

About 223,000 people in 48,400 households in the two districts will benefit from the



**TEAMWORK**—Malijani and his team assist by locals conduct a controlled test excavation in Fombe Village, TA Kasisi in Chikwawa—Pictures by Gospel Mwalwanda

## Preserving cultural heritage



**TREASURE**—Malijani displays a wooden gun found at a baobab tree shrine in Supuni Village

project. The scheme will irrigate 43,000 hectares by extracting water from the Shire River at Kapichira Dam and conveying it by gravity to the irrigable areas in Chikwawa and Nsanje through canals.

The main canal will be more than 100 kilometres in length, starting from the intake at Kapichira Dam to Bangula in Nsanje, passing through some areas that have a rich cultural heritage.

"SVTP is a very big project and its main canal will cover a distance of more than 130 kilometres," Stanley Khaifa, SVTP Acting Coordinator, said.

Khaifa said there was a long history with a rich cultural heritage in the footprint of the project and that there was a high probability that the project would impact it as construction works continued.

"It is therefore important to involve Department of Museums and Monuments to rescue such cultural materials in sites where they are found in order to

preserve them," he said.

At the time of researching for this article, 19 sites had been identified, according to Malijani, Principal Geo-Archaeologist responsible for research in Department of Museums and Monuments.

Mabvuto, Supuni, Thuboyi 1 and 2, Saliva, Kholosi, Mwanza, Kadinga 1, 2 and 3, Mandrade and Magamba spiritual sites are some of the areas where the archaeological sites have been identified.

Malijani said the identified sites fell within the path of the canal and they gave recommendations to SVTP, one of which was to salvage the sites and conserve them for posterity.

"We are here to provide mitigation measures on how best to manage these heritage resources so that they should not be affected by the canal development," he said.

Malijani was speaking to reporters at Fombe Village Traditional Authority (TA) Kasisi in Chikwawa where his team was carrying out what he called



**NDAKWERA** – We need to preserve our cultural heritage for prosperity

controlled excavations at one of the 19 sites.

At Fombe, the team discovered a concentration of pottery and iron implements among other items.

"Here we are working with local communities to rescue archaeological findings so that they can later be analysed, processed and kept at our national repository at Nguludi," Malijani said.

One eye-catching sight which is close to the path of the canal is a shrine in form of a baobab tree where locals still go to perform rites.

Under the tree are various items including a wooden gun, broken clay pots, metal plates, coins, a gourd, clothes and bones.

People took the items to the shrine, which is located in Group Village Head Supuni, Traditional Authority (TA) Katunga in Chikwawa as offerings to get rid of problems that were tormenting them.

TA Katunga in a telephone interview acknowledged the existence of the baobab shrine in

Supuni Village and what people seeking help do there.

However, he said he had never been there.

Locals said the practice of taking offerings to the shrine has been done for ages when either a person or community is in problems and that the offerings were intended to pacify spirits of the dead.

"The practice has been there from time immemorial," TA Ndakwera of Chikwawa told this writer in a telephone interview.

"We perform it when there is no rain or when something is troubling you."

When going to the shrine, one has to observe strict laid-down rules.

For example, the wearing of trousers is forbidden and you are only allowed to sit on a special traditional stool and not a chair.

On the cultural heritage impact assessment exercise itself, TA Ndakwera expressed happiness that SVTP had taken measures to protect things that locals considered to be of cultural value.

"What government has done is good. We need to preserve our cultural heritage for posterity. If we don't, future generations will not know how we lived," he said.

Malijani appealed to all developers in the country to adhere to Museums and Relics Act and a cultural policy that safeguards and promotes all archaeological, historical and cultural sites in Malawi.

"In the past, we have lost a number of cultural heritage sites because most of the consultants, especially environmental and social consultants, used to forgo the heritage aspect," Malijani said.

He said cultural heritage was part of the general environment and, therefore, should be treated equally and with the seriousness it deserved.

It was a pity, he said, that the majority of people were not aware of the importance of the cultural heritage sites. Some of them had historical, social, economic and educational values, he said.

"Yes, we need development but development needs to be done in a sustainable way without compromising or destroying the natural and cultural environment," Malijani said.

He said all development projects should be preceded by a cultural heritage assessment as one of the important aspects in EIA.

Malijani made a passionate plea to the media in the country to help raise awareness so that Malawians should start appreciating the country's cultural heritage.

"We need to appreciate our history because a tree without roots is nothing. We need to know where we are coming from so that we should be able to plan for where we are going in the future," he said.

Malijani said: "So cultural heritage is very important."