

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT

ON THE CORRECTION OF MEDIA MISREPRESENTATION OF INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE DEGREE PROGRAMME AT UNZA BY THE HON. MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, PROF. LUO

Mr Speaker, I thank you for affording me this opportunity to clarify the recent misrepresentation in the media and the perception created, especially by Hot FM Radio, through social media about the Intangible Cultural Heritage Degree Programme to be offered at the University of Zambia (UNZA), through this ministerial statement.

Mr Speaker, the discourse that has been in the media, in the public, and even sometimes comments in this House, is very telling. It actually shows that there is urgent need for us to invest appropriately in the higher education sector of this country.

Sir, from the onset, allow me to unreservedly condemn the irresponsible and uncalled-for media sensationalism that has resulted in this misrepresentation of facts. I have time and again, through this august House, and through other fora, emphasised the importance of responsible, evidence-based and factual reporting by our media houses. However, journalism in Zambia today has become sensational and aimed at just evoking unnecessary interest and misrepresentation of facts to the public at the risk and expense of misinformation as has been the case in the issue at hand.

Mr Speaker, on 11th June, 2018, the secretary general of the Zambia National Commission for the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO), Dr Charles Ndakala, through a press statement, informed the nation regarding the new UNESCO-supported programme to commence at the UNZA Institute for Economic and Social Research - Department of History, in Intangible Cultural Heritage. In the secretary general's speech, whose verbatim statement was shared with all media houses, a copy of which I wish to place on the Table of this august House, pointed out the objective and importance of this programme in Zambia. He also pointed out the role that the programme would play in fostering the implementation of the UNESCO 2003 Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Mr Speaker, at no point in that statement, was any issue of witchcraft mentioned. However, a named media house, in a prototypical exhibition of miseducation, translated and equated intangible heritage to witchcraft. Without any further verification, research or enquiry, this media house decided to sensationalise the story and report that UNZA was developing a degree in witchcraft.

Mr Speaker, I believe that this is against journalism ethics as it is a clear misrepresentation of facts that resulted in misleading the nation.

Mr Speaker, allow me to clarify this matter by providing information to this august House, and through this House, to the entire nation of Zambia on the Intangible Cultural Heritage Programme to be offered at UNZA. The Intangible Cultural Heritage is a programme whose development and implementation will be funded by the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) at a total cost of US \$340,000. The main objective of the programme is to ensure that Zambia documents and preserves its intangible heritage. The support was secured through a competitive process where UNZA submitted a project proposal and was awarded this project. Two countries succeeded in their bid for the financial support other than Zambia. The other country is Uganda.

Mr Speaker, this project is aimed at developing and implementing a degree programme at UNZA on the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and not witchcraft. The project has therefore, many objectives, which are:

- (a) to improve a critical mass of experts for intangible cultural heritage and safeguarding in Zambia;
- (b) to improve the level of training for intangible cultural heritage administration and experts to university level so that they could better be prepared to implement the UNESCO 2003 Convention on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage; and

- (c) to provide a niche for critical research and in-depth understanding in the field of intangible cultural heritage.

Sir, the UNESCO 2003 Convention defines intangible heritage as practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills as well as the instruments, objects artefacts and cultural spaces associated therein, that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage.

Mr Speaker, the intangible cultural heritage is manifested through various ways such as:

- (a) oral traditions and expressions including language as a vehicle of their intangible cultural heritage;
- (b) performing arts;
- (c) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- (d) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and
- (e) traditional craftsmanship.

Mr Speaker, Zambia, as a nation and a people is rich in intangible cultural heritage which included among other things, Gule Wa Mukulu and the Makishi Dance, which were inscribed in the UNESCO safeguarding list in 2006. Other traditional ceremonies such as Kuomboka, Umutomboko, Nc'wala, Ukusefya Pa Ng'wena and Likumbi Lya Mize are full of exciting arrays of intangible cultural heritage expressed in dances, songs and other performances.

Sir, this intangible cultural heritage is transmitted from generation to generation and constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to the environment, our interaction with nature and history and provides us with a sense of identity and continuity thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. It needs to be safeguarded and protected for future generations through documentation and cataloguing. This is part of the intangible cultural

heritage programme at the university. In fact, documentation of a lot of things that Zambia has known and enjoyed has been one of our biggest weaknesses.

Mr Speaker, to interpret this rich cultural heritage as witchcraft is both misleading and unfortunate. It is an exhibition of a severe lack of understanding and appreciation of our history and culture at the highest level. Through the utilisation of this intangible culture, the people of the Western Province have survived generations of flooding in the plains through the Koumboka Traditional Ceremony. Many tribes across the country have relied on traditional medicines and other activities that have safeguarded the health of many in rural areas. In fact, at the moment, many African countries are having to pay for traditional medicines which they knew and because they were told that this is primitive, they gave up and the western world has been coming to collect our roots and barks of trees and leaves which they go and use to make medicines which are given back to us at high cost.

Sir, traditional folklore that is passed from generation to generation has exhibited wisdom necessary for stable societies. It is against this background and the understanding of the importance of indigenous knowledge systems that UNZA is introducing the programme that will help to preserve intangible culture. If not preserved, intangible cultural heritage can easily be lost and once lost, it may never be recovered.

Mr Speaker, in addition, my Ministry and through it, UNZA, is cognisant of the fact that witchcraft is a crime in Zambia as outlined in Cap 19 of the Witchcraft Act of the Laws of Zambia. It is therefore, unthinkable for UNESCO, which is a law abiding and international institution and UNZA, which houses the critical mass of intellectuals in this country and a public Government owned university to engage and support criminal activities of witchcraft.

Sir, it is important that the media endeavours to avoid misinforming the public as that is likely to lead to public unrest. In this regard, I wish to urge all media houses and journalists to verify their stories because such careless reporting is unethical and can lead to problems.

Mr Speaker, there must be a time when some of these journalists or media houses get sued for misinforming the nation. UNESCO has been a long standing partner of the Zambian Government and the country has benefitted immensely from various projects in the area of education, science and technology and cultural preservation. It is my trust and belief that all well meaning Zambians will sincerely appreciate the efforts of UNESCO and UNZA in promoting our cherished cultural heritage both tangible and intangible. As a country, we would like to express our profound gratitude to UNESCO thoughts its UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage International Assistance Fund and the Zambia National Commission for UNESCO for the material and financial support in developing a degree programme in intangible cultural heritage for the benefit of our Zambian people.

Sir, I wish to lay on the Table of the House, the following documents in support of the Ministerial Statement;

- (a) the speech issued by the Secretary-General of UNESCO of 11th June, 2018;
- (b) a statement from UNESCO on the misrepresentation of facts regarding that statement; and
- (c) a press release from the University of Zambia on the programme.

Mr Speaker, let me conclude by stating that the reaction on social media regarding this issue is very telling. It means that as a country, we really need to guard against misrepresentation of facts by social media. Before we know it, social media is going to swallow this country. We need to ensure responsible and ethical reporting in this country. Our media houses need to invest in the education of its reporters. In fact, let me take this opportunity to suggest that those who have qualified in scientific subjects must take on journalism as a subject so that they can report correctly. Some of the qualified journalists may wish to undertake science as a subject so that they have a good understanding of issues. That way, they will not misrepresent issues in their reporting.

Sir, I would like to thank you for this opportunity.