URBAN GROWTH CULTURAL LOSS

REVIVING THE ZARAMO INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE FOR SUSTAINABLE DAR ES SALAAM CITY

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Dar es salaam has transformed significantly in economic, social and cultural setting since the early 20th Century. Connected to the world by air, road and water, the city struggles to accommodate a fast growing population and expanding commercial activities. Beneath this fast paced development lies a deep cultural heritage rooted in the Zaramo, the original inhabitants of the city. Modernisation has reshaped the landscape while the traditional African institutions particularly of the Zaramo who the original inhabitants of Dar es Salaam continue to perish from the face of the city.

As Dar es Salaam develops into one of Africa's fastest-growing cities, the rapid transformation has placed new pressures on Indigenous Knowledge Systems of the Zaramo that once guided community life. From the traditional Zaramo vantage point, the social and ecological knowledge vital for addressing challenges such as environmental degradation, food insecurity, and public health risks were embedded in cultural values.

However, this knowledge have survived marginally while informal settlements expand into wetlands, coastal zones, and other fragile ecosystems, disrupting natural systems that historically protected the city. Much of Dar es Salaam's daily life including housing, waste management, and community health operates through informal, culturally rooted practices that remain largely unrecognized in formal urban planning.

This magazine highlights the importance of Zaramo Indigenous Knowledge as a guide for sustainable urban and cultural development. Through stories and historical accounts stationed at the Village Museum—a modern living repository of Zaramo heritage, this exhibition is presented to allow visitors to reflect the city and its connection to the cultural foundation and invite the Dar es Salaam city dwellers to participate in the discussion about how to navigate the pressures of modern growth used the knowledge of the original city resisdents.

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Old Dar es Salaam

Dar es Salaam Now

THE VILLAGE MUSEUM

The village museum was established in 1966 aiming at documenting and preserving the cultures of Tanzania, especially traditional architecture, crafts and performing arts. It preserves rural lifeways within an urban setting, offering a unique space where communities, researchers, and visitors can explore cultural continuity and change. As an open air museum, it showcases rural lifeways in the heart of an urban environment, giving visitors a rare opportunity to experience and reflect on how communities lived, built, and expressed themselves long before modern development reshaped Dar es Salaam.

For this project, the Village Museum is breeding ground and a classroom that provides a meaningful natural platform for reconnecting the city with Zaramo Indigenous Knowledge. Its environment, defined by traditional homesteads and community practices, offers an ideal setting for discussing how urban growth interacts with cultural loss by looking at the past and envisaging the future. The Village Museum space allows the revitalisation and sharing of Zaramo ecological and cultural knowledge with a wider audience, expanding its original mandate as custodian of the past and an active centre for heritage education, science communication, and sustainable urban awareness.

Village Museum aeriel map 1962

Village Museum aeriel map 2025

Village Museum in 1966

Village Museum Now

Who are the Zaramo?

The Zaramo are one of the most influential Indigenous communities of the eastern Tanzanian coast, historically shaping the cultural landscape of present-day Dar es Salaam. By 1957, they were recorded as the largest urban ethnic group, with 95% of all Zaramo people living within 50 miles of the city. At that time, villages such as Buguruni, Kurasini, Mtoni, Magogoni, Msasani, and Mzizima were predominantly Zaramo settlements, each governed by its own headman within a decentralized social structure.

Oral traditions trace Zaramo origins to earlier homelands south and southeast of the Luguru mountains, from where they gradually moved toward the coast. Their migration stories describe dramatic encounters, most notably the conflict with marauding Kamba warriors from Kenya. According to popular oral narratives, the coastal Shomvi called upon the Zaramo hero Pazi Kibamanduka, a renowned elephant hunter, to help drive out the Kamba who threatened local settlements and disturbed hunting grounds. His success not only secured peace but also strengthened social ties: Shomvi men married Zaramo women, establishing a long-standing ritual and kinship relationship that shaped coastal identity.

The Zaramo share deep cultural and linguistic links with neighbouring groups such as the Kwere, Kutu, Doe, and Lugulu, with whom they share clan systems, matrilineal descent, and spiritual traditions. However, by the early 20th century, key aspects of Zaramo social life began to shift as the spread of Islam, colonial land policies, and expanding urban development altered community institutions and family patterns. Villages that once served as vital cultural centers were gradually absorbed into the growing city of Dar es Salaam, transforming ancestral lands into industrial zones, housing estates, and transport corridors, which contributed to the erosion of community autonomy.

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The name Zaramo is derived from kuzalama or kuzarama, meaning to go down or to move downward, to mark the historical movement of the Zaramo from the inland to the coast. The Zaramo regarded the Shomvi, whom they found along the coast, as ritual kin—to whom they had borne children—a relationship that allowed relatives of Zaramo women married to Shomvi men to move and settle there. This reciprocal kinship system played a major role in shaping the Zaramo population patterns in what is now the Dar es Salaam metropolitan area

The coastal economy also shaped Zaramo's experiences in the 19th century. Some were sold or exchanged as slaves for iron and cloth by Shirazi and Arab traders. Villages such as Mzizima, Msasani, Kunduchi and Magogoni still acknowledge this mixed heritage, although many inhabitants today identify simply as Zaramo. These settlements formed in the early 19th century but only gained prominence after Sultan Majid of Zanzibar established Dar es Salaam in the 1860s. A significant influx of Zaramo into the city did not occur until the period surrounding the Second World War.

By the mid 20th century, the Zaramo communities in Ilala, Kariakoo, Buguruni, and Magomeni documented both continuity and change in social life, rituals, and healing traditions. Since then, the Zaramo rich heritage has been increasingly threatened by migration, immigration intermarriage, spiritual healing practices, and the pressures of an expanding urban environment. By the 21st century, the Zaramo cultural life continued to evolve in the city, responding to rapid urbanisation, shifting social values, and new economic realities. Traditional rituals, healing practices, and spiritual knowledge that were widespread are now maintained by fewer specialists as modern healthcare and new religious affiliations reshape community practices. Intermarriage, mobility, and interaction with diverse urban populations have generated hybrid forms of Zaramo identity,

in which symbolic elements such as clan references, songs, and selective ritual practices remain meaningful even as broader urban lifestyles dominate.At the same time, deliberate revival efforts through museums, cultural festivals, and community-led documentation projects reflect growing concern over cultural loss and renewed interest in safeguarding threatened practices. Digital platforms have emerged as new spaces for transmitting songs, stories, and healing knowledge, particularly among youth, while some rituals and performances have become commercialised within tourism and creative industries.

Today, the Zaramo remain a foundational, overlooked community in the history and development of Dar es Salaam. Their ecological knowledge, cultural adaptability, and social resilience continue to offer important insights for heritage preservation in a rapidly transforming urban environment.

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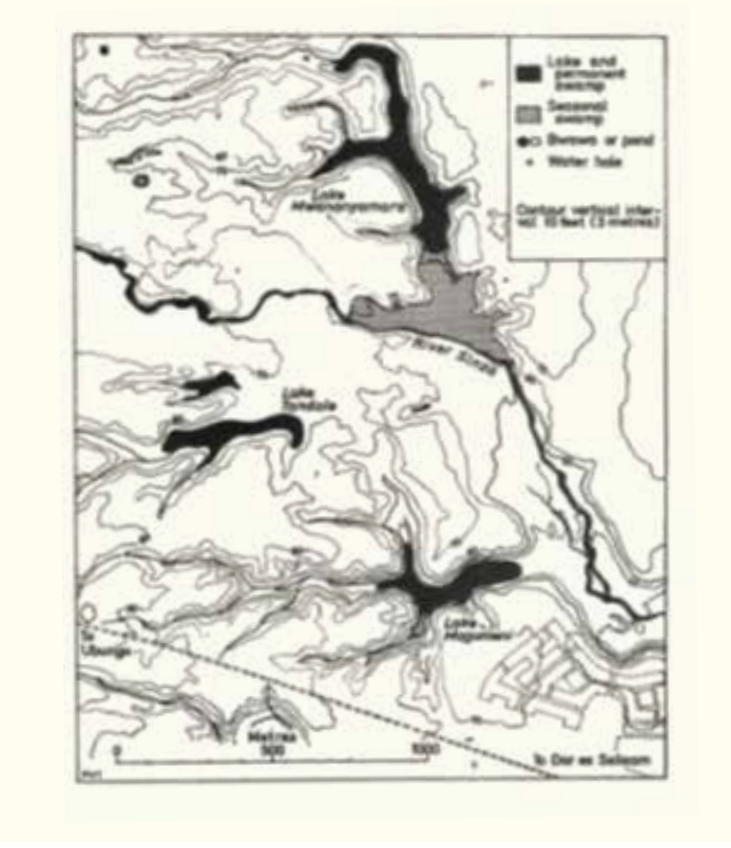
MEMORY OF LANDSCAPE-Zaramo Roots

In the heart of modern Dar es Salaam, the Zaramo people's roots remain deeply etched in the land. For generations, hills, rivers, sacred groves, and settlement sites have carried layers of ancestral presence, oral histories, and ritual meaning. These landscapes are not just space; they are living archives where identity, spirituality, and social continuity are constantly negotiated. The Zaramo's connection to the land is expressed through agriculture, especially the cultivation of millet, cassava, and rice, as well as ritual observances that mark births, migrations, and seasonal cycles. Ceremonies at sacred sites reaffirm lineage ties, cleanse misfortune, and maintain social harmony. Memory becomes embodied through stories, gestures, dances, offerings, and seasonal movements, creating a rich tapestry of cultural knowledge. Yet, as Dar es Salaam expands, urban development, land commodification, and multiethnic settlements have fragmented these ancestral spaces. Sacred groves are encroached upon, rivers rerouted, and settlement sites lost, creating anxieties about cultural erosion.

Today, the Village Museum revives Zaramo memories, offering city dwellers a rare opportunity to experience ancestral lifeways and understand the knowledge embedded in the land. By reconnecting with these roots, the museum highlights the enduring importance of Zaramo Indigenous Knowledge in navigating urban growth while preserving cultural identity.

Dar es Salaam Map



River between Mwananyamala and Magomeni

EXHIBITION THEMES: Exploring Zaramo Knowledge in a Changing City

The exhibition, Urban Growth, Cultural Loss: Reviving the Zaramo Indigenous Knowledge for a Sustainable Dar es Salaam City, brings these traditions into focus. Through immersive displays, reconstructed environments, storytelling, and interactive learning, invite visitors to explore how Zaramo ecological knowledge, food systems, urban creativity, and healing traditions can offer solutions for building a more resilient and sustainable city. The exhibition is organised into four themes, each highlighting a different dimension of Zaramo knowledge and its relevance to contemporary urban life:

1.LIVING WITH NATURE: Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

In this theme, the focus is on Zaramo ecological knowledge, grounded in reciprocity and respect between humans and the environment. For coastal communities, sustainability emerges from reading the rhythms of tides, seasonal winds, soils, and plants. This wisdom is transmitted through stories, rituals, and daily labour, ensuring ecological balance and community well-being. Mangrove forests and wetlands form the heart of Zaramo's environmental life. They protect coastlines, support fisheries, provide building materials and medicine, and sustain sacred spaces. Traditional rules regulate how and when resources are harvested, ensuring regeneration for future generations.

Dema

Boat

Fishnet

Mangrove Forest

2.FOOD SECURITY –Traditional Systems and Practices

The theme focuses on the traditional food security system and practices. In this context the Zaramo food security is both a survival strategy and a cultural practice. Traditional food security encompasses safe and reliable harvests, careful storage, ritual protection of crops, and the intergenerational transfer of farming wisdom. Traditional systems of seed saving, granary construction, and communal food-sharing networks function as both practical and symbolic safeguards, ensuring that households remain prepared through droughts, seasonal shortages, or ecological disruptions. These practices demonstrate a sophisticated local system of resilience, long before global institutions coined the term “food security.

3.INFORMAL URBANISM-Survival and Innovation

The theme indicates that, as Dar es Salaam expands, Zaramo households adapt ancestral skills to new urban realities. Informal settlements become spaces of creativity, where traditional building techniques, social networks, and flexible land-use systems merge with the pressures of city life. The Zaramo architecture, which indicates compound layouts, airflow-oriented designs, and the use of local materials, continues to shape modern housing models. Urban food systems, especially women-led informal markets, rely on Indigenous knowledge of preservation, preparation, and seasonality. These networks form the backbone of how the city eats.

4.ZARAMO MEDICINE AND HEALTH-Healing as Holistic Knowledge.

The theme focuses on Zaramo healing traditions, blending botanical knowledge, spiritual balance, ritual practice, and community ethics. Healers (waganga) use plants, storytelling, dance, and symbolic performance to teach both the science and morality of wellness. Healing is considered a social and spiritual strategy. Children learn plant knowledge through participation in gathering, preparation, and ceremonial games. Many herbal treatments used today trace back centuries and continue to influence community health practices..

Bao

Traditional medicine

THE ZARAMO DISPLACEMENT AND DAR ES SALAAM GROWTH TIMELINE

YEAR	ZARAMO EVENT	DAR ES SALAAM
Before 1860	Zaramo are the main indigenous group around what would become Dar es Salaam; they farm, keep land under customary ownership; their villages and rice / coconut plantations surround the coastal area.	The settlement of Mzizima (a fishing / farming village) exists. In 1865-66 Sultan Majid bin Said of Zanzibar founds Dar es Salaam near Mzizima.
Late 1800s - early 1900s	German colonial rule begins to impose new land tenure systems (freehold / leasehold) in some areas; Zaramo lands begin to be reduced, particularly near areas desirable for urban infrastructure. Customary rights exist but are under pressure.	Dar es Salaam becomes administrative + trade centre under Germans. The Central Railway is constructed early 1900s, helping to connect the city, promote trade and bring in non-indigenous people. Urban planning by colonial authorities begins to segregate areas (European quarters vs African etc.).
1920s-1930s	In the 1928 census, Zaramo are about 32% of the African population in the Dar es Salaam township. This shows that other ethnic groups have already become significant in-migrants. Land-sales begin (or increase) by the Zaramo, either through pressure, economic need, or colonial policy. Customary tenure starts eroding in peripheral lands.	Population growth accelerates somewhat; colonial infrastructure expands. Dar's township more clearly delineated; policies of "native administration" under British indirect rule put in place after German rule ends (post WWI). Also growth of non-Zaramo residents.
1940s	Many Zaramo sell land due to economic pressures; colonial reforms affect local governance.	African township population ~51,000; in-migration rises; city expands demographically and spatially.
1950s-1960s	1957: Zaramo ~36% of African population; 1967: ~27%; many become landless or move to outer zones.	Population surges (1957: ~128,742; 1967: ~272,821); urban expansion along major roads; informal settlements grow.

1970s-1980s	Government policies (Ujamaa, land regulations) reclassify Zaramo lands; some remain in absorbed villages, others move outward.	Population grows from ~272,821 (1967) → ~757,346 (1978) → 1M+ (1988); urban sprawl and infrastructure pressure increase.
1990s onward	The proportion of Zaramo in the city continues to decline in census identity terms (though ethnic data may become less collected). Most Zaramo land near the centre has been transformed into urban property, often owned by non-Zaramo, corporations, private developers. Many Zaramo are no longer major landowners; some still retain land in rural/peri-urban zones but often under reduced influence. Some "distress sales" of land happen due to poverty, hunger, debt.	Dar es Salaam becomes megacity in growth patterns: built area expands, informal settlement areas increase, huge population increase. Growth hotspots follow major roads. The city's spatial footprint increases, periphery urbanizes.
Early 1990s	Rapid **in-migration** from upcountry regions and the liberalization of the Tanzanian economy intensify urban expansion. Informal settlements mushroom on the city's periphery (Kinondoni, Ilala, Temeke). Land begins to be commodified and sold at unprecedented rates.	The **Zaramo lose control** over customary lands as informal sales and speculative transactions become common. **Village structures dissolve**, and sacred sites, coconut groves, and burial areas are cleared for new housing. Traditional governance by *viongozi wa kimila* (customary leaders) weakens as land tenure becomes individualized.

Mid–Late 1990s	Urban sprawl connects formerly rural villages to the city core. **Road development and urban zoning**reach areas like Mbagala, Kawe, and Tegeta.	**Cultural erosion accelerates**: the Zaramo's agrarian identity and coastal rituals (such as *unyago* initiation ceremonies and ancestor veneration at family shrines) are increasingly marginalized. Many practices are discontinued or moved inland due to land loss and new religious or social influences.
1999 — Land Act & Village Land Act	Legal reforms (Land Act No. 4 and Village Land Act No. 5) formalize private ownership and enable land titling and transfers. The Acts promote the integration of peri-urban land into the formal market	The **legal shift undermines customary tenure**; Zaramo land, once collectively owned, becomes private and alienable. Cultural landscapes — once marked by clan settlements, communal forests, and ritual sites — are fragmented. Zaramo oral traditions refer to this era as the "loss of the village" (*kupotea kijiji*).
2000–2010	Dar's population doubles (1.5M → 3M+). New residential estates and infrastructure projects transform the coast and hinterland. Kigamboni, Kawe, and Kunduchi experience real estate booms. Informal housing occupies much of the land once used for Zaramo farming.	**Dispossession becomes multi-generational.** Younger Zaramo grow up detached from land-based livelihoods and ritual knowledge. Sacred groves and family cemeteries are encroached or relocated. Cultural identity becomes tied more to urban survival than to rural heritage. Oral traditions, songs, and kinship-based community events decline sharply.

2010–2016	Major infrastructural works — **Nyerere Bridge (Kigamboni)** and **BRT Phase I** — reshape the city's spatial pattern. Peri-urban areas are converted into mixed-use developments.	The bridge opens up **Kigamboni**, a key Zaramo heartland, to investors and developers. Local residents are displaced through market pressure and expropriation. **Ritual spaces (e.g., water sources and shrines)** are destroyed or rendered inaccessible. Elders lament the loss of *mila za pwani* (coastal customs) and traditional initiation rites.
2020–2025	Urban footprint extends deep into former Zaramo villages. BRT extensions, industrial zones, and high-density estates define the metropolitan edge. Land scarcity and speculative development continue.	**Cultural erasure** reaches symbolic dimensions: local names, toponyms, and rituals vanish from the urban lexicon. Traditional ceremonies (e.g., *unyago*, *kumoga maji*, *ngoma ya mdundiko*) are performed sporadically or reinterpreted by youth collectives in urban art forms. Some community-led efforts (e.g., at the Village Museum or cultural NGOs) attempt to **revive and document** Zaramo traditions before they disappear entirely
2025–2030	Dar es Salaam is projected to exceed **8 million residents**, with new urban nodes forming around Pwani and Kisarawe. **Smart city projects**, industrial corridors, and logistics zones dominate planning visions. Coastal reclamation and highway expansion deepen urban sprawl	Without protective policies, remaining **Zaramo lands**(Kigamboni, Bunju, Mpiji) face irreversible transformation. The **disconnection between youth and ancestral landscapes** widens. However, community-based initiatives—oral history recording, school heritage clubs, and digital archives—start emerging to **document disappearing rituals** (*unyago*, *mdundiko*, *ngoma ya pwani*).

2030–2035	**Integrated metropolitan governance** attempts to manage urban growth through zoning and public transport networks (BRT Phases IV–V, commuter rail). However, peri-urban expansion continues informally. **Climate change impacts** (sea-level rise, flooding) reshape the coastal edge, displacing more settlements.	Climate threats revive interest in **indigenous ecological knowledge** (salt-resistant crops, water rituals, mangrove stewardship) traditionally held by the Zaramo. Universities and museums begin partnering with communities to **reclaim cultural landscapes** as part of sustainability efforts. This creates a small but growing movement toward **cultural-ecological repair.**
2035–2040	The **formal-informal boundary** of the city blurs. Satellite towns merge into one extended urban region stretching from Bagamoyo to Kibaha. Digital and migrant economies dominate livelihoods.	**Urban indigeneity** becomes a theme in public discourse. Zaramo descendants, through artists, researchers, and cultural entrepreneurs, **reinterpret heritage through performance, fashion, and music.**Some lost rituals are hybridized—revived not as sacred practice but as **urban cultural expression**.
2040–2045	Urban redevelopment reaches saturation; **land scarcity and environmental degradation** spur urban renewal programs, displacing older settlements. City authorities designate heritage districts and cultural corridors to attract tourism.	A revalorization of **Zaramo identity** occurs: ancestral narratives, clan histories, and traditional architecture gain visibility in heritage tourism. Yet this revival risks **commodification**—heritage is preserved, but selectively, shaped by state and market logics rather than community custodianship.

2045–2050	Dar es Salaam consolidates into a **regional megacity**, possibly exceeding 12 million inhabitants. Land regulation, climate adaptation, and infrastructure dominate policy agendas.	The future of Zaramo culture depends on **agency and recognition**: • If community voices remain marginal, the heritage may persist only in museums and festivals. • If inclusive planning and restitution frameworks emerge, **ancestral lands, shrines, and rituals may be reintegrated** into the urban cultural fabric. • The city's plural identity could then acknowledge its **Zaramo foundations** as part of a living, multi-ethnic heritage.