



Maximilian Chami & Gabriel Kaminyoge

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## Closed House of Wonders museum: Implications to the tourism of Zanzibar Stone Town, UNESCO World Heritage Site

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# Closed House of Wonders museum: Implications to the tourism of Zanzibar Stone Town, UNESCO World Heritage Site

**Maximilian Chami**  
Brandenburg University of Technology, Germany

**Gabriel Kaminyoge**  
University of Dodoma, Tanzania

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper examines the impact of the closed House of Wonders Museum in the tourism industry of Stone Town, Zanzibar. The paper aims to propose the best practices taken into account due to the impact raised by the closure of the Museum. There has been no clear information on the overall situation which faces the site since 2012 when the Museum closed.

**Methods:** Data were collected through mixed methods: a quantitative questionnaire survey using a sample size of the 105 tourists who visited the House of Wonders Museum; qualitative in-depth interviews and focus groups, consisting of 8 Government Officials, 6 Tour Guides and 8 Tour Operators.

**Results:** The findings show that the closed museum has affected the level of tourists' satisfaction, tour operators, community and tour guides economically. The closed museum also might cause the Stone Town World Heritage Site to lose its authenticity hence being in danger of being removed from the UNESCO World Heritage Site if the conservation and rehabilitation activities won't be finished as soon as possible

**Implications:** Based on findings, a quick rehabilitation and reconstruction of the Museum is strongly recommended to save the integrity and authenticity of this World Heritage Site and to enhance local tourism development; the closed House of Wonders Museum has badly affected the economic situation of the many tour operators and tour guides and the local community.

**Keywords:** House of Wonders, heritage tourism, Zanzibar Stone Town, museum

**JEL Classification:** G14, M31, Z33

**Biographical note:** Maximilian F. Chami (maximilian.chami@b-tu.de) is a PhD Candidate (Heritage Studies) with the Brandenburg University of Technology-Cottbus, German. He currently works at UNESCO National Commission of the United Republic of Tanzania as the Culture and Heritage officer. He obtained his Bachelor of Arts in Tourism and Culture Heritage from University of Dodoma (2012) and Master of Arts in Heritage Management from the University of Dar es Salaam in 2015. Gabriel I. Kaminyoge (86kaminyoge@gmail.com) is an assistant lecturer at the University of Dodoma. He graduated with his Master of Arts in Heritage Management and Bachelor of Arts in Archaeology at the University of Dar es Salaam. His research interests focused on environmental and heritage impact assessment, tourism, heritage, policy studies and the environment.

## 1 INTRODUCTION: HOUSE OF WONDERS MUSEUM

This paper reports a piece of research undertaken in Zanzibar Island on the impact of closed House of Wonders Museum since December 2012 to the tourism cycle of Zanzibar Stone Town, UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Museum was closed down by the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar for maintenance and repair after a large corner of the Museum collapsed, taking with it several essential iron pillars and threatening the structural integrity of the building and its façade. Furthermore, the roof of buildings is in a precarious

state, especially after heavy rainfall of November 2015 caused the partial collapse of the roof (WMF 2017). The House of Wonders (in Arabic: Beit-al-Ajaib) is a landmark building in Stone Town, Zanzibar Island. It is the largest and tallest building of Stone Town facing the Forodhani Gardens on the old town's seafront, in Mizingani Road. It is located between the Old Fort and the Palace Museum as one of six palaces built by Barghash bin Said, the second Sultan of Zanzibar (ibid.).

The building was constructed in 1883 with the intention to act as a ceremonial or stately palace to the Sultan's visitors.



It was named "House of Wonders" because it was believed as the first building in Zanzibar Island and Africa to have electricity and elevators. The design of the palace attributed to a British marine engineer and after Sultan Barghash bin Said inspired by its visit to Paris and London in 1875, where he enthusiastically took the idea to modernise Zanzibar Island by installing a piped drinking water system, amongst other infrastructure projects (Folkers 2013; Meffert 2009). The building has the wide external verandas supported by cast-iron columns, which allowed for uniquely high ceilings while construction materials consisted of an original combination of coral rag, concrete slabs, mangrove shoots and steel beams (Folkers 2013). In August 1896, the building suffered damage due to Anglo-Zanzibar War and reconstructed in 1897. After the bombardment and reconstruction, in 1911 the building was transformed into government offices and as the central secretariat for the British governing authorities in Zanzibar Island and later in 1964 converted into a school and a museum for the ruling Afro-Shirazi Party. Since the 2000s, the House of Wonders became the Museum of History and Culture of Zanzibar and the Swahili Civilization along the Coast of Indian Ocean (Sheriff et al. 2007).

Figure 1. The front façade of the House of Wonders, now a Museum of Swahili culture in Zanzibar Island (WFM, 2017)



In this paper, we examine the implication of the closed House of Wonders Museum to the tourism cycles in Zanzibar Stone Town. While we try to discuss the impact of closed Museum on the tourism cycle in Stone Town; it should be well-known that many studies in Zanzibar Island (e.g. Stone Town) have concentrated more on the tourism satisfaction (Salim and Mwaipopo 2016; Chami 2018a; Chami 2018b), heritage management and archaeological excavations (Chami 2011; Chami 2013; Chami 2017; Juma 2004; Juma et al. 2005). Unfortunately, many of the studies or researchers in Zanzibar Island have ignored the impact of closed of House of Museum on the tourism cycle in Stone Town of Zanzibar. As such, before this study, there was no precise information on whether or not the closed museum has affected the tourism cycle in Zanzibar stone Town UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is essential to find out and determine whether or not the closed House of Wonders Museum has affected the tourism cycle and activities in Stone Town of Zanzibar. This idea is vital to government bodies especially Zanzibar Commission for Tourism, Stone Town Conservation Development Authority, Department of Antiquities and Museum on how to

solve the tourism challenges and opportunities which might raise in Zanzibar Stone Town due to the House of Wonders closed for reconstruction.

Therefore, it is fundamentally essential to investigate whether or not the closed House of Wonders Museum has affected the tourism activities in Zanzibar Stone Town. We further argue that there is a significant need for Zanzibar Commission for Tourism (ZCT), Department of Museum, Antiquities and Stone Town Conservation Development Authority (STCDA) to work together in developing an alternative means to the tourists who want to visit and explore the closed Museum.

## 2 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data presented in this study drawn from various interviews with the Zanzibar Commission for Tourism, Department of Antiquities staffs. A non-structured with open-ended questions were prepared to acquire relevant information from the informed respondents. Also, closed-ended questionnaires were designed and distributed to 120 tourists, but only 105 were returned. To complement the above two methods, non-participation observation employed in assessing the state of the building. All of these activities conducted between July-October 2018 in Zanzibar Stone Town. These questionnaires were used to catch up on the opinion and views of tourists on the level of satisfaction with House of Wonders as one of the attributes in Zanzibar Stone Town. Personal observations on tourism activities going on in and around the House of Wonders Museum also included in this data. One of us (MC) has frequently visited the site for his research activities since 2013 (Chami and Lyaya 2015; Chami 2018a; Chami 2018b). During all these visits, both of us experienced that tourists were demoralised due to the failure to get inside the Museum. This situation might have a significant adverse impact on the tourism cycle of Zanzibar Stone Town in Zanzibar Island.

Figure 2. A corner section of the House of Wonders that collapsed in November 2012 (WFM, 2017)



## 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Tourist Satisfaction in Zanzibar Stone Town: House of Wonders Museum

In this regard, tourists were requested to give a score to the closed House of Wonders Museum in each of the

questionnaires using a five-point Likert scale that is ranging from 1. Very Satisfied 2. Satisfied 3. Moderate 4. Dissatisfied 5. Very Dissatisfied. Here, the respondents provided a score to the closed Museum on the level of satisfaction to this attribute. Tourists (respondents) selected in a random way whereby 120 questionnaires distributed to tourists, but only 105 questionnaires returned. It revealed that 38 respondents equivalent to 36.2% and 18 (17.1%) were both dissatisfied and very dissatisfied with the House of Wonders museum. Also, the study found out that 2 (1.9%) respondents did not visit, the Museum. However, 15 (14.3%) and 6 (5.7%) were satisfied and very satisfied with the attribute respectively, but 26 (24.8%) felt that they were moderately satisfied with this closed Museum. These results summarised in Table 1 below. Generally, the results indicate that 56 (53.3%) respondents were not satisfied with the closed House of Wonders Museum in Zanzibar Stone Town.

Table 1. Respondents Satisfaction with Zanzibar Stone Town Attributes (N=105, P=100%)

Variables	Frequency	Percent %
<b>House of Wonders Museum</b>		
Very Satisfied	6	5.7
Satisfied	15	14.3
Moderate	26	24.8
Dissatisfied	38	36.2
Very Dissatisfied	18	17.1
Not Visited	2	1.9

Source: Field Data (see also Chami 2018a)

These results perfectly accord with previous studies (Chaudhary and Aggarwal 2012; Huh 2002; Hou 2009; Mensah 2013) which found out similar results on the variation in the level of attribute satisfaction in different tourism attributes. These results further suggest that the difference in the level of tourists’ satisfaction with the House of Wonders Museum might have a significant adverse impact on the tourism cycle in Zanzibar Stone Town. The higher number of tourists (53.3%) who revealed not satisfied with House of Wonders which closed for reconstruction can have the significant negative influence to the tourist touching loyalty to the Zanzibar Stone Town UNESCO World (Chami 2018b; Alsaqre 2011). The closed House of Wonders Museum can influence the tourists to lack the sense of willingness to revisit the site or even not to recommend Zanzibar Stone Town to their relatives in the future (Ijeomah and Esaen 2011; Nowack 2013). For example, Nowack (2013) argued that revisit intention can be subjective or somewhat influenced by a specific site or attribute in any heritage site. We can further discuss that intention to the tourist revisit, and loyalty with the Zanzibar Stone Town can be severely affected by the closed House of Wonders museum as one of the attributes in this site if government bodies will take no action.

3.2 Opinions of Government Staff Regarding the Closed House of Wonders Museum: Department of Antiquities and ZCT

Focusing on the importance of the House of Wonder museum holds for the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar, the study interviewed eight (8) employees from the Department

of Antiquities (5) and Zanzibar Commission for Tourism (3) respectively. The respondents provided their views and opinion on the importance of the closed Museum to the people of Zanzibar Island. Regarding the position that the House of Wonders depicts to the tourism of Zanzibar and Stone Town, in particular, all eight (8) respondents revealed that, the House of Wonders regarded as a symbol and one of the prominent structures in Zanzibar Island and the World of Architecture (Garlake 1966; Sheriff and Jafferji 1998). To show the value of this building, the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar uses the building in their passport and currency. It is the most famous building in the area of Stone Town. This building used as a museum that showed the history and Swahili culture of Zanzibar and the Coast of East Africa. In other words, the House of Wonders complements another tourism attribute available in Zanzibar (Chami 2018a). It is even said the visit to Zanzibar Island without getting into the House of Wonder, such tour considered as incomplete. Therefore, the House of Wonder is considered as a benchmark of Zanzibar's tourism as it attracted more visitors than any other building in the Zanzibar Stone Town. It further revealed by one respondent that the building by itself is a museum apart from what is housed inside as artefacts. The tourism of Zanzibar Stone Town embedded in this building. The building as a museum houses different artefact belonging to the Swahili culture (Steyn and Holm 2001). They also added that the building attracts many visitors from different parts of the world just because of its name and uniqueness. One staff further added, to show the value and uniqueness of this building the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar has even enacted a law that regulates the size of buildings within Stone Town not to transcend the House of Wonder. On this fact, the collapse and close of the building have brought a significant loss to the government regarding the economy and tourism activities at large.

Furthermore, the closed museum led to the government to lose an authentic and sustainable source of income from visitor and thus helping with the funding of conservation activities and other projects. For the visitors have missed an opportunity to learn and experience the sense of the architectural, historical and the collection housed inside the house. During the interview one antiquities staff said:

*“the closure of this museum has not only demised the rights of publicity and visitors to access the collection, but also the artefacts impacted due to storage spacing, and others were affected by moisture and dust due to leakage”.*

Regarding tourism, the closure of the museum might have led to the decline in the number of visitors, particularly those interested in the museum staffs though no precise statistical data obtained from these government bodies. But, as it stands the number of visitors to Zanzibar is increasing year after year; however, with the closure of the House of Wonder visitor have shifted to other tourism activities. This tendency if allowed to prevail for an extended period may lead to mass tourism and the destruction of the facility and surrounding vicinity like in Greece (Schouten 1998). Also, we can argue that this situation may result in the reduction of the number of nights that visitors stay in Zanzibar destinations due to the decrease in tourism activities. The decline in the number of visitors’ nights has serious implication for the expenditure

and government revenues. Other respondents showed that the closure of the museum contributes to the loss of memories about the collection, which is the strongest tool for visitor's orientation to the museum. Secondly, the closure of this museum had affected the workers economically as they used to receiving tips when the museum was operating but now no longer receiving it. As a department of antiquities, this building uses to generate more than 75% of the total fund created from all buildings governed by the antiquities. Lastly, the study observed severe input to the budget and conservation activities of the department of antiquities. We can further discuss that; this downfall has perhaps contributed to weak conservation efforts. As a result, the government end up relies on the funding from donors which is not sufficient. Additionally, the closure of this building jeopardises the position of Zanzibar Stone Town as a UNESCO World Heritage Site which could end up being positioned on the list of World Heritage Site in Danger. It should well know that tourism is the backbone of the economy of Zanzibar Island; hence a huge effort is needed to retain this status and the authenticity of House of Wonders Museum. The closure of the House of Wonder has demoralised the attitude of workers as they are not exercising their areas of specialisation and do not benefit anymore ending up allocated to the different working stations. As a result, this perhaps suggests that House of Wonders has a significance value not only to the antiquities government officers but also to the Stone Town of Zanzibar in general. The building might cause the Stone Town World Heritage Site to lose its authenticity hence being in danger of removed from the UNESCO World Heritage Site if the conservation and rehabilitation activities won't be finished as soon as possible.

### *3.3 Opinions of Private Sector Regarding the Closed House of Wonders Museum: Tour Operators and Tour Guides*

In different parts of the World, researchers have been conducting studies on the impact of tour guides, tour operators and their role in the overall development of the tourism industry (Sandaruwani and Gnanapala 2016; Blyablina 2015; Nkonoki 2012). Some of the researchers have moved even further and tried to show how tour guides and tour operators can provide tourism satisfaction and experience within the heritage site (Hsu et al. 2009; Weiler and Walker 2014). Hence, following up from this review, the is no clear information on the impact of the closed museum to the tour guide and tour operators in Tanzania. This situation even made the need to include the opinions of these two stakeholders in this study.

Therefore, the views from private sectors on the closed House of Wonders Museum of Zanzibar Stone Town is of paramount. The study also consulted at least Eight (8) tour operators and Six (6) tour guides around the site. These two categories of stakeholders considered because of their duties and position in the tourism activities of Zanzibar Stone Town World Heritage Site in particular. At this end, at least all respondents cohere that, the House of Wonder is important evidence of the unique architecture of Zanzibar and mirror / iconic building of Zanzibar Stone Town. Also, information on this building was the first to be published on the internet before any facility found in the Zanzibar Stone Town. The

name wonder attracted many visitors both domestic and foreign who have been motivated to visit and see what does the building embrace. This status, therefore, was used as an attracting force to the visitor to come to Zanzibar. As for this case, every visitor who sets foot in the land of Zanzibar wished to visit the building and experience the sense of wonder of the building as the name suggests (Weiler and Walker 2014).

Therefore, three tour operators and two tour guides shared that before the closure of the Museum, the building received nearly 90% of the total visit to Zanzibar Stone Town. The estimated figure from both operators and guides rounded to 200 to 300 hundred visitors per day. They further said the government received a lot of foreign currency as a direct entrance fee that was standing at 2\$ per visitor. After the closure of the Museum, the respondent 's showed a sudden drop in visitors and activities around the building. Regarding the revenues, three tour guides suggested that nowadays the government has lost the very sustainable source of income from the tourists who were coming to this building. One tour guide added that the closure of the building has increased troubles resulting from frustrations and dissatisfaction from visitors who always insist there need to go to the building even if closed (Sandaruwani and Gnanapala 2016). For instance, in 2017 one royal family travelled from Saud Arabia to Zanzibar to see the building, when I told them that it's not open to the public due to leakages they were very disappointed, he added. In addition to this, the tour guide explained that we had lost some tips from visitors following the closure of the museum as this was helping to support themselves and our families.

As the issue of concern for tour operators, two operators revealed that the closure of the famous building of House of Wonders has led to the shutdown and the collapse of some tour operators/ organisers who were specialised in the Stone Town World Heritage Site walking tours especially those dealing with visitors from Italy. And some others have shifted to other forms of tourism activities and destinations, for example, organising tours to Prisoners Island, Beach Safaris, Dolphin tours and spice tours to mention a few (Nkonoki 2012). Additionally, one tour operator added that the time when House of Wonder was active, even our school children used to benefit from tourists who used to give them with books, pen and other school materials during recession hours. Often time these were visitors from Italy who were having an undivided interest in the architecture and the content of the museum. Today our kids have not received this stuff anymore. At one point this was helping to inform our kids about the importance of tourism to them and thus valuing and respecting their culture and its immediate attributes which attract visitors.

These results further suggest that not only the government of Zanzibar losing a lot of revenue but also tour guides and tour operators due to the closure of the building. On top of this, we can argue that there is a big possibility that the closure of the museum has increased mass flow of visitors to other attributes that might increase chances to mass tourism which have a devastating impact on the same. We further argue that the closure of the building might have discouraged some of tour guides and operators who many of them opted to work on other economic activities or the different working

environment. Similarly, the closure of this building had altered some entrepreneurial activities which operated greenly when the House of Wonders was in operation. For instance, tax drivers complained about the decline of business as many visitors from peripheral areas (Shamba) are no more flowing to the museum and other small business owners like Machingas selling “batiks” “spices” and other products to visitors have either closed their business or shifted to less lucrative business. This situation has increased competition among taxi drivers and business people to areas that still invite visitors. As a result, whatever the reasons one could provide, it suffices to note that the closed House of Wonders Museum has severely affected the economic situation not only for the revolutionary government of Zanzibar but also to many tour operators and tour guides around Stone Town World Heritage site.

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#### 4 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Based on the results and discussion above, we conclude that the closed House of Wonders Museum has clear negative implications on tourist satisfaction and the tourism cycle of Zanzibar Stone Town at present. The closed museum also might cause the Stone Town World Heritage Site to lose its authenticity hence being in danger of being removed from the UNESCO World Heritage Site if the conservation and rehabilitation activities won't be finished as soon as possible. Lastly, we conclude that the closed House of Wonders Museum has badly affected the economic situation of the many tour operators and tour guides and the community around Stone Town World Heritage site which threatening the tourism business around the area.

It's acknowledged that tourism is the backbone of the economy of Zanzibar Island (Rotarou, 2014). It is from this fact that the Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar and the community at large should embrace this vital sector important in the economy, employment and linkage with other sectors. This study proposes five recommendations identified as follows;

1. The STDCA as the caretaker of the Stone Town buildings including House of Wonders Museum should continue to identify and rehabilitate buildings requiring to be repaired immediately once spotted. The authority should not wait until the buildings collapse like House of Wonders Museum to react. For this, prevention is better than cure. Also, tour guides, tour operators and other people in business who by one way or another depend on House of Wonders museum should be encouraged to work on other activities which will help to solve their economic problems at present.
2. The government should continue to raise awareness among the public on the value of repairing their building while obeying to their originality, authenticity and available guideline, especially from UNESCO and ICOMOS. They should not use modern materials that alter the originality and authenticity of their historic city that can lead to the lose its value and popularity among tourists and as a World Heritage Town. For instance, today there so many buildings with protruding air conditioners, grills, grass windows which are against the

guideline of the STDCA, UNESCO and ICOMOS.

3. The government should allocate more funding to enable the STDCA to implement their duties of rehabilitating and maintaining the Stone Town World Heritage Site especially House of Wonders Museum. There is a continuing complains from this authority that the amount of money returned by the government from those generated by tourism does not tally with reality. A very small percentage is given back for the management of the buildings. Instead, the STDCA continues to rely on donors and the UNESCO to fund for rehabilitation and maintenance of the buildings. The lack of a reliable internal source of fund to run STDCA activities is the threat to the survival of the House of Wonders Museum and Stone Town World Heritage site as the external sources are neither reliable nor sustainable.
4. Immediate efforts are required from the STDCA and Antiquities department to find an alternative modality to continue showing cases of the artefacts and other materials that were displayed (exhibitions) in the House of Wonder to the visitors and the public elsewhere. The essence will help to make a tour to Zanzibar Island most fascinating and complete as tourists will learn more about the history, culture and leadership regime of Zanzibar through material remains hence tourist satisfaction.

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