

# Museums: Arenas for Dialogue or Confrontation



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**M**useums are about people and are made by people for people. The origins of the museum and its growth may however not reflect this. Museums have traditionally been places of identity and pride, temples of the best collections, put on display for human reflection and education.

While some traditional museums have addressed socio-economic issues, most have been reflections of human pride and past achievements rather than of current issues and future projections. Today, however, museums must change with the times from temples of achievement and national identity to grappling with social issues affecting the people they are founded to serve. Museums and museum professionals must work in the service of the public and be accountable for the support that they get from the public.

ICOM's definition of the museum is very broad and provides a wide range of opportunities for museums to involve themselves in the service of society. The museum is defined as a "non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment." The statement that captures the museum's social role is "in the service of society and of its development." It confirms the role of museum management aimed at the well-being of peoples and at heritage as a dynamic element in society."

The museum is the embodiment of the cultures of a people; a temple of heritage; the representation of the identity or identities of a nation and its achievements. But museums have also become forums for dialogue and critical thinking; in some cases, museums provide spiritual spaces where a community can rally around shared heritage, problems, catastrophe or happiness. Thus museums are today moving away from the confines of their grand walls as houses of wonder, collections of the very rare and fortification of the untouched, to open friendly spaces of memory, shared experience and representation of identities.

It is, however, clear that there are different types of museum, as defined by their activities and even audiences. Museums of feathers or stamps alone may not share much with museums of natural history; a numismatic museum is not easily comparable to a museum of art. Public expectation from a natural history museum may not be the same as from a numismatics museum or museum of stamps. They may, however, be connected by the same principles of serving the public and sharing common ethical considerations.

It is also important to note that museums all over the world, particularly in Europe and North America, do not only depict "us" or "ours" but also "others." Equally important is the fact that some of the most popular exhibits in some of the largest museums worldwide come from "others." These are interpreted by "us" either as great achievements of humanity, unique, or as a sign of a difference from "us." In many cases, objects are interpreted by "us" to show how different "others" are. For



many years the interpretations were the monopoly of curators and not of the makers or users and owners of the different heritage. Today this monopoly of interpretation and representation is being challenged. Museums do not only preserve world cultures but are also guardians of their interpretation and hence of our understanding of our world. Museums shape how we understand our being. Thus the traditional presentation and interpretation of material culture and other cultural symbols in museums today provides a challenge for museum curators, as the diverse but globalised community asks for a stake in the production of their own history.

It must also be appreciated that the material culture of a people is a manifestation of their way of life and how they understand and treat their environment. Material culture bears messages which help us to understand why a people behaves in a certain way. In Africa, for example, much of material culture (objects) has symbolic meanings and the objects are passed from generation to generation; material culture is used in creating a coherent society through acceptance of the pieces as unifying factors. These pieces are grounded in the local cultural context and occupy special or defined spaces. They are often symbols of unity in a diversified society; some have spiritual connotations. Many of these are currently found in museums. Thus museums become the guardians of spiritual and symbolic items.

The question then is: how can museums bring this context closer to reality? And, more importantly, how can museums, particularly in Africa, make their objects have a positive impact on the lives of their people?

Still today, many items continue to find their way onto the international markets through illicit trade, where they are taken from their contexts, abused and lose their meaning. These same items find their way into large and prestigious museums as major exhibits with elaborate and glossy catalogues.

In order for museums to gain respect, they must first clean up their act, be transparent and further the interests of the societies which they interact with. In doing this, museums compete for resources with many other bodies offering entertainment and education, and even with institutions that address human needs such as health and economics. This is the case for African Museums. The privileged position of museums as the pride of the nation is beginning to be challenged by an inquisitive public. Museums all over the world are at the crossroads. The management of museums and the choice of their activities, particularly those that have an impact on society, are issues to be examined closely.

### *Museums in Europe and North America*

The question of "what museums for the 21<sup>st</sup> century?" is now a common one. In Stockholm, in June 2001, a gathering of over 260 museum personnel from over 40 countries grappled with issues concerning the role of museums, ethics, relevance, etc. Today, as people stop taking museums for granted, they are beginning to demand the removal of the monumental walls that surround the museum and to create spaces with a human face, a forum for dialogue, and a neutral ground where many voices, even unequal ones, have a chance of being heard. It is time for museums to move away from a conservative orientation to become a dynamic, flexible and proactive institution that recognises change and appreciates diversity.

There are nevertheless great opportunities for museums to play a central role in the national agenda, particularly in Europe and America. This is due both to good economic performance and to the lottery money available for culture, as well as to the people's demand. Today, in Europe and America there is demand for more free time. The free market and unrestricted use of science and technology is providing this opportunity. People are increasingly consumers of leisure and are at the same time thirsty for fruitful educational activities.

What is not clear is whether museums are prepared for this kind of

challenge, for addressing issues that affect humanity, developing mechanisms for inclusion of changing cultures, while retaining their ethical stance.

### *Africa at the crossroads*

By contrast, museums in the developing world and particularly in Africa compete with other institutions such as schools, hospitals and public works for the very scarce resources of their various governments. Museums are therefore not a priority and must strive to generate their own resources. If they are to attract central funding, they must play an even more important social role. This requires a broad mission, a proactive stance and flexibility.

Museums in Africa in their present form are recent creations of the colonial era. While material culture has always formed part of African life, it was never organised in the Western sense of display, as is the case in museums. It formed part of daily life, whether for ceremonial, ritual, functional, spiritual-religious or political usage. However, even objects in daily use had symbolic meaning and, when used for ritual or ceremonial purposes, attracted varying degrees of reverence; objects had a life and spirit of their own.

With colonialism, Europeans exposed to the outside world what they saw as the hidden "treasures" of Africa, the regalia symbolising the "primitive" peoples of the continent. Over the years, the growing settler community in Africa wanted places of entertainment, which were provided, among others, by the display and consumption of African cultural and natural heritage.

Many of the collections that came to be housed in these places were from missionary collectors, administrators or rich white families who had previously indulged in the collection of African paraphernalia. With time, and as the collections grew, governments then established official museums.

In Eastern and Southern Africa, the fossil-rich Rift Valley offered opportunities for archaeologists and palaeontologists to investigate the theory of human evolution. Africa, presented as the possible cradle of the human species, attracted the attention of scholars from as early as the 1920s and 1930s. The early findings were placed in local museums, since these specialists were associated with the museum institution. The collections strengthened the position of the museum as a centre for education and research. This was, however, in most cases for a white elite.

For many years, museums in Africa, especially the well-developed ones, were of little significance and benefit to the local people, as they strove to be centres of excellence for the outside world. Many museums in Africa had therefore become irrelevant institutions by the turn of the last century. Visitor statistics in many were low, as people only visited them during school outings. Thus museums in Africa had to re-evaluate their role in the new society. The question, "What museums for Africa?", first asked in November 1991 through an ICOM-organised brainstorming session of archaeologists and museologists, became a common cry across the continent. Africans began to reflect on museums that could address their needs and interests, and interpret their history as they saw it. For it also became a question of empowering people to own their history and heritage. It has, however, taken many professionals and bodies to start these discussions; among them are the West Africa Museums Programme (WAMP), the West African Archaeological Association (WAAA), ICOM, the South African Development Community Association of Museums (SADCAMM), AFRICOM and various museum professionals in Africa.

As public facilities, museums should have an influence on public life and development, should increase knowledge and make it accessible to the community which they serve.

In Africa, however, there was a long period during which the museum was not managed for the well-being of the people. The President of Mali,



Alpha Oumar Konaré, when he was President of ICOM, remarked: "Who still doubts that Africa's museums never really left the cities, and even in those cities have remained things belonging to foreigners? Who doubts that museums in Africa have harboured illicit objects, or have often served to legitimise dubious traffic? Who doubts that the image of Africa transmitted abroad does not correspond to the reality of African life or to the views of African people? Who doubts that many museums continue to exist only because they are financed from abroad?". This was Konaré writing in 1991 and reflecting on the problems faced by African museums: the lack of vision, of independence, of transformation and community participation. His prescription was therefore "to eliminate the Western model for museums in Africa so that new methods for the preservation and promotion of Africa's cultural heritage can be allowed to flourish". It was necessary to cultivate willpower, to break away from dependence and to embrace dialogue. It was necessary for museums to include the marginalised in their activities, to speak various national languages and to be open to science and technology.

Today, African museums must take the continent's needs into account and play a dual role as custodians of national heritage and forums for cultural development and exchange. The museums founded in the past decade not only respect new national identities, but also use the past through exhibitions and public programmes to instill a sense of identity and pride in the spectator, as well as to engage in social dialogue. These new developments reflect the desire for museums to take a central role in the political, economic and social discourses of African countries, to present diversified activities and play active social roles. They convey powerful messages of memory or collective identity.

### Museums in the service of communities

The role of museums therefore ranges from educational facilities, platforms for dialogue, spaces of memory and common identity, to areas of resistance against oppression or a venue for economically and environmentally sustainable activities for local communities.

For example, The National Museums of Botswana, through their desert Zebra Outreach Programme, have popularised museum activities at the rural level, taking the museum to the people while at the same time carrying out research into oral traditions. Due to its effectiveness, this programme receives good funding from the government, despite its high running costs. It is a true reflection of the flexibility of the museum and its physical presence among the people in their own space.

Through its Museum Interactive Programme, the Education Department of the National Museums of Kenya is involved in popularising science for young people by using museum specimens in interactive learning. In recognition of science as a means of national development, the programme has set up a club called the Young Researcher, for children between the ages of 8 to 13, who come every month to work behind the scenes with NMK researchers, in museum departments and laboratories. The club is an important educational tool as well as a constructive recreational activity.

Through similar programmes, the NMK has identified the weaknesses of the education services within the country, especially in primary schools where students are perceived only as listeners, and teachers as the owners and givers of knowledge. Through countrywide workshops, the NMK has started addressing this issue, developing the skills of primary school teachers in the promotion of analytical teaching. Analytical teaching provides students with a capacity to take an active role in the exercise of learning. Interactive learning exercises arose out of the need to bring museum objects to life and to endow them with meaning, for the benefit of our communities. Here, the museum is not only popularising science and technology, but also encouraging the education of those people who will be responsible for running the country and deciding the destiny of the society. As Alpha Oumar Konaré once noted, "it must be clear that we are conserving objects not for their own sake, but for mankind in relation to man and society. If we pay more

attention to the objects than to man or society, we shall conserve nothing. An object cannot be conserved outside the human and the social context".

### Museums as community spaces

Museums in Africa are becoming platforms for expressing living communities' feelings and expectations; with the disappearance of many of their cultural and spiritual spaces, communities are beginning to regard museums as alternative spaces for cultural activity and community performance. Thus museums have become spaces for dialogue and free expression that also offer opportunities for recreating the "better past."

In relation to the above, the village museum in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, acts as a venue for the different Tanzanian ethnic groups to recreate their rich traditions in a town, but within a rural setting. The various ethnic days, where people from an ethnic group go through their traditional practices, including food preparation and consumption, traditional folk singing, dance and story-telling, have become very popular. Here the museum provides opportunities for people to enjoy the rich traditions that have ensured the survival of the group, and for the young to learn from the old. It additionally enables each individual to identify their role in the community.

In Cape Town, South Africa, where 30 years ago a whole community was evicted from their homes in District Six, a museum was set up on that site, which helped to retain the spirit and cohesiveness of the community. Additionally, the museum ensured, through community mobilisation, that no new construction should take place in the area, which was appropriated by the apartheid government. Today, the common memory of people of District Six is represented in the museum. After 30 years, the present government of South Africa has now decided to give back the land to the original owners. This is a case where a simple community museum has not only helped in presenting a people's collective memory, but has played a successful role of resistance against an oppressive regime and has subsequently negotiated the return of the land by the new democratic government to its original owners. It is therefore the guardian and custodian of a people's memory, land, and dignity.

There are a number of other African museums which play similar roles in different parts of the continent. For example, when the king's Palace Museum in Antananarivo, Madagascar, caught fire, the whole town rallied to put out the fire; subsequently, the whole of Madagascar was in mourning. Today, this is probably the only element that brings the people of the island together – including the 200 or so political parties. It has become a symbol of the nation, a common identity for an otherwise diverse nation.

In both Senegal and Mali, two museums have been set up to deal specifically with the issue of women. In both, the role of women as custodians of heritage, guardians of homes, mothers of the children, providers of food and performers of other domestic chores is for the first time vividly put on public view through exhibitions. For all they do, women's roles in most African societies have not been given recognition, unlike the roles of men – the "protectors" of the family. These museums are therefore trying to address gender issues that will not only bring recognition of women's roles in male-dominated society, but also bring to the fore the issue of equality, the sharing of responsibility and the acknowledgment of the role of women as the backbone of the society. In this sense, the museum becomes the voice of the oppressed and the underprivileged.

### African museums as custodians of the continent's heritage

The role of museums in Africa as custodians of both cultural and natural heritage has improved their status and made them relevant to peoples' needs. While some countries in Africa have two institutions in charge of cultural heritage – namely museums for movable heritage and Departments of Antiquity for immovable heritage – many countries such as Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe and Botswana



entrust this role to their National Museums. The latter are empowered through relevant legislation to be custodians of heritage which includes antiquities and monuments. In Kenya, the old towns of Lamu and Mombasa have been registered as protected historical heritage, under the guardianship of the National Museums of Kenya. Also, some museums have established training centres together with their local communities, in order to train members of the community to carry out restoration, preservation and renovation work. This is the case for the Swahili Cultural Centre in Mombasa and Lamu and the Great Zimbabwe Conservation Centre.

A number of museums also contain large collections of botanical and zoological specimens. For example, the National Museums of Kenya in Nairobi has the largest collection of plant species on the continent in its Herbarium; the same applies to its entomological collection. It also has the largest Centre for Biodiversity in Eastern and Central Africa. Most of the museum's research facilities are directly related to human survival, existence and the preservation of the environment. For example, the entomology department contributes directly to pest control and advises farmers on which insects are good and which are bad for crops. It also works closely with the International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology for pest control in the region, since it is the only institution that is engaged in the collection and maintenance of a permanent study collection.

The marine resources section of the Centre for Biodiversity, especially ichthyology, works with other institutions in improving fish stocks in the lakes of East Africa and also helps run the Aquarium of the National Museums of Kenya, which is both an educational and an entertainment facility.

Many African museums are beginning to appreciate the role of indigenous plants, especially food and medicinal plants. They not only exhibit indigenous food plants and medicines, they also experiment with the values attached to foods and the cultural significance of different plants. The issue of food security and poverty reduction has become part of museums' main activities. These are not only areas of interest but are practical human experiences that may enable museums to get better funding opportunities, since museums are directly serving the people. The relevance of museums and hence the sustainable support which they can attract in the future will depend principally on their contribution to national development, through tackling issues that affect their different communities.

Africa's position is unique; for a long time, it was a continent of conflict and wars. Most of the leaders have not lived up to the expectations which independence brought with it, as many countries are more divided than ever before. There has been in many instances a lack of understanding of diversity as a resource. This has created a need for alternative forums of discussion, a neutral ground which some museums have provided to fill the gap as facilitators of peace and co-existence among different peoples. This of course provides tremendous status opportunity and funding prospects, for research and implementation of the museum's findings.

A number of museums in Africa (such as the National Museums of Kenya) are involved not only in peace research, but also in peace exhibition, or similar projects. The traditional knowledge is there and, to quote Alfa Oumar Konaré, "*we must also be open to traditional knowledge, the knowledge of the people, of notables, men of culture*". This knowledge should be used for the benefit of humanity.

### *Creation of partnerships through networking*

One area that museums can and in some cases have already started to exploit is the creation of partnerships and networks with other museums, within and beyond the continent. An important example of

partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa is the twinning of African museums with European ones, notably through ICOM's Swedish-African Museum Programme (SAMP), sponsored by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). This unique arrangement has seen museums in Africa and those in Sweden develop joint programmes and create equal partnerships that have produced rich cross-cultural exchanges and also support for African museum programmes. Many of these programmes have identified local needs and created partnerships among people of different worlds e.g. the Women's Group of the Nyaweg and Buhuslän's Museums.

Also, through AFRICOM, African museums have been able to document their collections using a standard set of norms, thus making it easier for them to exchange information. It is hoped that AFRICOM will further help popularise the museum's social role over the continent.

It is clear that African museums are starting to play a crucial role as regards exhibitions, education and research. They are evolving into community facilities and are creating forums and spaces where different voices can be heard. They are regionalising and even globalising their operations through partnerships, and enhancing specifically the role of culture in the appreciation of diversity and understanding between human beings. African museums are well placed to play this unique role, as they are also custodians of living heritage. In this sense, other museums have a lot to learn from developing countries, where the past and the present are still so tightly intertwined. ■

