

CRUCIAL FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING A TRUE AFRICAN MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the study was to identify and discuss critical factors which can help museums in Africa to assume a true African character, whereby common people may want to associate with museums and their activities. Data for the study were collected through secondary sources such as books, academic journals and public library, and were analyzed using thematic analytical procedure. The following were identified as crucial factors in the development of a true African museum: Integration of native views into Museum Procedures, centrality of people in the museum agenda, public participation, objectivity in the presentation of Africa's experience to encourage nationalism, contextual display of objects , emphasis on educational role of exhibitions, etc.. It is concluded that for museums to survive and boost audience development, museums have to shake off their past elitist image , and be more aware of and sensitive to the society at large, by addressing issues which affect society. This can only be achieved if museums incorporate the identified factors for a true African museum in their activities.

Keywords: *African museum, crucial factors, developing*

Introduction

In the 21st Century, museums in Africa and elsewhere have found themselves in strong competition for visitors with other arts, cultural and leisure institutions. Equally, African museums are being challenged to justify their existence in the face of waning fortunes owing to budget cuts, low priority status of cultural institutions, increasing costs of managing museums as non-profit institutions, etc. How can museums survive these challenges in a continent where cultural institutions of most nations appear to have been relegated to the background in favour of dealing with a myriad of socio-economic and political problems? Attracting a wider range of visitors is viewed as both a way to justify museum existence and also a sine-qua-non to the sustainability of museums in Africa. Suffice it to say that it is no longer enough for museums to

focus only on conserving, researching and promoting heritage; museums should also pay close attention to increasing visitor flow since museums are for people.

Sadly enough, most Museums in Africa still follow the European model; they have not liberated themselves from the colonial legacies. The absence of Museums with true African character partly accounts for the unresponsiveness of people towards Museums culminating in very low patronage. If museums must make appreciable impact in Africa, museums must extricate themselves from the European model, and devise an African museum concept. It is the belief of the writer that an ideal museum in Africa should tell an African story that will have its main focus on African problems, using themes/subjects on the continent, so that average people would want to visit museums.

In view of what has been said, it becomes imperative to identify and discuss critical factors which must be seriously considered in developing a true African museum, such that indigenous people may identify with museums. This paper critically looks at the foregoing, and attempts to discuss ways by which museums in Africa can assume true African character, and thus, become increasingly relevant to society.

Data for the study were sourced through secondary sources such as books, academic journals and public library, and were analyzed using thematic analytical procedure. It is believed that the outcome of the study will contribute immensely towards repositioning museums in Africa for better productivity. The paper is also expected to be a source material for policy makers, academics, researchers, students and non-governmental agencies interested in culture, tourism and heritage related matters.

Literature Review

Museum is a foremost public institution which is saddled with the responsibility of preserving and conserving various aspects of people's heritage for the education and enjoyment of the masses. Okita (1985:64) as quoted in Okpoko, A. I. (2006:1) remarks that the term 'museum' was coined from the Greek word, *museion*, and in its original sense, it was applied to a sanctuary dedicated to the muses of Greek mythology. According to Abun (1987:1), cited in Okpoko, A. I.

(2006:1), the muses were believed to be the nine virginal daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne who were charged with the responsibility to protect and encourage art and science, poetry, music, dance and history of people of Greece. Abun (1987) in Okpoko, A. I. (2006) also remarks that the muses were credited with great deal of imagination and infinite memory, and thus, were associated with learning of encyclopedic character.

As remarked by Okpoko, A. I. in his typescript on culture and heritage, shrines and palaces represented crude forms of museums before Africa made contact with Europeans. Tangible cultural materials like ritual items were kept and preserved in shrines, while the king's paraphernalia and other items relating to kingship were kept in kings' palaces. With the advent of colonialism, the European model of museum was introduced into Africa, and till date, the model is still being maintained in most museums throughout Africa.

Museums that were set-up in Africa during the colonial era were not primarily in the interest of the local people. Adedze (1995) remarks that “the purpose of museums in the colonial era remains controversial, because historically, museums served the interest of the resident or administrative Europeans and functioned as windows to the conquered people”. Supporting this assertion, Dominy (2000) quoted in Makuvaza (2002) notes that “museums in many Africa states are ... late 19th and 20th century colonial creations which has been brandished as an attempted colonial, intellectual conquest of Africa”. According to Makuvaza (2002), the collection methods undermined the values of African culture. The sacredness and value of the objects were not ... their priority. The colonial travelers, administrators, missionaries and military officials stole or confiscated objects from the owners. Konera (1983) remarks that “violence and violation of indigenous cultures and sensibility characterized the early museums in African. He writes further:

The local people were not consulted for their interests since it was by then necessary to sideline them for museums were not meant to serve them. The confiscated objects were stripped of their value and were displayed in places where they would not be accessed by their creators.

Makuvaza (2002), for instance, reported that the traditional colonial type of museums in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Zambia are situated in urban areas, which are not within the reach by the bulk of rural dwellers, and this isolates the majority of the indigenous people from enjoying their culture. There is little doubt that colonial museums were used by Europeans as propaganda to justify their presence in Africa. As Konera (1983) puts it, “their (Europeans) aims were to charm the population in the home country with the ‘exoticism’ and ‘folklore’ of African countries, and in doing so, justify their presence there. This is reinforced by Adaedze (1995):

While “preserving” and exhibiting African material culture in museums for a European audience, attempts were made to denigrate the people and their culture in order to justify Europe’s “civilizing” mission ... While these expositions helped promote the concept of national identity and unity within Britain, they did so by encouraging an imperialist ideology.

Most post colonial museums in Africa did not differ significantly from their colonial counterparts; “They are by products of the colonial era” (Makuvaza 2002). According to Okpoko, A. I. (2006:40),

...many of the features of colonial museums are still prevalent in most African museums. For instance ... there is still a heavy concentration of museums in the urban centres and even here, these museums still function as instruments for social elites; places visited by the wealthy few, especially government dignitaries (including visiting foreign dignitaries and embassy staff) (Andah 1990:149). Secondly, the museums in Nigeria still follow early European model especially in the method of display and exhibition of objects and with captions written in languages foreign to the local people.

The aforesaid is supported by Heywood’s (20006) summary of the opinion of some visitors to an exhibition held at National Museum of Kenya between August and September, 2006:

As visitors, we are unable to identify those objects that relate to trade as an economic activity. What was traded, in exchange for what? How does the stand-alone siwa interpret the theme of traditions, trade and

transitions on its own in a glass case ... devoid of its historic and human context? And this has been one of the major criticisms of the exhibition – that a European – style of presentation of objects just does not work in an African context. How were the objects used? And strangely, the exhibition labels are only in English. There was a consensus among the visitors I spoke to that the interpretation should also have been in Swahili (Heywood 2006).

From the foregoing, it is very lucid that museums in Africa have to be redefined in order to be relevant to society. There is the need to develop an African museum concept that will put into consideration, African needs and realities. “Museums in Africa, therefore, need to break away from the colonial vestiges and African based museums be established that will be responsible to their own communities” (Makuaza 2002). For this to come to fruition, certain crucial factors for developing a true African museum should be brought to the fore. These factors are presented and discussed in what follows.

Crucial Factors for Developing a True African Museum

- **Integrating Native Views into Museum Procedures** - In developing a true African museum, effort should be made to incorporate the views of local people into museum procedures. One way to ascertain the views of local people is to conduct front-end evaluation. Front-end evaluation is a veritable tool to tap into the mental model(s) held by people about museums; thus, it can help uncover visitors' knowledge and possible misconceptions about the museum. Equipped with such knowledge, museum managers would know how to run museums in order to incorporate such views, thereby, making the local people interested in museums and their activities.
- **People-Centered** - A major criticism of the colonial museums is the exclusion of the local people who produced the cultural materials (see, for example, Makuaza 2002). Museums are for people; therefore, an ideal museum in Africa must focus on the people by addressing their needs and realities. True African museums should not only serve as institutions for research and entertainment, but also as means of empowering the local population through revitalization of indigenous technologies, arts and crafts, which at the

long run are transmitted into economic gains. Concerted effort should be made to make the presence of museums in African communities felt by host communities. One way to achieve this is to make sure that economic gains accruing to museums from fees paid by visitors are extended to host communities.

- **Popular Participation** - Related to the aforesaid, museums in Africa should involve local participation. In Zimbabwe, for example, theme parks are being developed as new form of museums to replace the traditional colonial types. A characteristic feature of the new type of museum is that members of the local population decide on what collections to make, and these collections are based on the significance of the objects to the people (Makuvaza 2002). Local participation can also take the form of employment of local people as museum attendants. The choice of local museum attendants may be based on adequate knowledge of how the cultural materials have been managed through time. Thus, there is the merging of preservation and conservation techniques with traditional care in managing material cultural resources.

- **Objectivity in the Presentation of Africa's Experience to Encourage Nationalism** - An African orientated museum is the one that can present to the people, a true picture of Africa's experience, and in doing so, encourage the present generation to take pride in the achievements, strength and courage of their forebears; educate them on the need for cultural identity, in fact, provide the impetus for Africa's nationalism. An ideal museum in Africa should be capable of promoting and sustaining these themes under nationalism, for example, themes of strength, courage, endurance and determination for self actualization. The museum of colonial history in Aba, Nigeria, for instance, should be overhauled to focus much attention on celebrating Nigeria's strength, courage and determination for self rule during colonial period. Events which illustrate these should be incorporated into the museum exhibitions by way of pictures and drawings. Such events may include the strength and courage exhibited through the Aba women's riot of 1929 over taxation, and the massacre of coalminers at Enugu in 1949 over protest for wage increase.

- **Depiction of Environmental Setting** - Following the lead by Okpoko, A. I. (2006:40), museums in Africa should reflect the cultural and natural environment within which they are set. Africa is a large continent with scenic landscapes, these should be taken into account by museum managers so that local people would see their environment in the museums, and thus, become inextricably attached to these cultural institutions. In this regard, the museum of Traditional Nigerian Architecture in Jos, Plateau State, has done very well by “incorporating the beautiful hilly landscape and trees in the construction plan of the museum” (Okpoko, A. I. 2006: 40). In Namibia, The National Earth Science Museum in the geological survey is the primary repository of geological specimens in Namibia, and houses a large collection of rocks, minerals and fossils. Such museum can be used to advertise the rich natural resources of the African continent.

Another important factor, although already in existence in some museums, in attempting to reflect the African environment in museums is the establishment of kitchens attached to the museums where local dishes and home brewed wines are made available to visitors. Chairs and tables used in the kitchen should also be constructed with raw materials found within the environment where the museum is set.

Robben Island in South Africa has been declared a world heritage site by UNESCO since 1999. This Island was used as a maximum security prison during South Africa’s apartheid era, and it was where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 18 out of the 27 years he stayed in prison. A museum relating to apartheid South Africa can be set-up in such location, such museum would become a symbol of the strength and endurance of its political prisoners, and “the triumph of the human spirit, of freedom and democracy over oppression” (ICOMOS, 1999 as retrieved from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>).

- **Display Technique** - The technique of displaying objects in an ideal African museum should be able to situate the objects in context. This is valid because every object has a bunch of information surrounding it, and thus, cannot stand in isolation. The European model whereby objects are displayed in glass cases should be transformed because such displays deny the objects their historic and human contexts. True African museums have to invent

... A technique of display and communication which will effectively situate the (cultural objects) on display in their full cultural sitting – a setting which while bringing out the fullest artistic beauty of each piece could also bring out something of its functional, ritual and other links with the centre in which it was made (Afigbo 1985) in Okpoko, A. I. (2006:41).

This is one the reasons while museums should be established within the communities that produced the material culture. The labeling of objects should also be done in both the *lingua franca* of the country and the local language of the host community; so that local people can be accommodated in the museum.

- **Educational Role** - True African museum ought to render historical education to the masses whereby lessons can be drawn. It is a wise saying that if you do not know where you began, you may not know where you are going. Equally, if people are not taught their history, they may likely fall into the mistakes of the past. For example, Africa is a continent that has been devastated by war. The war museums and history museums are expected to be centres where research is carried out on the causes and effects of war to human development; and the possible ways of preventing future occurrence. Such museums, through their educational roles, can make a big statement: that any nation inclined towards war does not have the interest of her citizens at heart.

Conclusion

That an ideal African museum must tell an African story, must break away from colonial vestiges and become responsible to host communities is an undisputed fact. To achieve this, however, is not easy. Africa is a continent bedeviled with many socio-economic, political and health problems. In the face of these afflictions, how much attention would museums and cultural resources management in general receive? It is the job of museum authorities in different countries of Africa to develop an African museum concept, create awareness and also canvass for support from government.

By way of conclusion, it will be necessary to state that museums worldwide are reassessing their traditional responsibilities to society. New demands are constantly being placed on museums to be accountable and relevant to communities (Vergo 1989) in Leitz (1996). Museums in order to survive, have to shake off their past elitist image and exclusive nature, and be more aware of and sensitive to the society at large. Museums are actively expected to contribute to the reshaping of attitudes toward social and political reconciliation (Morris, 1989) in Levitz (1996). These are the responsibilities that museums in Africa are expected to fulfill.

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