

THE PROBLEMS OF MUSEUMS IN AFRICA

Dr. A.B. Etukudoh^a, Prof. O.K. Oyeoku^b, Dr. D.E. Ezemokwe^c
^{a&c}Project Development Institute, (PRODA), Enugu State, Nigeria
^bUniversity Of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Abstract

In terms of enlightenment, museums are comparable to schools, universities, libraries and other agencies of knowledge and culture.

Museums preserve the tangible evidence of man's history, creativity and the physical aspects of the world he inhabits.

1.0 Introduction

It is important to know or to refresh our minds on what museum is all about and why it is important in any society.

Museums are institutions (publicly or privately owned) which collect, preserve and display objects (both natural and cultural) with the basic aim of entertaining, educating and providing material for research on aspects of man's heritage and development. In terms of enlightenment, museums are comparable to schools, universities, libraries and other agencies of knowledge and culture.

Museums preserve the tangible evidence of man's history, creativity and the physical aspects of the world he inhabits. They also give information about the past environment of the materials displayed, such materials then attract, entertain and arouse curiosity amongst the people. Museums therefore give people opportunities to rediscover themselves (including their natural resources) and to identify their place in the past and the role they can play in the contemporary world.

Cultural materials date to the early stone age period which dates back long before 100,000 years ago, by about 11,000 years ago, late stone age hunter/gatherers would seem to have been exploiting most of Nigeria up to, at least the forest fringes (e.g the Iwo-Eleru finds which include microlithic tools, pottery and skeletal remains) people using and making pottery were already present in parts of Nigeria e.g Jos, Plateau, Northern, Nigeria) at about the 5th millennium BC from 5th century BC technological and cultural entities like the Nok

(mainly terracotta figurines and sculptures), with sites, like Taruga contain evidence of Iron working. Terracotta objects were also recovered from Ife in South-western Nigeria.

Nigeria cultural heritage also includes features like stone and pottery artefacts and bronzes from Daima in North-Eastern Nigeria, rock paintings and rock-gong of Birnin Kudu (Northern Nigeria), the Igbo-Ukwu (9th century AD) Ife and Benin (12th to 15th century AD) bronze, the various art in woodwork and calabash found in many parts of Nigeria, traditional woven mats and cloths, musical instruments and masquerades found in different parts of Nigeria. Nigeria's traditional architecture is represented by various palaces (including defensive walls) of old empires of states for example, the palaces of the emirs in the north the obas in the western part of Nigeria, and palaces of other traditional rulers and chiefs in parts of Eastern Nigeria. Collections of these traditional rulers comprise mainly hereditary ceremonial objects. Royal patronage of the work of arts (for example, Benin) led to the accumulation of cultural objects.

Museum, as we know originated from Europe around the third century BC. It started with what is called the Muses period, I.e. era of encyclopedia learning before learning before developing later to a specialised institution.

Since its scope and objective have continued to increase as more and more people come in contact with it. It has ceased to be regarded as the convenient repository for antiquated items it once was thought to be. It is increasingly being seen as a powerful cultural centre for the community, a powerful institution which has much to the development of any nation.

With the new orientation, the objectives of the museum can be summarised as:

- a) To collect, protect and preserve the national patrimony

- b) To educate the masses on their patrimonial heritage and the culture of other people.
- c) To provide entertainment and relaxation for those who visit it.
- d) To protect the national image on the international scene.

The fourth objective is political, aimed at protecting a country's image and defending its values against a more powerful hegemony. In Africa the museum began playing this role in the late 1950s and 1960s when many African countries gained political independence from their colonial masters. African nationalists looked upon it as the mirror of their new status, a cultural institution which was required to buttress political independence.

1.1. The Colonial Legacy

There is no doubt to the fact that the museum in its current form and structure is an alien institution in Africa. It was introduced by the colonial masters. It is generally believed that the intention was to collect and preserve the culture of the colonized peoples. It was to be a stored house for the past and an educational resource centre from where scholarly information can be obtained.

However, the less educated African did not see the museum in this light. Many saw it as a place for storing antiquated objects, others thought it was an elitist institution whose collections and displays required special training to be able to understand and appreciate them. Many African hated the museum because of the strain it exerted on their brains. The development of this institution in Africa has consequently been checked. After independence, many African countries began to see the museum in a new light. It became an important cultural institution to support and project the newly won political independence. It was consequently fully embraced and developed toward this objective. It was at this time that the National Museum (museum national in Francophone countries) was born in Nigeria, Kenya, Niger, Equatorial Guinea, Benin, etc.

On the contrary, other independent African countries have yet to improve on the embryonic museums bequeathed to them by the colonial masters. Development planners in these countries to whom power was handed on a plate, have preferred, or so it seems, to

focus on what they see as more obvious signs of development (eg Sky Scrapers). Obviously they have also found other ways of awakening national consciousness and projecting the national image. However the usually rich and diversified cultural heritage of such countries has been given the boost it deserves.

1.2. Problems of African Museums

Much of African's valuable resources in antiquities have been smuggled out through a number of means like theft looting and illegal acquisition perpetrated first by the early missionaries, colonial administrators, and traders and later by trafficking syndicates some of which are organised by Africans in collaboration with outside agencies. Attempts to discover these works of art have, sometimes been stalled by these keeper nations who have also conspired among themselves to stultify the UNESCO directives on restitution.

Apart from the danger posed by theft and smuggling there is also the problem of preservation as most of the objects in some of the museums and private collections are facing various degrees of degradation due to poor handling. There is need, therefore to strengthen the present physical security measures adopted in the African countries and also work out modern conservation measures to prevent further deterioration of these objects. The antiquities of any nation constitute a major repository of the people's cultural heritage. In Africa traditional society these cultural artefacts, particularly the work of art, served various functions. They were sometimes linked with and directed towards assuring the cohesion of the group. They were also used in the context of festivals most of which served to preserve the people's needs as well as give meaning to life.

Sculpture constitutes the bulk of African resources in antiquities and they represent important landmarks in the artistic creations of the African peoples. These works of art though precious and priceless to the cultures that created them, have witnessed series of theft, misconceptions, brutalization and abuse through time in the hands of foreigners to Africa. These attitudes have tended to play down the role which these cultural artefacts performed, and should continue to perform, in the various cultures that gave birth to them. For

instance, as a result of the manifestations of the culture of imperialism which tended to regard as inferior, the African and his various cultural creations, most of African's work of art were either destroyed by religious iconoclasts as superstitions, pagan idols or silently and sometimes forcibly exported to Europe as curiosities or spoils of war. Although the store-house of African antiquities was not emptied by the activities of these agents of cultural denudation during the colonial period, it is sad to note that most of those that survived from this massive exportation are still exposed to a lot of hazards. For instance, most of them have fallen victims of the new wave of smuggling in antiquities which is fast becoming one of the safest money spinning ventures in the world today. Those of them that escape the scanning eyes of the smugglers in the meantime, are facing the danger of extinction in the various locations where they are carelessly dumped and left at the mercy of the elements of whether by their owners.

In order to follow the trends in the dispersal of African antiquities it will be necessary and desirable, to review the various levels of contact which African had with Europe. This will enable a proper understanding of the various processes and circumstances that led to the massive exportation of African antiquities, especially art forms and the irreparable damage it did to African's cultural heritage. The first notable Europeans contact with Africa was in the early fifteenth century and this was by the Portuguese exploration of the Guinea Coast. They made a lot of navigational breakthroughs and by 1490 they had brought in Portuguese missionaries along with various artisans who would make evangelical works more possible. The missionary enterprise up to the middle of the 17th century was under Portuguese state control as a result of a series of papal concessions (1434 and 1455) granting the Portuguese crown, the obligation and privileges of planting and controlling all mission establishments in their overseas territories. The papal concessions were, however revoked in 1622 and by the end of that century several European nations had penetrated deep into remote areas of Africa and established posts in these areas. By the late nineteenth century African territories had been partitioned by these European nations in what was later known as the scramble for Africa. These navigational exploits later

opened the corridor for the influx of a large number of European missionaries, merchants or traders.

Traders' posts and even forts were built and numerous commercial treaties were signed between Europeans traders themselves and between them and the Africans. Through missionary activities they infiltrated into various facets of African culture.

Colonialism was yet another important form of European contact with Africa. It brought along with it western education. European scholars and researchers especially anthropologists, were enlisted to study and document the various aspects of African culture for use by their home governments in setting up administrative machineries in Africa. It was observed that this level of contact was characterized by racism. In fact it was the reactions of some of these early visitors to Africa that marked the beginning of various fabricated, academic theories about the intelligence and culture of the African. The racial attitude to African culture also affected its arts.

The trend in the illicit trade in antiquities is growing out of proportion in the world today and African countries, in particular, helpless as they are, appear most vulnerable and are the target of the smuggling syndicates across the world. As noted earlier, sculpture constitutes the bulk of Nigeria's resources in antiquities and also the item that is highly sought after. Trafficking in rare art works and antiquities has become big business in Africa. In the mid 70's one Benin piece of art work was sold for £34,000. Sometimes in July 1989, a new item carried by Radio Nigeria reported that a sixteenth century bronze sculpture from Benin had been sold for \$2m (Two million US Dollars) in an auction in London. As a result of the great demand for quick financial gains, several raids have been carried out of museums, shrines sacred groves and palaces holding of antiquity. These raids have been perpetrated by various smuggling agencies outside Africa with the collaboration of their African counterparts. In January 1987, for example, a number of antiquities were removed from the Jos Museums following a raid. Similar cases theft of cult objects in shrines have been reported from different parts of the country in recent times. Museums security expert have identified several stages in the complicated process of illicit traffic/trade in antiquities. These are the source, the thief or receiver or middle-men and the buyer. In

this chain the museums or art galleries could act as the buyer. Sometimes they could be victims of or collaborators in the theft. Apart from the danger posed to antiquities by thefts and smuggling, there are also the problems of ignorance and apathy-towards cultural objects by the

Africans. Most Africans are unaware of the value of these objects to their cultural heritage and even those who are informed about their value are often not sympathetic to the cause of preserving them. The result is that most of the objects that abound in the society today are in various stages of deterioration due to neglect and poor handling. In the village shrines, for example the objects are often left in the open air thereby exposing them to the elements of weather. Apart from the occasional rubbing of palm oil or chalk on the objects by the priest as part of the ritual process, especially during festivals, no other efforts are made to prevent them from decay, damage or attack by insects. Most museums, particularly the institutional museums lack the basic conservation equipment necessary for the care of objects in their collections. Where the equipments are available, the requisite manpower may be absent. In Nigeria today, there is a dearth of trained manpower in the field of museum conservation and there are very few conservation laboratories and workshops.

In the case of Nigeria the need for close co-operation between the National Commission for Museum and Monuments and the institutional museums in the training of personnel in conservation techniques and in the building of more laboratories and workshops can be over-emphasized. This need is underscored by the increasing importance attached to courses in museum studies in the universities. Most universities that offer museum related courses do not have equipped laboratories or workshops for practical demonstration, with the result that students often graduate without acquiring the necessary practical skills for handling diseased or damaged objects. It is a well-known fact that facilities for training conservators locally are few, hence since the financial resources of these institutions are grossly limited by dwindling subventions, man powers development programme could be worked out between the institution concerned and I CCROM, Rome, through the recommendations of the National Commission for Museum and Monuments. Bilateral

agreements could also be reached between the local institutions and other foreign institutes of conservation for the setting up of laboratories under the auspices of the commission. When sufficient man power is trained and more laboratories are opened, the task of protecting and preserving the large number of antiquities deteriorating in some public and private holding can be carried out with much ease.

Security is a precondition for the peace and progress of any organised establishment in the society of which the museum is one. Because of the growing incidence of thefts and illegal export of antiquities as well as the poor attitude to cultural objects. It has become expedient to offer concrete suggestions on how to protect and preserve this vital aspect of the people heritage.

Adequate security arrangement should be made to protect museums (public and private) shrines and sacred groves from incessant raids. It is a well-known fact that places with insufficient security arrangements such as shrines are more susceptible to robbery than places adequately guarded. To protect these objects photo-document and proper inventory of these objects should be carried out in situ. The advantage of photo-documentation is that it helps in tracing out the object in the event of theft and also helps in the building of photo-archives which could eventually lead to the publication of catalogues.

Proper training could improve the quality of work perform by the guard force in the museums. The museum authorities should given members of the guard-force an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging and appreciation of their role as guardians for the people's cultural heritage.

Training of museum staff is one of the most important point here, to achieve the dimensions of museum activities advocated African museums must be staffed by trained personnels. As of now trained and qualified staff are lacking (few). First of all there is hardly a properly orchestrated training programme for the various arms of the museum. Secondly what training is acquired is not really geared to African needs. It is now necessary for African museum experts to address themselves to this greasing problem. Even though there is a centres for training at Jos, Nigeria. But it is restricted to the junior cadre museum technicians.

Finance is another vital problem in the development of a museum, it is noticed that most museums in Africa do not have enough financial aids to run their museums, and these could be partially the negative idea or attitudes of the people toward cultural heritage. Also many people are not aware of the importance of cultural architecture and maintenance. Museum architecture should be spacious enough to accommodate the objects and not a tight place that will not give enough room for the objects to be spread out, in some cases for proper inspection, exhibition etc. Maintenance is one of the major things one should think about in a museum, even ordinary building, to be able to keep it in shape for a longer time. We notice that some museums in Africa do not have this attention and is one of the setbacks the Africans face in the museum management.

Equipment and records constitute one of the major problems Africa museums are facing. Lack of proper and modern computerized equipment in their operation, lack of proper storing of records for future information that will help in the location of objects and facts concerning it.

Organisation/Management: Organisation may be termed as the act of organising while management could be said to be managing or being managed. In case of a museum it is the duty of a curator to see to the affairs of it. As the word curator means a person in-charge of a museum, or a custodian of a museum, as the custodian, the curator must take care of the museum and its collections. To care for collections implies more than mere keeping of the objects in the store or mere preservation of the exhibition in the gallery for viewing by visitors. It involves proper examination of the artefacts before receiving them, etc.

1.3. Conclusion

To be able to have a well organised museum in Africa we should have enough trained curators, museum staff and well equipped museum laboratories should not be overlooked.

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