

# ■ New Developments in African museums – a trend of the 21st century

George Abungu

Director, Regional Museums, Sites & Monuments  
National Museums of Kenya

## Résumé

Les musées commencent à jouer un rôle important en Afrique en tant qu'institutions culturelles et à être considérés comme parties prenantes des communautés qu'ils servent. Les musées fondés après l'indépendance ne renvoient pas à de nouvelles identités nationales, mais font appel au passé, dans leurs expositions et programmes d'activités, pour distiller un sens identitaire et une fierté jusque-là absents. Ces nouveaux développements reflètent le désir d'occuper un rôle central dans les discours politiques, sociaux et économiques du pays. Tous les musées n'ont pas atteint ce stade, et certains n'ont pas de vision ou de projet d'avenir très clairs. Néanmoins, l'interrogation *Quels musées pour l'Afrique?*<sup>1</sup> semble s'être répandue sur tout le continent.

Museums as cultural institutions are beginning to play important roles in African countries and to be seen as part and parcel of the community they serve. Therefore it is imperative that they are responsive to the needs of the community. In Africa, many pre-independence museums were founded for the interest of particular groups, except for a few museums engaged in scientific research. The visitors were the few elite or white people who were intrigued by "artefacts from the primitive tribes". Today, museum agenda has changed to try to take Africa's needs into account, with museums playing the role of both custodians of National Heritage and forums for cultural development and exchange. The museums founded after independence do not only reflect the new national identities, but use the past through exhibits and public programmes to instil a sense of identity and pride that was once misappropriated. This new development reflects the desire to take a central role in the countries' political, social and economic discourses. However, not all museums have reached this stage; some have no clear objectives or prospects. Nevertheless, the question *What Museums for Africa?*<sup>1</sup> seems to have rung across the continent.

## AFRICAN MUSEUMS TODAY

Nowadays, there are two or three different kinds of museums – local museums run by a community, centrally controlled national museums that encourage various cultures to mix and help create national identities, and also university museums. In Kenya national and local museums have merged into one National Museum of Kenya, where all museums are regarded as national, despite the fact that they are regionally based and that many of their activities are region-based. Most museums have collections that also represent other parts of the country.

In South Africa the situation is quite different. Probably only two museums are national; the others represent regions or small communities within a very restricted area. Some may even represent an interest group or a displaced people within a municipality.

Although there are still many exhibitions of ethnographic materials, new museums try to answer public questions rather than serve only as repositories of material. Even the ethnographic collections are being given meaning and use; material is getting a voice and playing a role in the present African socio-cultural landscape.

## Education

Most African museums are playing a central role in children's education. Large numbers of primary, secondary and college students visit museums for lectures and "hands-on" activities. The programmes involve both natural and cultural sciences, and make children aware of the environment through lectures, film shows, painting competitions and new exhibits. The Livingstone Museum in Zambia, and the Fort Jesus and Nairobi Museums in Kenya are among the many that have perfected such programmes. Through its desert *Zebra out-reach programme*, the National Museum of Botswana in Gaborone has popularized museum operations at the rural level. The National Museum of Kenya in Nairobi has introduced a new angle to its public programmes: toy making and exhibiting as a means of learning has become one of its priorities. Its collaboration with the Commonwealth Association of Museums has raised the interest on children's issues in museums.

## Museums as community spaces

Museums in Africa are becoming platforms for expressing the feelings and expectations of living communities. With the disappearance of many of their cultural and spiritual spaces, communities may regard museums as an alternative space for cultural activities and community performances. Furthermore, the rediscovery and redefinition of peoples' traditions seems to be taking place in African museum spaces, thus making the institutions much more active than before.

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

Many African museums play the role of custodians of both cultural and natural

heritage. Apart from their ethnographic, pre-historic and historic collections, a number of museums host some of the largest botanical and zoological specimens on the continent. The National Museum of Kenya in Nairobi probably has the largest collection of plant species on the continent in its Herbarium; the same could be said of its entomological collection. The museum also has the largest and most up-to-date Centre for Biodiversity in East and Central Africa. Most of these facilities are used for research directly related to human existence and the preservation of the environment. More than exhibiting indigenous food plants and medicines, many museums are offering experimentation with the food values and the cultural significance of different plants.

Museums are also involved in conserving immovable heritage such as monuments, ritualistic sites, cultural landscapes, etc. This is true of Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, West Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Madagascar, and East and Southern Africa. In Kenya the old towns of Lamu and Mombasa have been gazetted as protected historical heritage, and benefit from the museum's Old Town Conservation Unit which is responsible for their care. The museum works closely with the local community – the owners of the heritage. This is a good example of harmonious cooperation between a museum and a community, where the museum contributes directly to the local economy. Facing a real need for labour, working on restoration, preservation and renovation, some of the museums have founded training centres, such as the Swahili Culture Centre in Lamu and Mombasa where traditional arts and crafts are taught to young men and women who would not otherwise have jobs. The museums thus create sustainable resources for the local area, while reviving and developing threatened cultures.

Through networking, museums in Africa have become active custodians of their national heritage; and although illegal traffic in cultural property is still prevalent, most African museums through ICOM's AFRICOM programme have made a concerted effort to stamp it out. Again through AFRICOM, African museums have documented their collections, and today there is a set standard for this.

Through ICCROM's Prevention in Museums in Africa (PREMA) courses, African museums have managed to develop their manpower in conservation and to reorganise their storage facilities. A new forum, AFRICA 2009 for the Conservation of Immovable Cultural Heritage in Sub-Saharan Africa, is set to further enhance the role of African museums in managing their heritage sus-

tainably. Thus through partnerships, the new African museums have been able to redefine their roles and begin meeting the challenges of the future.

An example of partnerships in Sub-Saharan Africa is the twinning of African Museums to European ones, notably the case of ICOM's Swedish-African Museum Programme (SAMP) which is sponsored by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). Museums in Africa and those in Sweden have an equal partnership that has seen very fruitful and rich cross-cultural exchanges. Within Africa itself, regional organisations geared towards promoting museum work and networking have taken root; such as the West African Museums Programme (WAMP) and the Southern Africa Development Community Association of Museums and Monuments (SADCAMM). A sense of a regional approach to museum issues has been developed and now museums in Africa are set to work much more closely together than before, removing barriers based on boundaries and language.

Many museums are playing major roles in "nation building". Africa has for a long time been a continent of conflicts and wars. Most African politicians have not lived up to the expectations of independence, and today many countries are more divided on ethnic grounds than ever before. There has been a lack of the understanding of diversity as a resource. There is a need now for a voice of reason, an alternative forum for discussion, a neutral ground, and some museums in Africa have started to play that role and fill the gap as facilitators of peaceful co-existence among peoples.

Kenya, with its recent numerous ethnic clashes, is an example of a country where reconciliation is necessary. The National Museums of Kenya, realising the gravity of the situation and its privileged role as a neutral and non-partisan organisation, started research some years back on the traditional ways of conflict resolution among ethnic groups in the country. This was done with a view to using past knowledge and mechanisms in creating peace among the diverse Kenyan communities. Today, as a symbol of this effort, there is an exhibition entitled *The heritage of peace and reconciliation*. With audio-visual and material cultural evidence, this puts together the process of conflict resolution among pastoralists in Kenya, and is hoped to sensitize everybody to the need for peaceful co-existence among peoples. A number of African museums have started on similar exercises, and more will be required to follow suit, and so fulfil Omar Konare's saying that *we must also be open to traditional knowledge, the knowledge of the people, of notables, men of culture*.

Many museums have tried to move towards becoming institutions where the meaning and the role of both the objects and the museums can be re-enacted to suit the present situation and generation. As Omar Konare 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 and society we shall conserve nothing. An object cannot be conserved outside man or outside society.*

Not everything, however, has been perfect in museums in Africa; even today, many museums lack policies and vision. And in today's Africa where the word "liberalisation" is key, many so-called private museums have sprung up with no programming and no strategies, but merely as ventures to make quick money. While collection takes place, there is not sufficient provision for storage, proper environmental conditions or conservation. If not checked this will be an even bigger threat to the African heritage than the plunder that took place during colonial times and continues as illicit traffic in cultural property.

African museums also lack proper funding. Government funding is either very low or non-existent as cultural institutions are given low priority. More serious still, Africa is so rich in cultural heritage that museums as custodians are basically overwhelmed. Furthermore, museums still lack trained manpower. They are still being confronted by illicit trade in cultural heritage, and most do not have the capacity to fight the well-organised operatives of the trade. This, however, is a war that has to be fought by all, not only by museums.

It is clear that modern African museums are starting to play a crucial role as centres of research, education and exhibition. They are becoming community facilities and are creating spaces and forums where different voices can be heard. Through partnerships they are regionalising and even globalising their operations, and enhancing the role of culture in development, appreciation of diversity and understanding between human beings. As they are also custodians of living heritage, African museums are especially well-placed to play this role. It is hoped that the African museums of the future will further expand their horizons and develop both local and global visions of their heritage; a heritage that must be taken in its totality, a true representation of the African continent and being. ■