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STORAGE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I esteem it an honor to have been invited to participate in this Seminar whose importance is better appreciated by the presence here of you all -- men and women distinguished in your areas of specialization; Museum Architecture, Conservation and Curatorship of various collections, their storage and security. I had accepted the generous invitation of ICOM-UNESCO and the AAM to participate in this conference with a view to learning. I now find myself called upon through no merits of my own, to report to you on "Storage of Ethnographic Collections in Developing Countries". Coming as I do from one such country, it does not seem inappropriate that I should be invited to speak on such a subject.

Mr. Chairman, even Africa which is one vast geographic mass has enormous variations. What to say of developing countries, scattered as they are on the whole continent of Africa, Latin America and vast areas of Asia. From what source then shall I, a humble newcomer, derive courage to relate the story of ethnographic collections and their storage problems in these developing countries with no

foundations except modest personal acquaintanceship with a few. Fortunately, there is a characteristic that is common to almost all developing countries as far as museum development is concerned and for this reason one may make pronouncements on this matter without too great a danger of misrepresentation.

Most developing countries were until recently under colonial rule. Indeed the agitation for sovereign independence in all cases was based on national consciousness and traditional values whose evidence in the form of cultural patrimony became the object of intense collection, if only to salvage what was left after the colonial plunder. In circumstances like this the collections were invariably stored in buildings by no means designed to accommodate them. Nor are we to forget that developing countries are largely grappling with vicious circles of various gradations. As soon as sovereign independence is achieved the rallying point shifts from intensive collection of cultural patrimony to pressing demands for economic well-being, agricultural development, more food, shelter and good health and education for the people. The fight for the preservation of collected specimens then becomes not strictly a national fight but one for those who are closely connected with them -- the curators, the administrators of the collections who know that they have reached a point of no return, for they know too well that whether appreciated or not it is on their carelessness or carefulness that depends respectively the destruction of the heritage or its endurance.

Since the modern concept of a museum as a public place for exhibition of specimens, for the appreciation and instruction of visitors is new in most developing countries including even other states like India, China and Mexico, it is not surprising that the collections are mostly ethnographical. It is an interesting phenomenon that more and more, people associate archaeology not with its scientific study of the life and culture of ancient peoples (including of course surface finds) but finds from excavations. Since, however, archaeology is fairly new in relation to ethnography it is not surprising that in most cases the latter collections outnumber the former. As has already been indicated, because most of these ethnographic collections are housed in premises ill-suited to them, planning for their organizations and storage with a view to their conservation, easy retrieval, study and display becomes difficult. In fact hardly any distinction can be made between reserve collections on the one hand and study collections on the other for the simple reason that space is inadequate. The dilemma, I believe, is one that confronts all museums both in the more technologically advanced countries and the less advanced ones. The problem really is: Constant Collection versus Limited Space. No museum curator is going to stop collecting or dispose of part of his collections and space is also determined to be limited. We need not be frightened of this dilemma, for it seems to me that every problem carries within itself its challenge and solution. In Africa, Asia, Latin America

and other technologically less advanced countries, plagued largely by the problems of illiteracy, population explosion and diversity of languages and variegated patterns of culture, no tool or medium is more to be desired and encouraged than the museum which displays objects that communicate ideas and instruction easily.

Of course the awareness exists that where funds are available for the construction of new premises for the storage and display of exhibits, the curator has to work closely with the architect to ensure that a balance is struck between storage and exhibition spaces. The problem of space limitation does not seem to arise only where old buildings are concerned. The strange story is told of the Israeli Museum in Jerusalem which was opened some eleven years ago and whose offices occupy 2/3 of the building and the collections 1/3. In Ghana the museums and monuments institution acquired the premises of the House of Chiefs in the South Eastern region, better known as the Volta Region for conversion into a museum. Even though as much money has been spent in converting and renovating it as was spent in purchasing it, it does not seem that we have an ideal museum yet. Mr. Chairman, the greatest asset of the museum is or should be its manpower or a constellation of talents, whether Archaeologists, Ethnologists, Conservators, Restorers or Administrators. Due to the paucity of philanthropists in most developing countries their governments (whose priority scales have already been mentioned) are the main source of support. Where this is not generously and

adequately forthcoming a real problem is created. For the whole of Africa, there is only the Jos Training Centre in Nigeria for the training of middle level museum personnel. There is as yet no graduate or postgraduate training in Museology anywhere in Africa although one may be started in Ghana in the near future. Apart from India and Latin America, museology students from Africa have to proceed to Leicester in England the ROM in Toronto or one or the other of the American training centres. Meanwhile some form of atmospheric and environmental controls are being applied, be they lighting, temperature and relative humidity. But these techniques and the equipment devised for use are being constantly changed and improved. The vicious circles in which the technologically less advanced countries are caught are many and if they are to free themselves from these permanently, they certainly need the sympathy, support and assistance of their more endowed colleagues especially having regard to training facilities. We cannot stand aloof when we are engaged in a common battle to save the heritage of mankind. This is where we need to strengthen ICOM and all other world bodies such as UNESCO so that the outcome of research may be made known to all readily. I wish here to make an appeal to our colleagues in the more technologically advanced countries to make conscious effort to assist especially with the training of our museum personnel. For one thing, where you may be talking about detector equipment for purposes of security we are still relying on manpower -- on security

officers who probably see no bright future for themselves in the museum and are therefore halfhearted.

The renowned Conservateur of the Louvre, Germain Bazin, foresees the great museums, plagued by the problems of space, storage and security, metamorphosing into organisms analogous to the central library with vast reference collections of authentic pieces consulted or read about but not visited casually.

The prospect of man having eventually to rely on museums (if they can still be called museums) stocked with reproductions or simulations of real objects or worse still on movies, microfilms and photographs for simple lack of space and storage is gloomy enough to make this Conference both necessary and timely. One proposition may be that the number of museums throughout the world should be increased and specialization encouraged. This position is consistent with UNESCO's call on its member states to return ethnographic collections or works of art in general to their natural ambience. The argument that these specimens will not fare well when returned to their original setting is not sound because the materials from which they were fashioned could not themselves endure if they were not in harmony with their environment.

That the first museological collections in Greece should have been treasuries of the temples points to the common or universal origins of the museum as it is known today, for in Ghana as in India today, the former its shrines and the latter its temples continue to be the repositories of works of art. Are we to turn to the temples?

In any case it were better to read books with photographs of museum specimens than to frequent centralized library of museums.

We have to see ourselves as partners in search of a common goal.

If we see ourselves in this light cooperation and mutual assistance will be the outcome. In unity is strength. Thank you.

NB/Other remarks.