

# African Research Review

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*An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia*

*Vol. 4 (4), Serial No. 17, October, 2010*

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

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## **Museums and Development in Africa** (Pp.529-538)

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### **Abstract**

*The theme of this paper is centred on museums as veritable tools for national unity and development in Africa. It argued rather dispassionately that after several decades of economic development in Africa, it is clear that cultural parameters and processes are as important as economic aspects of the evolution of African societies. Besides appraising the objectives of museums in Nigeria, it also critically looked at museums and scientific/ technological development in Africa. The paper which relied overwhelmingly on secondary methods of data collection, revealed that museums are avenues through which the cultural and natural resources of a nation as well as its people's abilities and attitudes, in the presence of this institution, can be mobilized to achieve the desired development goals. It however, recommended that African peoples should utilize the resources and methods of science and technology critically and intelligently, if they are to overcome their backwardness in these areas.*

### **Introduction**

The last decade marked a turning point in acknowledging the importance of culture in the development process. Since the beginning of the 1970s, a number of voices have been raised regularly at United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), to stress the importance of the cultural factor in the social, economic and political evolution of contemporary

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societies (Etounga - Manguelle, 1998). Nonetheless, in Africa he further asserted, this awareness seemed to focus on reasserting cultural identity, which Africans, rightly or wrongly, believed was really threatened by the emphasis on purely economic development.

Similarly, Ardouin (1998), contended that after several decades of economic development in Africa, it is now clear that cultural parameters and processes are at least as important as the economic aspects of the evolution of African societies in a world of profound changes and crises. Poverty, problems of physical survival, production, consumption, health, education, rapid urbanization, political change, degradation of the environment and destruction of natural resources can no longer be considered as separate issues. Moreover, this type of growth, when it has occurred, has caused profound imbalance, which is not only economic but cultural and social as well.

In addition, Ardouin stated that, one also begins to realize that the tendency to rely on models from "developed" countries to industrialize, build, organize medical care and educate has often led in terms of the official policies and doctrines to leave aside or simply reject a considerable mass of local knowledge, technology, techniques and know-how developed in their particular environment by different societies over time. In this context, the cultural heritage in its material and non - material aspects acquires a new dimension. The concepts of "culture" and "cultural heritage" can no longer be considered as mere intellectual mystification in relation to the future of African societies.

The term "development" has a broad and generic meaning and as a result, different perspectives have been adopted by development scholars writing about the concept (Onokerhoraye and Okafor, 1994 and Okigbo, 1983). This has also led to a lack of agreement on its definition which naturally should embrace political, economic, educational, technological and cultural changes. Capitalist economists see development as economic growth measured in aggregate terms of growth in per capita income. Gross National Product (GNP), Gross Product (GP) and so on (Goulet, 1975) to the neglect of the individuals involved in production growth in terms of attitudinal, institutional and technological changes which the people must undergo to produce wealth (Lewis, 1975). Todaro (1977) sees development as a multi-dimensional process involving changes in structures, attitudes and institutions as well as the acceleration of economic growth, the reduction of inequality and eradication of absolute poverty. Andah and Bolarinwa (1994) however,

examined development from the cultural perspective. They viewed culture as the sum total of values, beliefs, attitudes, customs and patterns of behaviours in a given society, as vital pillar of social and economic transformation.

The experience of a member of developing countries in these periods, however, indicate that the narrow economic conception of development was inappropriate as such, there was the need for a redefinition of the term (Mabogunje 1980, Ayida 1987, Tom 1991 and Onokerhoraye and Okafor 1994). To achieve national growth depends to a very large extent on the people's abilities and attitudes and also on their economic, social, political as well as cultural institutions. These according to Ekechukwu (1990) are the basic ingredients that ought to be present in the right doses before a polity can convert its material endowments into resources for the attainment of national development. Okigbo (1983) has identified an endogenous relationship between people's abilities and attitudes and their natural and cultural endowments on the one hand and their national growth on the other. Museums can thus be seen as avenues through which the cultural and natural resources of a nation as well as its people's abilities and attitudes in the presence of this institution, can be multiplied in order to achieve development in the desired direction.

What are museums? What functions do they and should they be fulfilling in the peculiar circumstances of the so-called developing nations of Africa? How are they being mobilized and how can museums resources and services be mobilized for national development? How should museums be structured in such countries for them to function effectively and properly as educational, cultural and scientific institutions contributing to resolving economic and socio-political problems which hinder national development and the achievement of national goals? These are some of the questions addressed in the paper to truly set the stage rolling for a meaningful discussion of museum and sustainable development.

### **Museums and African Peoples**

According to Momin and Okpoko (1990) 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 materials 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 role they can play in the contemporary world.

The term comes originally from a Greek word referring to a place for the muses to congregate, where one would have philosophical discussions or see artistic performances. In Europe, the concept of the museum developed into a place where art objects were housed and displayed. Ethnographic and science museums came later, inspired by Europe's emerging interests in exploration in the 1500s and the accompanying scientific urge to gather specimens from around the world and classify them into an evolutionary history. The concept of museum and its several forms has now diffused to most parts of the world including Nigeria. Within anthropology, "museum anthropology" emerged in the 1980s as a sub-field concerned with studying how and why museums choose to collect and display particular objects (Ames, 1992; Jones, 1993; Stocking, 1985).

One of the aspirations engendered by independence was that the museum becomes a privileged place where the treasures of African cultures would find the ideal setting in which to express what they have symbolized throughout past millennia and centuries from the point of view of history, art, science, technology and ethnography, divested of all bias. This is yet to be realized in the case of many African countries especially Nigeria.

As Andah (1990) rightly observed, a decolonisation policy requires to be initiated. Such a programme should aim at rehabilitating African peoples, mentally and otherwise, through the material evidence of their civilizations and positively helping them to recognize their identities - their social and individual selves as nations and as persons. Museums Andah stressed, were and are meant to be in the forefront of efforts to protect and develop the material values of African culture as well as to integrate these into the total ideological orientation adopted for development by each country or nation.

Although as repositories of cultural values, it has helped to some extent with cultural rediscovery, especially since independence, museums set up in Africa are yet to contribute significantly to the reversal or rather repair the severe psychological damage colonial altitude has wrought on

African peoples and on several other facets of national development,

As Jelinek (1973) rightly noted, a backward glance at museum development shows that museums only fully develop their potential for action when they are actually involved in the major problems of contemporary society. There are many examples to prove this. For instance, when education was made available to their entire populations in many European countries as a result of the French Revolutions, museums were developed as centres of national revival, educational institutions, places of creativity and culture for youth documentation and so on. Museums are institutions intended to serve society; and only thus can they continue to exist and function in Africa.

Andah (1990) however, suggests the urgent need to redirect museum activities in African countries to serve the real interests of the general public rather than a select few; to reflect the state of progress of all its basic disciplines and not just a few: to educate all, especially the young; and participate fully in the development of the countries in which they are sited rather than be passive onlookers. In this regard, the major objective of museums in Africa is and should be educational. In this direction, museums are suitably placed to correct the distortions of African history as well as major defects of African educational programmes manifest in a general failure to make full use of the cultural potential of African peoples.

### **Museums in Nigeria: An Overview**

According to Momin and Okpoko (1990), the history of museums in Nigeria can be said to date to pre-Arab and European times. During these periods, various cultural materials of ritual, religious and political importance were fashioned, conserved and preserved in temples or traditional shrines and in the palaces of kings and chiefs. Apart from housing such cultural materials like ivory, bronze and carved wooden objects, these institutions (temples, shrines and palaces) were preserved as monuments in their own right. Some natural features like caves (for example, Ogbunike cave in Anambra State) were also maintained as monuments. In these pre-colonial museums, objects were preserved because of their utilitarian or symbolic value.

Nzewunwa (1984), however, noted that the development of modern museums began during the colonial period. In 1927, Mr. Kenneth Murray, an art teacher in the British Colonial Service, was appointed to advise the government on the effects of colonial education system on local art. As Murray (1966)

reported, while performing the assignment, Murray made a personal collection of several Nigerian art forms. Later he advised the government on the establishment of museums and the proclamation of relevant laws to prevent illegal exportation of Nigerian works of art. However, because of the Second World War, Murray's recommendations for the establishment of museums in three centres in Nigeria, could not be implemented. Nzewunwa (1984) however stressed that Murray was permitted "to continue with the purchase of antiquities pending the building of a permanent place" for the preservation of the cultural objects.

The Nigerian Antiquities Service was established on July 28,1943 in response to appeals by concerned Europeans like Murray and Duckwork. Mr. J.H. Brauhnoltz, a keeper in the Department of Ethnography of the British Museum, was sent to Lagos by the Colonial Office to advice the British government on the preservation of Nigerian cultural resources. In 1947, Mr. B.E. B. Fagg, a trained archaeologist was appointed government archaeologist and assistant surveyor of antiquities. Mr. Fagg carried out much of the archaeological work in the Jos Plateau and helped in the establishment of the Jos Museums in 1952 in which most of the archaeological materials are preserved till date. The then Department of Antiquities and the present National Commission for Museums and Monuments have been responsible for the establishment of museums in different parts of Nigeria to preserve Nigeria's cultural objects.

In Nigeria, there are 35 National Museums located either in the state capitals or in historic places or towns and in many smaller communities as well; and in addition, there are local community museums and private galleries, numerous historical / cultural monuments and sites found all over the country. For society, as a whole, museums provide valuable intangible benefits as sources of national, regional and local identity. They have the singular capacity to reflect both continuity and change, to preserve and protect cultural and natural heritage while vividly illustrating the progression of the human imagination and the natural world.

### **Museums and Scientific/Technological Development in Africa**

Modern world is changing at an incredible pace under the influence of scientific and technological development and no one can escape them, or still less, ignore them. If this is the case, societies like ours in Africa, urgently need to chart their own scientific and technological developments which were hitherto ignored, and more importantly, relate these to modern

trades so that African peoples can create a firm foundation for their modern endeavours in science and technology. As Andah (1990) puts it, the museum has much leadership role to play in this respect and has indeed shown itself (at least in Nigeria) to be very aware of this role as is evident in the imaginative scheme of the Civil War Museum. If well prosecuted, he asserted, it should serve as a much needed bridge between various past and present traditions of warfare, of oil refinery, of assembling cars, etc. Similarly, experiments would be very valuable in the spheres of architecture, medicine, weaving, metallurgy, transportation, educational system, codes and methods (including oral devices, written word, pictorials, television and films).

From observation, there are vast but unexplored possibilities for Africa's museums of the future - which according to Andah, indicates that Africa's musicological tradition is yet to make use of even a significant part of available resources. It is worthy of note too, that there are a great many museums of art and history and a fair number devoted to human science (archaeology, ethnography and anthropology) a few dealing with natural history (Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and Ife, Nigeria) but hardly any good ones devoted to science and technology. This is due largely to inadequate economic resources, Africa's industrial underdevelopment, red tapism and poor political will. Another basic factor is the predilection of many African Mediterranean people of humanistic subjects, which is well reflected in their educational systems.

The museums envisaged should be geared towards educating and convincing African peoples at all levels that science and technology are absolutely necessary for

- i. developing their material potentials,
- ii. evolving a science and technology tradition considered proper for their development; one which builds squarely and firmly on the useful facets of the scientific and technological traditions of the African peoples and
- iii. breaking the present strangle hold of various governmental agencies and institutions which lack proper equipment and premises as well as properly trained personnel.

## Conclusion

The key to reconstructing our Africa lives and societies lies, not in neglecting our past as if it never happened but in accepting that past, not only as the source of generations but also as the source of regeneration.

The lack of science and technology museums is merely helping to perpetuate a dismal situation in which African children shy away from studying the hard and exact sciences. With good science and technology museums, such disciplines would begin to leave the realm of the abstract and would thus be made more attractive and easier to comprehend.

To achieve these new dimensions of museum activity advocated by this article, African museums must be staffed by persons with requisite scientific and technical expertise. As of now, such qualified staff are few and far between, for several reasons. First, there is hardly a properly orchestrated training programme for the various arms of the museum. Secondly, available training programmes are not tailored to African needs.

Being underdeveloped in these spheres accordingly to Andah (1990), it seems absolutely necessary for African peoples to use the resources and methods of science and technology critically and intelligently, if they are to overcome their backwardness in these areas. The only way of doing this successfully, Andah contended, is to train their own scientists and technologists. Failing to do so he further stressed, they would continue to remain in the trademark technology and thus remain dependent on the more developed countries, since they would do no more than copy the patented techniques devised elsewhere for which they must pay heavy royalties as they are doing presently.

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