

MUSEUMS AND THEIR ROLES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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Abstract

A Museum is a complex institution. Controversy continues to dog its definition, function and role in the society. The dynamism of the global world is constantly expanding its function and roles, and consequently its definition. The society seems to be yearning for more than the usual traditional functions and roles of the Museum. As a matter of fact, the traditional trends in the history of Museum have generally attracted only people of above average education and wealth. Thus, there is restricted visitorship, thereby alienating the broader society. Some of the challenges today for Nigerian museums are how to attract audience, achieve social relevance, be of service to the society and contribute to its development in the face of low government funding. This paper attempts to suggest ways by which Nigerian museums can effectively be in the service of the society and its development through a process termed cultural empowerment. It also recommends ways of transforming the museums into a more socially open institution through programmes on contemporary issues that bear relevance to local community.

Keywords: Museums, Contemporary, History, Society, Nigeria

Introduction

The word Museum is from the Greek word Museion and signifies a temple dedicated to the nine lively muses who were guardians of the nine aspect of art, namely, Dance, Oratory, Love, Tragedy, Music, History, Comedy, Epic and Astronomy (Edward, 1987).

Though the term museum in English was first used in 1682 to describe the display of collections donated to the Oxford University by Elias Oshimole Ambrose and Paine (1993), history is replete with many accounts of collections and a few display of objects by the rich, powerful and noble in the society before the advent of museum as we now know it. In fact, the height of a culture's glory, splendor and civilization is measured by the wealth of its collection. These collections which were acquired through exchange, long distant journeys, conquest in war and concerted search was a medium of showcasing status, wealth, power and height on the social ladder (McLean, 2003).

Different societies and cultures through history employed various means for preserving whatever was considered valuable. According to Kaplan (1996), Asians kept their valuables in temples, churches were the treasure houses for the Europeans, housed paintings and sculptures are meant for history and religion lesson in India, while busts and indoor sculptures gave the baroque its dynamic character, and instilled on visitors the greatness and importance of the ruling houses. All these collections were restricted, private or with limited public access. In traditional Africa with its divine kingship, the kings are the custodians of traditional cultural heritage.

The objects thus collected portrayed the king's power and are used as gifts to show their kingly generosity to others. The emergence of museums on Nigerian landscape according to Kaplan (1996), was a recent phenomenon. She reiterates that museums in Nigeria are products of a passion among some British colonial expatriates and some traditional rulers (especially Oba of Benin and the Ooni of Ife) for preserving indigenous art works and cultural history.

Though, these traditional rulers had already formed local museums in their palace grounds before World War II, the formal opening of the first museum which was the Museum of Antiquities, Traditional Art and Ethnography did not take place until March 9th, 1957 in the King George IV Memorial Park in Lagos (Federal Ministry of Research and Information; 1959). What then started as modest beginning has blossomed today into 36 museums scattered all over the country with the government's original plans to found a National Museum in each of the 36 state capital and Federal Capital Territory, almost achieved.

The museum system in Nigeria is today the largest and most extensive museum system in Africa. (ICOM, Directory of Museum Professionals in Africa, 2003). It is administered through the National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) established under decree No. 77 of 1979.

Definitions of Museum

By definition, the museums in Nigeria are often viewed as cultural resource centres charged with responsibility to collect, store and showcase to the public cultural materials of the ancient days. In view of this, the museums are mostly stock with antiquities most of which their photographs are seen in books and other public historical documents.

Allan (1960) explained that, a museum in its simplest form consists of a budding to house collections of objects for inspection, study and enjoyment. The International Council of Museum (ICOM) has however defined Museum as a "No profit making, permanent institution, in the service of society and its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserve, researches, and communicates and exhibit for the purpose of study, education, enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment".

Types of Museums

Museums vary most controversially in the functions they perform. The Museums, for example promote national unity by fostering national culture, depending on the collections on display.

Museum Types	Location
Archeological Museum	National Museum, Ile-Ife
Art Museum	National Museum of Art Lagos
History Museum	Museum of Colonial History, Aba
Ethnography Museum	National Museum, Benin.
Natural History Museum	Obafemi Awolowo University - Ile-Ife

Military Museum

Umuahia and Zaria

Other list of art museums are Esie Museum in Kwara State, Gidan Makama Museum in Kano State, Jos Museum in Jos Plateau State, Kaduna Museum in Kaduna State, Oron Museum in Akwa-Ibom State and Owo Museum in Ondo State.

Challenges of Managing Museums in Nigeria

African Governments, according to Kerri (1999), are not in a hurry to create and fund museums when their people are hungry, unemployed, sick and quite a number is illiterate. Nigeria is not industrialized and its external trade is still mainly in the exportation of raw materials. Basic amenities like water, electricity, fuel, good roads, good communications network etc. are grossly inadequate, the list of problems requiring attention are daunting.

The low per-capital income in Nigeria has an adverse effect on the museum staff and the level of visitorship. The latter has contributed in no small measures to causes of antiquity theft in Nigerian museums by its workers. According to Jane-Teves, (2001), whether we like it or not, a museum is defined by its collections and they have constantly to be improved upon. And the crux of the matter is, no matter how skilled a curator is, in preserving the object in his care, they are useless no matter how long he keeps them if they are not exhibited (Areo, 2008).

The situation remains worrisome that almost all museums have become centers of excellence for foreigners and have become by the turn of the last century, irrelevant, to the local people with low visitor statistics of less than 10% of urban dwellers. Considering this, the patronage is on the downward curve, because Nigerians are no longer curious about their past; rather, they are more concerned about their future.

Traditional Functions of Museums

The museums as a public institution responds to the needs of the society, assist its progress, and provide cultural, political and economic inspiration as well as moral education and re-orientation.

The core function of the museum, according to Decree 77 of 1979 which places the administration under the National Commission of Museums and Monuments, is to carry out systematic collection, preservation, study and interpret material evidence of the cultural, historical and environmental heritage of the people of Nigeria, in service to the society and its development (NCMM Policy, 2004).

The basic functions of the museums and museum outlets under NCMM are, the collection, documentation, preservation, interpretation and presentation to the public through exhibitions, publications and various educational programmes, the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the people of Nigeria and placing that heritage in the service of the society.

The minimal standards of museum management have been defined by Ardouin 1992 as 'Development of programmes that disseminate and enhance knowledge of the artifacts in the museum collections, and Maintaining and developing all aspects of the museum institution, its collections and its services'.

The basic responsibility of museums remains to care for the museum collections, especially the primary collections of cultural objects which are the backbone of the Nigerian museums.

The Place of Museums in Contemporary Society and New Suggestions

The traditional role of the museum is changing in the contemporary context and increasingly globalized world. These changes place new and additional responsibilities on the museum management. There are emerging international factors that are forcing these changes on museums in Nigeria; they include globalization, new information technology, new pattern of international relations and the cultural diversity issues. All of these combine to affect the museum in contemporary society.

In African context, new emerging issues such as community space, peace and conflict resolution, financial sustainability and the museum relevance, also reflect on the traditional role of museums in the African continent.

There is increasing need for community space for debate and dialogue on contextual issues, discussion on Human Rights, Gender, Education and Health issues (HTV/AIDS), Skill Acquisition, Employment as well as History and Identity of the community. This places pressure on the museum institution to use its resources to bring dialogue on such issues to enable it get closer to its community, or become relevant to the society and its development. Museums provide information, facts, historical experiences and material evidence in addition to opportunities for giving conflicting views and dialogue.

Ardouin (1992) advocated that West African museums should become tools for improvement in their own communities. They should address problems of health, physical survival, rapid urbanization, poverty, environmental degradation and destruction of natural resources. They should be involved in their community life and communicate effectively with their different publics.

Nigerian museums should play a significant role as communicators of culture for the benefit of development and identity building. They should incorporate the local culture from local view point and present culture in a way to raise self-esteem and pride, to build and develop the community's cultural identity. Malinger (2005), also recommends the use of museums as places of history, cultural banks or cultural centers- as border-crossing institutions, where all aspects of human life are presented and integrated in time and space. It is when this is done, that the community and its members will fill the need for and have the will to preserve their cultural heritage, including museums.

Museums should also, play an economic role for development; through the development of culture industry and promoting cultural tourism. As an important tourism destination, they can integrate history and heritage as part of everyday life and use all its objects (tangible, and intangible cultural and natural) as an economic and financial resource for development. They can revitalize the transfer of traditional knowledge within communities by strengthening ties between elders and youth, thereby enriching the existing educational

resources. They can also create knowledge through collection and general research. ICOM (1992) has synthesized these new roles in global scale and has recommended that museums should be used as tools for cultural pluralism, national development, democracy and public education. Some of the new aspects of the museum's social role, which have emerged in the past two decades, are based on the following strategies;

- **Heritage Conservation:** This would involve the community participating in the protection and preservation of its cultural and environmental heritage.
- **Cultural Mediation:** Museum outreach, establishing relationship between objects, the public and the museum institution. It is also used for assisting the reconciliation and social reconstruction process in the wake of conflict through the museums acting as neutral territory for ensuring dialogue, developing joint projects and reinventing peace.
- **Community Development:** Enhancing the quality of life, job creation opportunities, and a higher level of employment of proper museum strategic management plan and Development policy frame-work.
- **Scientific Research:** Collection, general and audience research to enable museum "construct knowledge" and offer better services to its community.

Nigeria Museum: What they offer for the Present Generation

Museums are places where history is made tangible. This means that museums contain relics of cultural materials which have helped scholars in tracing the cultural roots of individual groups within a country or region. The historical stories being read make use of such relics to enhance knowledge of the current generation on the past things or societies that have existed before it.

Nigerian museums have a long history and it is closely linked to the helpless nature of things regarding the accidental discovering of certain cultural materials of great value to man. Considering the fact that the accidentally discovered cultural materials were disappearing unlawfully against the inherent growth and development of the cultural sector, the need to create a safe place was paramount.

From 1950 to date, over twenty museums have been created to help in the managing of cultural materials which are mostly artifacts and ethnographic materials found within Nigeria. There is virtually no museum in Nigeria that prove to be different from other ones in terms of their activities based on the purpose they were established. In view of this, museums are stock with antiquities most of which their photographs are seen in books and other public historical documents. It offers the present generation the clue to know their past cultural materials and history.

Recommendations

Prudent management of the four Ms (man, money, machine and materials) should be the goal of all museums. Creative use should be made of the tools for effective management especially when generated funds are

judiciously used, it will have multiplier effect on community development. There must be training and retraining of staff to enable them meet current and new challenges. Training based on continuous evaluation of changing needs of the museum and the community, exploring "e- learning opportunities with local/Africa context. Training the trainer's programmers should be encouraged.

There must be bench-marking with similar institutions abroad, especially in exploring the advantages of internet facilities; ensuring partnership and .networking between museums; museum and the private sector; museum and the local community; museum the international community based on shared values, interests, goals and objectives. If all of these are harnessed, they can be very supportive in meeting the objectives of Millennium Development Goals (MDG) and New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). It will also help to meet the new expectations from the museums.

Conclusion

The museum should take every opportunity that arises for either the museum personnel or members of the public to quickly respond to contemporary issues that have relevance to local communities. More collaborators, particularly from communities, should be allowed and encouraged to participate in museum work. This is what is referred to as cultural empowerment. It will provide opportunities for others to represent their own point of view within the institutional context. It will allow people to speak for themselves through' exhibition and programmers about issues that are important to them, that is, contemporary issues and not a decontextualized past.

In a communicative service, all museums are contemporary, all must find a voice to communicate in the present tense and put a premium on contemporary culture, practices and conditions. That means if museums are to be of effective service to the society and its development, they should deal more directly with the socio-cultural, political and economic issues of the past as a separate entity or a phase that has passed. The appropriate approach is to be able to link together the past and present if museums are to arrive at socially responsive history.

Nigerian museums must diversify their cultural programs in serving the public. This is because the traditional role of collection, housing and showcasing to the public is fast becoming un-motivating to the general public especially the youths. National Commission for Museums and Monuments (NCMM) as an umbrella body of public museums in Nigeria should look toward making policies that will rejuvenate museums. New cultural programs involving youths should be carried out to improve public patronage

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