

TO OWN, BENEFIT AND SUSTAIN: RETHINKING MUSEUM CONCEPT AND PRACTICE IN AFRICA

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Introduction

In Africa, the museum concept both in terms of its philosophy and its building is a colonial construct. The museum concept was introduced to Africa by the colonial masters as Eyo (1994) mentions. Although scholars like Ivan Emeka Okonkwo argue that the concept of museum existed in Africa before the arrival of foreign religions and the colonial masters, the name and the mode of operation were completely different. Okwonkwo (2016) writes that in Pre-Arab and European times specifically in Nigeria, the museum concept existed in the form of temples, traditional palaces and shrines where various materials of cultural, religious and political importance were housed and displayed nonetheless, they were not called 'museums'. Okonkwo (2016) further explains that the cultural materials were catered for by heads of households, priests of shrines and kings and chiefs.

From the above, one can say it is the western conventional museum idea and concept that requires that these objects assume a secondary function for entertainment and education, are moved and housed in a building now called a 'museum' and are displayed in show glasses or on plinths and cases that is alien to Africans. Production of artefacts for religious, utilitarian and decorative purposes is an integral part of the African cultural heritage. Till date, these artefacts constitute a large part of the traditional African tangible heritage. Africans lived with these artefacts, used them and worshipped them as the case may be. However, the advent of the colonial masters and the infiltration of foreign religions (Christianity and Islam) brought about a significant paradigm shift in the production and relationship between the artefacts and the African people, especially the religious ones as both Christianity and Islam abhor idol worship. It is important to mention at this point that Islam and Christianity reached the Western part of the African continent before the arrival of the colonial masters who introduced the idea of the conventional museum to Africa (Eyo, 1994). As a result, the African became confused in the sense that the same artefacts he/she was asked to denounce are now dignified, housed and cared for in a place called the "museum" (Eyo, 1994).

The contradiction mentioned above is arguably the foundation of the challenges the museum as an institution is facing on the African continent. Although development is at the heart of the entire museum philosophy, it cannot be said that West African museums have succeeded in making this a reality in societies where they are located. Perhaps, this can be relied on by the fact that the introduction of the museum concept in Africa by the colonial masters could be an example of a "top-bottom-approach" to development. While the top-bottom-approach has a number of advantages, its glaring criticism is that it starts from the perspectives of central decision makers and thus tends to neglect other actors (Isidiho, 2016). Shallangwa and Saliba (2019) opine that for development to be sustainable, it should be informed by the people's needs and aspirations, grounded on their cultural orientation or background otherwise known as the bottom-top-approach. The bottom-top-approach is an approach that allows the local community and local players to express their views, and to help define the development course for their area in line with their own views, expectations and plans (European Union, 2019). This implies that local people need to be involved and carried along in the plan, design and implementation, as well as management of any developmental project targeted at them. It is in this light that using the Borno State Museum as case study, this paper draws attention

to the reason(s) behind the stunted growth which most African museums suffer that puts their sustainability at stake. It will also identify the factors impeding them from largely contributing to the development of their societies as enshrined in the very definition of the museum and lastly, develop a new African museum concept and practice model.

Methodology

The paper employed a qualitative research approach. The qualitative method focuses on “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2014:4). Basically, in this approach “the process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particular to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2014:4). Primary data was obtained through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with museum staff and interviews with some Borno indigenes. A total of 2 FGD sessions were conducted with the museum staff with 8 persons per session and 8 interviews with Borno indigenes. A recruitment criterion for interview participants was at least one museum visit. Each FGD group had a mixed composition of 4 males and 4 females. Genders were mixed as they were recruited on the basis of being museum staff. All Participants gave their consent to participate in the study. However, they chose anonymity. FGDs and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, themes generated and data is presented in a descriptive and narrative format.

Museums and Cultural Sustainability

Museums as custodians of the cultural heritage of the communities they serve are inarguably important institutions and their value cannot be overemphasized. There are several definitions of the museum. However, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adopted a definition which holds that:

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.” (ICOM, 2019).

It is implicit from the above that the museum exists primarily in the interest of the community it is located; hence, its success can be accessed by the way members of that community where the museum is located interact with it. The fact that the conventional museum concept in Africa was built on European ideals perhaps accounts for the reason why the museum concept appears not to make sense to the typical African. African museums were not developed to serve the local Africans but to satisfy the curiosities of the elite citizenry. This totally excluded the local people who produced the cultural materials (Makuvaza, 2002). Makuvaza further adds that museums in Africa have remained insensitive to the interests of the communities they purport to serve, since the static nature of their displays and collections are more elitist and exotic than African. Eyo (1994) mentions that, the coming of independence brought a new light to African museums. African nationalists looked on to it as the mirror of their new status; a cultural institution, which was required to buttress political independence. Eyo’s claim further buttresses Makuvaza’s assertion that African locals who produced the materials were excluded from enjoying the benefits the museum offers as only local elites saw the glory and value in the museums even at that, the glory was short lived and within a short time, the glory was lost. Therefore, if indeed the success of museums is largely dependent on the way the locals interact with it, then majority of African museums are not successful and their sustainability in the context of the future appears bleak.

The World Commission on Culture and Development defines cultural sustainability as inter- and intra-generational access to cultural resources (WCCD, 1995). Cultural Sustainability entails and requires that development takes place in a manner that respects the cultural capital and values of

society (Mpofu, 2012). Cultural sustainability is based on the principle that the current generation can use and adapt cultural heritage only to the extent that future generations will not be affected in terms of their ability to understand and live their multiple values and meanings (Pereira, 2007). Hence, cultural sustainability is primarily concerned with ensuring the continuity of cultural values that link the past, present, and future (Al-Hagla, 2005).

In light of the above, the museum and cultural sustainability are inseparable. According to Stylianou-Lambert, Boukas, and Bounia (2015), the relationship between the museum and cultural sustainability is in both narrow and broad terms. The narrow term refers to the traditional roles of museums that are clearly spelt out in the definition provided by ICOM and cannot be contested. They are: acquiring, conserving, researching, communicating and exhibiting both tangible and intangible heritage of humanity for the purpose of education, study and enjoyment. These are core museum activities that ensures that cultural resources are available in the context of the future and at the same time ensures the link between the past, present and future. In broad terms on the other hand, the relationship between the museum and cultural sustainability goes beyond the traditional roles of museums to include the use of heritage to create certain set of values, attitudes and behaviours among individuals which results in cultural vitality. Cultural vitality is the evidence of creating, disseminating, validating and supporting arts and culture as a dimension of everyday life in communities (Jackson, Kwabwasa-Green & Herranz, 2006). Jackson et al definition of cultural vitality identifies arts and culture as capitals that emanate from communities, not borrowed from outside and therefore, should not be preserved or kept for special occasions or events. They are integral parts of human day-to-day life. In the case of African museums, the collections are from the local communities while the museum concept is a borrowed one.

The relationship with the museum and cultural sustainability in the narrow term exists in most African museums however, it is abstract. Instead of tapping into the myriad of benefits and value the museum institution offers, it is viewed as that extraordinary building where special objects are kept. In most cases, locals only make reference to the museum without necessarily visiting. The typical African in most cases has still not understood the relationship between him/herself and the conventional museum institution. It is the broader relationship that results in cultural vitality (making the museum an integral part of the day-to-day life of locals) that is missing in African museums which is what this chapter advocates for through rethinking the museum concept and practice in Africa.

Rethinking Museum Concept and Practice in Africa

The introduction of the Conventional museums in African societies spans several decades. Yet, the members of the communities where they are located barely remember that they exist. While a significant number of Euro-American museums owe their reputation to the large collections looted from Africa, African museums, where these important cultural pieces originate from have not recorded such successes. There have been series of ongoing discussions on the reparation and repatriation of cultural artefacts that were looted from the continent that grace the exhibitions of Euro-American museums. This is a laudable effort that requires optimal support. However, there is an urgent need to decolonize African museums towards better interaction with the public they serve. This will contribute to the sustainability of the museum institution as well as make cultural vitality possible. The first step to achieving this begins with identifying the issues with the current museum concept and practice and proffering possible solutions to the challenges. During a Focus Group Discussion with staff of the Borno State Museum in Maiduguri and interviews with some indigenes of Borno State, the following were identified as barriers between the locals and the museum: location, accessibility, Eurocentric curatorial practices and displays, as well as poor funding.

Location

The Borno State Museum is located in Maiduguri, the Borno State capital, at the city centre which is also the central business area of the State's capital city and not so much a residential area. Whilst this is a central area, it is not the main domain of the majority of the locals who are mostly resident in suburbs of the city. The participants of the aforementioned FGD agreed that the location of the museum is a challenge that has distanced the locals from the museum because they do not feel a sense of belonging within the setting. They have to make extra effort and commitment to visit. A participant said:

The location of the museum matters a lot. It is located in the heart of the city a bit far from residential areas where most locals reside. This has created a barrier between the locals and the museum. They will have to pay transport fare to visit the museum. Paying transport fare to visit the museum is the least of their worries. Local patronage will have increased if the museum is located in locals' residential areas like Shehuri or Old Maiduguri. As it is, the locals do not feel a sense of belonging here (Male FGD participant, November 2020, Maiduguri).

The museum staff mentioned that location of the Borno State museum is an indicator that indeed African museums are prototypes of European museums which are mostly located in city centers. They agreed that such a location is problematic for African museums.

Accessibility

The museum is an institution that is open to the public and exists in the interest of the public however, it can only be accessed at a fee known as the gate fee both to locals and outsiders. Payment of gate fees was identified as a barrier between the locals and the museum. Generally, Africans have a communal culture. They owe each other a sense of responsibility hence, can have access (to some extent) over each other's property. The idea of having to pay gate fees in museums is in sharp contrast with the African communal culture since one has to pay to enjoy that which is produced by one of them. Although gate fees are significant and channeled into good use such as the maintenance of museum collections, the typical African sees no sense in having to pay for what belongs to him/her. Hence, it has become problematic. A participant stated that:

The issue of gate fee is a major challenge to museum practice here. The locals find it strange that they have to pay fees to be allowed into the museum. This is more of a cultural issue because in Africa, we have a strong communal spirit. To be honest, sometimes, the few locals that come around bargain gate fees. They ask to be allowed free access or discounts and when denied, they get offended. I am speaking both as a local and a museum professional. While the gate fee is important, the locals do not understand why they are asked to pay so it appears strange to them. The issue of gate fee has discouraged a lot of locals from visiting the museum (Female FGD participant, November 2020, Maiduguri).

Museum Organisation and Presentation Style

The European style and pattern in which African museums are organized and collections are presented was also identified as a barrier between African museums and the locals. Borno State museum staff that participated in this study highlighted the point that their texts and labels are not translated into local languages which they pointed as a major indication that the museum was not established for locals hence, they feel no sense of belonging and ownership there. The manner of display was observed to be permanent and exotic which is problematic in terms of maintenance. Perhaps, something African would have been easier to maintain while making locals feel more at home. In the words of a participant:

There is a conflict in our displays. Our collections are African but displayed in European manner. All texts and labels are written in English without translation in any local language. How can the locals feel welcomed here? The showcases are not well maintained and dust has settled on the collections. The entire nature of the exhibition makes maintenance difficult. African display techniques would have been easier for maintenance (Male FGD participant, November, 2020, Maiduguri).

Funding

Inadequate funding of the museum sector by the government was also identified as a barrier between the museum and the locals. This is because the most innovative and creative museum staff can do almost nothing without money which has ended up in making the museum very boring and unattractive to one who is already familiar with these collections. Perhaps, again, the Eurocentric idea of income generation through gate fees is not working for African museums. There is need to review income generation methods in African museums. However, it is important to mention that museums are non-profit making institutions.

The challenges mentioned above were identified as barriers between the museum and Borno locals that have resulted in a disconnect between the people and museum. There is need to rethink the entire African museum concept and practice for the sustainability of the museum and the African culture as a whole. Using the aforementioned challenges, the next session will elucidate the trajectory of the proposed new African museum concept and practice. This is done along the three domains of cultural vitality as outlined by Jackson et al (2006) which are: presence of opportunities for cultural participation, and support for cultural participation. The presence of opportunities for cultural vitality domain entails that venues for participation in arts and cultural activities are made available for locals. Although Jackson et al (2006) consider the museum among what they call “conventional cultural venues” alongside theatres, libraries, concert halls, etc. on the basis that such institutions by nature allow for community participation. It can be argued that this does not apply to most African museums based on the fact that locals’ participation is relatively low as compared to western ones. This domain advocates that a mix of non-profit, commercial, public and informal venues and opportunities for cultural engagement is essential to create the variety of participation that enables robust arts practice and consumption both amateur and professional.

The participation in arts and cultural activities domain necessitates that cultural participation goes beyond viewing and purchasing art and cultural products (Jackson et al., 2006). They went on to add that people participate in arts and cultural activities in myriad of ways and at different levels either as practitioners, teachers, students, critics, supporters and consumers. People also engage individually and collectively, sporadically and on a regular basis. It is therefore important to view participation in a broad sense and to consider the diverse ways of participating in arts and cultural activities when creating opportunities for cultural participation. Jackson et al (2006) mention that participation in arts and cultural activities include but are not limited to membership in arts association or unions, art making, audience participation, engagement in public discourses and participating in activities such as dance.

The support for arts and cultural activities domain opines that arts and cultural activities should not totally rely on government subventions, other sources of funding should be explored.

The Proposed African Museum Concept and Practice

The African museum concept and practice proposed in this study is not a complete break away from the conventional museum concept and practice. However, certain aspects will be modified as well as a few introductions added. It is important to mention that the proposal emanated from the FGDs and interviews with the participants of this study.

Location

Buildings are immovable. However, museum location was identified as one of the factors distancing the locals from the museum. The proposed African museum concept advocates for bringing the locals to the museum since the building is immovable. This will be done by bringing in the locals to the museum through arts and crafts. Participants agreed that the Borno State museum needs to incorporate arts and crafts as a core component of the museum. Here, local arts and crafts men will be given spaces within the museum premises to produce and sell their products. This will attract both locals and non-locals to purchase crafts and at the same time drawing the attention of the people to the existence and importance of the museum collection. A participant said:

Bringing local arts and crafts people such as cap makers, textile and raffia products makers will attract more locals to the museum. The local craftsmen can be provided shed's within the museum premises and while people come to transact with them, attention will be drawn to the museum collections, their importance and their value. The locals will feel a sense of belonging in the museum activities. As it is, there is no form of attraction at all (interview with male Borno local, November 2020, Maiduguri).

With the rise in the number of internally displaced persons from the local government areas of Borno State, a vibrant local cap market has emerged. These caps are neatly hand sewn and have recently become popular and a major symbol of Borno's cultural identity. The caps are well patronized by politicians and important dignitaries and are often times given out as souvenir from the State. Hence, there is high demand for them. A market such as the cap market described above can be moved to the museum so that through it, the locals can have a sense of belonging in what the museum stands for, while at the same time enjoying the benefits it offers.

In addition to bringing in the local artists and craftsmen to the museum, the new museum concept and practice proposes that the Borno State museum collaborates with the Ministry of Arts and Culture to organise traditional dance and games from time to time. This will also increase patronage by locals and will draw them closer to the museum institution. This collaboration should not be difficult as the Borno State museum shares the same complex with the Borno State cultural troupe. As a matter of fact, they are managed by the same ministry. Borno State is made up of diverse ethnic groups hence, the traditional dance and games will be organized such that each ethnic group is accorded a day. This ensures that cultural diversity is captured while everyone is carried along as a participant suggested:

Another way to increase local patronage is through traditional activities like dance and games that locals can relate to. The museum can organise traditional dance and games from time to time with the diverse ethnic groups of the state represented. Such activities will attract locals thereby making the museum vibrant (interview with female Borno local, November 2020, Maiduguri).

Such a development has numerous benefits. Among them are the sustainability both of the Borno rich crafts culture and traditional music culture as well as the Borno State museum as an institution. It also contributes to community participation and engagement in the activities of the museum. This idea falls within the presence of opportunities for cultural vitality domain as well as the participation in arts and cultural activities domain as it creates room for both opportunities to participate as well as the participation itself.

Accessibility

In line with the support for arts and cultural activities, the new museum concept and practice proposes that gate fees be lifted for locals in the Borno State Museum. This can be replaced with shed rent from local artists and craftsmen who produce their works solely for profit. These proceeds will be diverted to collection's care and management as the proposed African museum concept and practice retains the non-profit making status of museums. The idea here is to make the museum more accessible to locals who will in turn create the sense of ownership of the collections which the museum holds in trust for them and at the same time serve as a channel of income generation for local artists. A participant said:

Like earlier mentioned, the issue of gate fee is a barrier to local's patronage in Borno Museum so instead of charging gate fees for locals, I suggest we charge shed rent from local craftsmen and use the income generated for collections management. Doing this helps the museum retain its non-profit status. We must not follow the European museological standard completely. We can modify certain aspects to suit our context (Male FGD participant, November, 2020, Maiduguri).

Museum Organisation and Presentation Style

The new concept and practice proposes that the Borno State museum breaks away from conventional curatorial practices. Participants agreed that local guides should be employed to carry out non-technical responsibilities such as tour guides to visitors especially locals in local languages while the professional museum staff attend to non-locals for ease of communication. The new concept also proposes that texts and labels are translated in local languages to give the locals a sense of belonging in the museum and its activities. This will also ensure the sustainability of Borno local languages (an aspect of intangible culture).

The new museum concept and practice advocated in this chapter proposes that the museum staff organise temporary exhibitions from time to time either on topical issues or on the culture of the diverse ethnic groups of the Borno region. This will increase the feeling of the sense of belonging among locals and increase community participation in the museum's activities. The display of these collections will also reflect African sense of display away from glass cases and panels. This idea falls in line with the presence of opportunity domain of cultural vitality.

Funding

The museum like other government agencies relies on the government for funding through subventions. For some time, the participants of the FGD conducted for this study revealed that the subventions they receive from the government has reduced drastically and a possible justification for this drop could be the fact that the museum institution is a non-profit making one hence, the government does not generate much revenue from it. This implies that revenue generating organizations receive more funding from the government. In light of this, the new African museum concept and practice proposes that revenue generation from the museum sector is an indirect one in the sense that the museum itself may not generate revenue. However, other agencies can draw their own revenue through them such as the transportation industry, hospitality and accommodation industry as well as commerce. In view of the above, the Borno State government should look at the museum in a new light and reconsider the amount it receives as subvention as the museum has high potential of generating revenue although, indirectly.

Furthermore, participants suggested that if locals are carried along in museum's activities and they begin to enjoy the benefits the institution offers, they can offer free volunteer services. Philanthropists, commercial, non-governmental organizations, clubs and unions will see the need to

support the museum as well, in line with the support for arts and cultural activities domain of cultural vitality.

Having outlined the aspects of modification in the museum concept and practice, the new African museum concept and practice model will be discussed below.

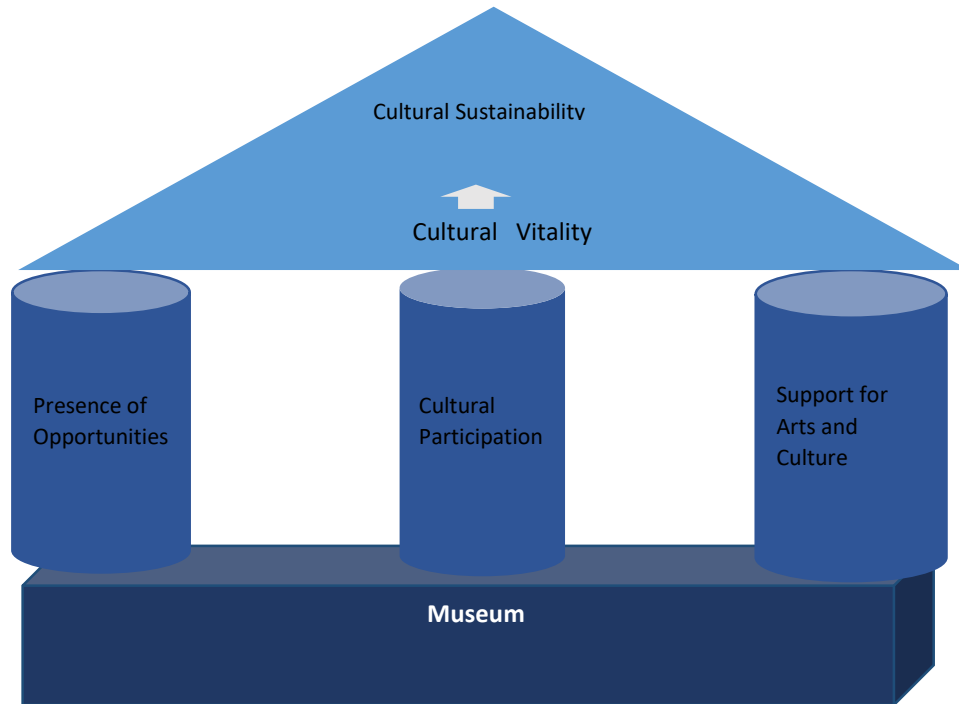


Fig.1 Proposed African Museum Concept and Practice Model

The new African museum concept and practice model is in form of a house which has the museum at its foundation with three domains of cultural vitality namely: opportunities for participation, cultural participation and support for the arts and culture as pillars holding the structure in place. The first pillar provides the opportunities for locals to get closer and interact more closely with the museum institution which will consequently create the feeling of belonging and ownership in locals. This study identified incorporating the production of arts and crafts, traditional games and dance in Borno State's museum activities as viable and potential avenues or opportunities that locals can participate in. Having created the opportunity for local participation, the second pillar allows for the participation of locals in these activities at different levels and ways. The third and last pillar allows for support and funding for the museum from diverse means not only on government subventions. These support is not limited to finance but includes services from individuals, public, private, commercial and non-profit sectors.

With the three pillars in place, the roof of the house contains cultural vitality which is the aim of the museum using the three pillars. Cultural vitality results in cultural sustainability which is the core benefit of the new African museum concept. With all these in place, the sustainability of the museum institution in Africa is to a large extent secure while locals enjoy the benefits it offers.

Conclusion

The conventional museum concept is purely a colonial construct in Africa. While it holds a lot of promise for the communities where they are located, typical Africans are yet to fully enjoy this promise as a result of some conflicting issues which this paper has made effort to identify and to

proffer solutions to by coming up with a new museum concept and practice model for the African continent. While this was prepared with the Borno State museum in mind, it can be adopted in similar climes. This new concept advocates for a breakaway from certain aspects of the Eurocentric conventional museum, modification of some aspects while it retains others such as buildings since this is immovable. It advocates for strong community participation by the locals for cultural vitality and the sustainability of the museum institution as a whole on the African continent.

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